

FUSEE Note: We provide the following speech by Senator Larry Craig (R-ID) verbatim in the public interest of providing people with the information necessary to rebut his dangerous, reactionary ideology and oppose his constant pandering to logging corporations.

Congressional Record S9809

Floor Statement by United States Senator Larry Craig on July 24, 2007

*Mr. President, I have come to the floor to speak about something that is going on in the West as we speak, that is a tragedy in reality and something that certainly we all ought to be aware of. As I got on the plane Friday morning in Minneapolis in my commute to Idaho, a group of young men and women got on my plane: firefighters of the State of Missouri. They were flying to Idaho to help Idahoans extinguish the wildfires burning there. I thank them and all of the brave firefighters who have been battling these immense wildfires in a season that is dramatic as we speak.*

*I got on the plane yesterday morning in Boise to return to Washington. Another group of young men and women, bedraggled, tired, and smelling of smoke, got on the plane to fly back to Minneapolis. That was another group of firefighters who were flown in from the Eastern United States to help out in Idaho and the Great Basin West. They were simply tired and returning home.*

*We are, in Idaho and in the West, at this moment experiencing one of the most dramatic wildfire seasons in our history. I say that because the season in reality has just started. From a historic perspective, it is late July, August, and September that the fire season we think of on our public lands, both forested and grasslands, usually begins.*

*Last year, we went through one of the worst fire seasons in history based on total acreage burned. As I speak, we are now ahead of last year and burning even greater. Headlines in the local largest daily in Idaho yesterday said: more fires burning in Idaho than any other State in the Nation, well over 600,000 acres burned and many burning.*

*Yesterday morning, five counties in the State of Idaho were declared a state of emergency due to those wildfires burning. Currently, the largest fire burning in the United States is the Murphy complex, estimated to be 570,000 acres; 7,500 people were evacuated from the area. Evacuations were being ordered across the State due to the number of fires and the*

*extreme of the fire behavior: 100-degree temperatures in an area where that extraordinary heat has reduced the dew point to such a situation that anything that grows becomes kindling for a wildfire.*

*Of the 72 large fires in the United States, half of those burning today are in the State of Nevada and in my State of Idaho. The weather outlook has gone from bad to horrible, as these temperatures continue and as the Great Basin of the United States progressively dries out. More hot and dry weather is expected along with dry lightning, fires, and wind storms. As these lightning storms sweep through, literally thousands of strikes occur, and hundreds of fires can be set in one evening across the public lands of the West.*

*As I mentioned, the 2006 fire season broke several records, including acreage. By the end of this week, we will have surpassed that increase as it relates to time and place of the fire season. We have obviously not yet burned the 10 million acres of last year, but by measurement this fire season is now worse.*

*Almost 100 years ago, the Forest Service started something. They started with a commitment and a philosophy to full fire suppression. Now I take you to a little bit of history as to what may be producing the very dramatic fire season we experienced last year and the year before, and we are now experiencing today. During that time, the Forest Service's aim was to extinguish every fire, man-made or lightning caused. With the exception of the last 15 years, the timber industry, on our public lands, enjoyed booming success during the same period. So while Mother Nature was not allowed to burn the forest, man was allowed to come in over the last 100 years and thin and clean. We called it logging. That produced the timber for the home and building industries. As a result, it is arguable that wildfires were kept somewhat under control. Not only did we put the fires out, but we were taking the fuels off the land.*

*In the 1990s, during the Clinton years, as a result of the impact of a variety of public policies, from the Endangered Species Act to the New Forest Management Act to the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act, and a lot of other combinations, we began to progressively reduce the overall cut of timber on public lands. In the 8 years of Bill Clinton, we reduced the allowable cut.*

*Here are the figures on this chart. It is patterned by revenue flow. We reduced the allowable cut of timber on our public lands by 80 percent--*

*not 8 percent, by well over 80 percent. So if you follow the green line on this chart, you follow the revenue flow that was coming from our public lands through the U.S. Forest Service. Of course, it was during that time that the Forest Service had money. As a result, they had the money to fight the fires. Then you see the decline on the chart.*

*As we discontinued timber harvests on our public lands, the revenue no longer was produced. But something else was happening. We were leaving on our public lands dramatic increases in timber and brush and, in today's situation, fuel for the fires.*

*So in part, the West is burning today because of public policy, because of attitude, not because of Mother Nature. Mother Nature has ebbed and flowed over time. But when Mother Nature is taken out of balance by man's practices and policies, dramatic results can occur. As the revenues declined and they paralleled human activity on the public lands, dramatic increases in fire resulted.*

*What do we do about it? For the last several years I have stood on the Senate floor and participated in the Energy and Natural Resources Committee and chaired the Forestry Subcommittee for many of these years and have said openly and publicly: We, by our public policy, have destroyed the U.S. Forest Service. We bankrupted it. It no longer has any money. In so doing, we keep putting greater burden on it, and we won't fund it.*

*We are not in the habit of funding it because timber sales historically funded the U.S. Forest Service. It not only funded all of their practices, both logging and trail clearing and wildlife management and habitat control, it did something else: It put money into the U.S. Treasury. We created a unique balance over the last 100 years because you can't predict a fire season. You have the revenue flow coming in. So we simply borrowed the money to fight fires from the different accounts of the U.S. Forest Service and at the end of the year, when the fire season was over and all the bills were paid, we simply replenished all of the accounts of the U.S. Forest Service that it used to manage the different components of the Forest Service itself.*

*It no longer happens today. We are still borrowing money from accounts to fight fires, but there is no money in the accounts. At the end of the year, because of tight budgets, we don't replenish the money from the general fund of the U.S. Government. There is no money there. Timber*

*receipts used to fund the money, used to create the balance, used to do a lot of things. They no longer exist, in large part because of public policy.*

*What is happening in Idaho and across the West at this moment, when you see the valleys full of smoke and the mountains full of smoke and the skies with dark bands of carbon-filled air across the West, our natural resources are literally going up in smoke. What is burning out there are trees. It is also watersheds and water quality and wildlife habitat. All of that is disappearing in a ball of fire, and it should not be that way.*

*What are the solutions? Throwing more money at fire suppression? Well, we have been doing that by ever increasing amounts every year for the last 5 or 6 years, to the tune of billions of dollars annually.*

*I am the ranking member of the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee. I put in another half billion dollars to fight fires, and it will quickly go up in smoke at the rate the fires are burning in the West.*

*What is the solution? More active management? Yes. More active management on our public lands will help the fire situation because active management--if you look at the Healthy Forests Act we passed several years ago--means you are in there thinning, you are in there cleaning the underbrush, you are doing the kind of things that fire would have done naturally 100 years ago. But we changed the circumstance, and we changed the environment.*

*Fire is unique in that it can be beneficial if it is handled appropriately. If you have 100 trees per acre, and fire is allowed to amble through and burn out all of the underbrush, it does not kill the tree, in many instances. But if you have 400 trees per acre of the kind we have allowed to happen over the last good number of decades, then it burns everything because the fire is so intense by the volume of fuel on the forest floor. That is a circumstance the West is experiencing, as we speak.*

*Fire is a unique natural disaster because humankind has found a way to fight it. It can change the situation that breeds fire. How do you fight a tornado? Well, you cannot. Yet it is called a natural disaster. How do you fight a hurricane? Well, you cannot. You can predict them, and you get out of their way, because it is a natural disaster. How do you fight a wildfire? Give me a shovel, give me the tools, give me a better environment--a managed environment, if you will--and I can fight a wildfire. Do not allow Federal judges to be land managers. Allow foresters*

*to be land managers in the right context of public policy and you can fight a wildfire. Give me the tools necessary in the local communities to do so, and you can fight a wildfire. Allow me to use a chain saw selectively in the forest to thin them and clean them, and you can fight a wildfire. But, all in the name of the environment, we have decided to do none of these. We have decided to simply preserve and allow it to be natural.*

*Let me conclude with these thoughts. The fires that are burning in the West today are not natural. They are hotter, they are more intense, they are more destructive than any forest fires we have seen in our forests literally within a century. The reason is quite simple. The 100 trees per acre I talked about that Lewis and Clark might have ambled through 200 years ago are the same acres in which there are now 400 trees. Because of the heat and the drought, they are dead or dying, and they have created a fuel load on our forest floor that is unprecedented. Yet, we, by public policy, have tied the hands of our land managers. As a result, literally millions of acres are now burning annually. For what reason? I believe it is because we, as a manager of public and natural resources, have failed.*

*There are reasonable ways to do so. There is an alternative besides simply locking it up and letting it burn. Yes, the skies of Idaho and the Great Basin West are full of smoke at this moment. That smoke is our natural resources going up in smoke, literally.*

*If we are worried about climate change, and we are worried about the carbon we are putting into the atmosphere, the fires on the public lands of this Nation this year will put more carbon in the atmosphere than any 1 year of automobile driving. Yet somehow there are those who are willing to ignore it only in the reality that it is nature and uncontrollable. I would argue that is not true because 30 years ago we did not have these kinds of fires, and 20 years ago we did not have them, even though we had peaks of drought and dryness and heat.*

*Our professionals told us some time ago if we did not become, once again, active managers of our public land resource it would go up in smoke--and it is.*

*Mr. President, I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.*