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The President. Well, we'll—if we don't, we'll deal with it, because I mentioned to the Governor, Congress has got a way of spending money. My job is to make sure they spend on priorities, and if I didn't think the forest of the United States was a priority, I wouldn't be here. It is a priority.

The other thing is, is that there are partnerships which can be put together to the benefit of those who care about conservation, the State and those who employ people. And the approach I'm going to talk about and the approach, frankly, that the Governor has worked with Governor Kempthorne of Idaho on is a balanced approach, one that recognizes more than one party involved, that there are a variety of folks involved with the health of our forests. And all voices ought to be listened to, and a strategy ought to be developed that will—that will achieve goals. One of the goals is prevent fire, healthy forests. Another goal is going to be to conserve our forests. Another goal will be to provide jobs. So we believe we can do that.

California Gubernatorial Candidate Bill Simon

Q. Sir, Bill Simon's family's investigation fund was found guilty of fraud. How do you reconcile that fact with your visits tomorrow to California to campaign for him, given your corporate accounting——

The President. I agree—I understand your question. Bill Simon assures us that when the courts look at this case, he'll be innocent, and I take the man for his word.

Okay. You're tired of me answering questions, I know. [*Laughter*] It's unbelievable, 2 days in a row.

Q. We like it.

The President. What?

Q. We like it.

NOTE: The exchange began at 11:33 a.m. In his remarks, the President referred to Gov. John A. Kitzhaber of Oregon; and Gov. Dirk Kempthorne of Idaho. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of this exchange. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this exchange.

Remarks on the Healthy Forests Initiative in Ruch, Oregon

August 22, 2002

Good morning. Thank you all for being here.

I just got a firsthand look at the terrible effects of the Squire fire. First, I want to thank the fire crews, the men and women of Oregon and surrounding States who risk their lives to put these fires out. On behalf of a grateful nation, I want to thank you for your service to the country, and thank you for what you do.

I flew over the Biscuit fire today when we were coming in. It's devastating. I mean, it is big, and it's a powerful fire that has been raging for more than a month. It's amazing the scope of the devastation that's taken place in Oregon as well as other Western States. Here in this State, a million acres have burned. A million acres have caught on fire. Hundreds of millions of trees have been destroyed. Countless lives have been affected—the same thing all across the West, a lot of people whose lives have been turned upside down. I saw firsthand the effects of fire in Arizona. I remember going to that school, Governor, where the people were just emotionally spent because of what the fire had done to them.

These devastating fires are—threaten the safety of our communities, obviously the lives of the firefighters. They destroy homes. They ruin farms. These fires destroy critical wildlife habitat, and they leave behind long-lasting environmental damage. And as we work to put out the fires and to bring relief to the victims, we have a responsibility as a nation to work together to prevent the devastation that can be caused by future fires. We have a responsibility to bring sensible policy and put it in place.

Today I'm announcing some steps my administration is going to do to restore the health of America's forests, steps that I believe and we believe will help prevent the kind of destruction we've seen this year.

Before I talk about that, I do want to thank Secretary Ann Veneman and Secretary Gale Norton for coming and for working together, for listening to the voices, such as the voices

of our Governors. These two ladies understand that not all the genius in the world is in Washington, DC, that if we listen to people whose lives are affected by managing nature, that we'll probably get better policy—not probably—will get better policy.

I want to thank Jim Connaughton, who works on my staff and has helped develop this policy, for being here. I want to thank John, the Governor of Oregon, John Kitzhaber, for being here. John Kitzhaber and Dirk Kempthorne brought the Western Governors together to develop a sensible policy as to how to deal with this issue. And Judy Martz and Governor Jane Dee Hull of Arizona are with us as well.

This isn't a Republican issue or Democrat issue. Managing our forests is an American issue. And it requires an approach that understands there's difference of opinion, and we ought to work together to achieve common ground. And John's being here today sends that signal loud and clear. I appreciate you so very much, Governor, for coming. He's an interesting character who—[*laughter*]—who I enjoy being around.

I appreciate Senator Ron Wyden and Senator Gordon Smith, one Democrat, one Republican, who have both made up their mind to get something done. Senator Wyden has been working with Senator Craig to develop sound policy. And of course, Greg Walden, Congressman from this event, is a very active voice in reason—reasonable policy to help the people of Oregon. I want to thank them for coming as well.

I want to thank Ron Wenker, who led our tour, did a fine job. Little did he know a couple of weeks ago that he'd be here entertaining such august company and speaking so eloquently in front of the national press corps about his job and about the job of protecting our forests and doing the best we can do. I want to thank the community leaders who are here, people who care deeply about the future of this region.

I believe, like you believe, that our forests are one of our Nation's great treasures, and therefore, we have a responsibility to protect our great treasure. It's one of our responsibilities as citizens of our country. And yet, as we've seen, our treasure is being wiped out by fire. I've looked, as you have, at why, and it's pretty clear that this fire prevention strategy of our country has been short-sighted, and we, frankly, haven't done a very good job.

And when you haven't done a very good job at something, it's time to take a step back and assess why and solve the problem. Forest policies have not focused on thinning—just haven't. That's reality. That's the truth. We haven't had a strategy to clear the forest floor of built-up brush and densely packed trees that we have seen firsthand here, and in other places around the country, create the fuel, the kindling for extremely large fires, like those we're experiencing this year.

The catastrophic wildfires kill the oldest trees, those which we long to preserve. They kill just about everything that grows in the soil. It's—we should note that because of short-sighted policy, even the sequoias of California, Mr. President, are threatened. The fires that ravaged the West have destroyed endangered species habitat. They damaged fisheries. They've eroded soil. They've become breeding grounds for beetles, as we just saw. We were in the midst of a breeding ground for insects that prey upon weakened forests.

Now, they—our policy has not had the health of our forests in mind. The hands-off policy that have contributed to this environmental crisis have been well intentioned, no question about that. Nobody is questioning the intentions of those who have helped put this policy in place. But they're dangerous—dangerous plans. And we've got to do something about it. All of us in elected positions must respond.

Some will say, "Well, there's thinning taking place," and let me just put what's taking place in perspective to reality. There's —at the rate in which we're thinning our forests, it will take a century, 100 years, to restore America's 200 million acres of Federal forest lands to healthy and safe conditions. That's too long, as far as I'm concerned. I know it's too long as far as forest firefighters are concerned. It's too long as their Senators are concerned. It's too long. And therefore, we've got to develop a different strategy.

We must be active in our management of our forests. We must thin, and we must

quickly restore the areas that have been damaged by fire. People who fight fires and who study forests, who know a lot more about this subject than I do, agree. And that's what the American people have got to know. Come out and speak to a firefighter about good, commonsense policy, and you'll hear what I just said.

Actively managing forests is going to be the centerpiece of this administration. And that's what I made clear to those who work with me. And we'll begin by identifying and protecting those areas that are the most vulnerable to catastrophic fires, areas which are near our communities and our watersheds and other key areas.

In order to effect our healthy forest policy, we must cut through the redtape and endless litigation that blocks efforts to restore forest health. For example, a thinning project to prevent catastrophic fire in the area where we were just standing was proposed 6 years ago. They said, "Well, what can we do to make sure this area is protected?" Yet, because of burdensome regulatory hurdles and meritless appeals and litigation, only a very small portion of this acreage was approved for thinning before the fires came through. And we saw the difference between an area that had been thinned and an area which had not been thinned. And the difference is catastrophic. That's reality.

So, for the good of Oregon's forests, and really for the good of her environment overall and for the good of your economy, I've directed the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of the Interior, and the Council on Environmental Quality to do the following steps: One, to authorize thinning projects on an emergency basis in the most critical areas; secondly, to speed up the process of developing environmental assessments while considering the long-term threat that fire-susceptible forests pose to endangered species; and to expedite the appeals process.

Listen, we want our citizens at the local level to have a voice. We want there to be an opportunity for our citizens to speak out. That's the great American way. But we must discourage the endless delays that prevent good forest policy from going forward. And Congress should pass legislation that will ensure that vital forest restoration projects are not tied up in courts.

I mean, we can do some of this through administrative action, but Congress needs to act. And I'm confident Congress will act in a way that doesn't exclude people, that, as a matter of fact, encourages citizens to participate. I mean, there's nothing better than having citizens worrying about how to conserve assets and resources.

I signed some legislation earlier this month in what they call a supplemental, which provides protection for Black Hills National Forest of South Dakota. The reason I bring that up is that, slowly but surely, Members of Congress understand that when there's a problem, we've got to deal with it. And my attitude is, if—and I recognize the situation is different in Oregon than perhaps in South Dakota, but managing the forest isn't. Good forest policy makes sense. And so if it's good enough for South Dakota or part of South Dakota, it ought to be good enough for Oregon and Arizona and Montana.

And so I want us to move forward with policy. And there's other ways to make sure that the communities are involved. John and I were talking about—to make sure that any good Federal policy recognizes that—I think Ron might have said it—one size doesn't fit all. Obviously, the Oregon situation is different from other States. The health of the forest isn't different; it's the same. But how to make sure we have a healthy forest requires input from local people. The Congress passed these pilot programs that encouraged partnerships of nonprofits or local governments or private companies to come together to remove small trees and brush that fuel dangerous fires. That makes sense.

But I don't understand why they need to be pilot programs. If it makes sense and we want to manage our forests, these pilot programs ought to be not pilot programs but permanent programs all around the country, so that we don't have a century of work ahead of us to make our forests healthy. We compress that time to a reasonable amount of time so our children and grandchildren can have healthy forests, and so your children and grandchildren aren't fighting fires all the time.

I also believe strongly that the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan made sense. It was a plan where people from different constituency groups came together to talk about how to, first, make the forests healthy. And that is the primary concern of this policy or any policy—ought to be how to manage our treasure. But at the same time, the plan talked about how to protect the wildlife habitat found here in Oregon, how to make sure that recreational areas were in good shape.

And there was a dividend, by the way, to the Northwest plan of 1.1 billion board feet taken a year of sustainable timbering and that, of course, is so people can find work. And that makes sense to me, particularly in a place and a part of the world where people are having trouble finding work.

Good forest policy yield a dividend. They yield healthy forests. They yield places where people can bring their families. They protect the endangered species, but it also—one of the dividends is work, where people can put food on the table. And that's important. The human condition is very important, as far as I'm concerned. When somebody is looking for work who can't find work, we need to do something about it.

So I want to thank you all for welcoming us here today. This is a classic example of what is possible, given what happened and what is happening. It is possible to have sound forest policy that will protect against fire. It's possible. It is possible for us to work together to achieve a good strategy to protect a national treasure.

My administration looks forward to working with both Republican and Democrat alike to forge the policies to leave behind a legacy of healthy forests.

Thanks for coming. Thank you for your concern, your deep concern about this beautiful State, this wonderful area.

May God bless you all, and may God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:50 a.m. following a tour of the Squire Peak fire area. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. John Kitzhaber of Oregon; Gov. Dirk Kempthorne of Idaho; Gov. Judy Martz of Montana; Gov. Jane Dee Hull of Arizona; and Ron Wenker, district manager, Medford District Bureau of Land Management, Medford, OR.

Remarks to the Community in Central Point, Oregon

August 22, 2002

Thank you all very much for coming. Thanks for—please be seated, unless of course you don't have a chair. [*Laughter*] Thanks for that. Thank you all for such a warm welcome. It's such an honor to be here in Jackson County.

I have come for a couple of reasons. First, I have come to express our deepest condolences for those whose lives have been affected by these fires and to thank the yellowshirts, the hard-working firefighters. I appreciate the sacrifice you all make to protect your neighbors. One of the things you learn growing up in small-town Texas or small-town Oregon is that you learn to be neighborly. And the idea of people sacrificing to serve their neighbors is something that makes this country great. So I want to thank you all for what you do.

I also want to tell you, our job is to make sure we do everything we can to prevent forest fires from happening in the first place. That's one of our responsibilities, and that's why I went up to Jacksonville to talk about a policy that is based upon common sense. It's not a political deal. It's not a Republican idea. It's not a Democrat idea. It's an American idea to preserve our forests so that we can—that's one of the hurdles we've got to address here in the country. That's one of the challenges we've got to meet, is how to preserve our national treasure.

We've got other challenges. Listen, anytime anybody who wants to find work, who can't find work, it means we've got a problem. So I want to talk about the job we have of making sure we grow our economy, so people can work.

And then what I want to talk about—I want to talk about the fact that we've got another challenge, and that is how best to protect our homeland from the killers. And I want to tell you how we're going to win the war on terror, and we are going to win the war on terror.

I want to thank members of my administration for coming out here. They're kind of used to the West, since they are from the