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Bowling Warns of Wildfire Hazards at Congressional Hearing

As catastrophic wildfire threats intensify across the West, Jason Bowling, Chief Executive Officer of Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative, delivered a direct message to Congress: streamline federal permitting before more rural communities pay the price. Testifying before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water last week, Wildlife and Fisheries, Bowling described how worsening drought, higher temperatures, heavy fuel accumulation and continued development near wildlands have combined to create dangerous conditions across Arizona and the broader West.

For electric cooperatives like SSVEC, the responsibility is straightforward — keep the lights on and reduce wildfire risk. The path to doing so on federal land, however, is anything but simple. As a not-for profit, member-owned utility, every dollar spent on delay or duplicative review is born directly by rural families, farmers, and small businesses.

Bowling recounted SSVEC's effort to replace aging power poles and remove hazardous vegetation near Fairbank, a historic site along the San Pedro River west of Tombstone. What should have been routine maintenance became a bureaucratic maze. The cooperative navigated overlapping reviews from multiple federal and state agencies, often receiving conflicting guidance and enduring lengthy delays.

“The process ultimately took roughly 15 years,” Bowling told lawmakers. “During that time, poles continued to age. Vegetation continued to expand. Drought conditions intensified. The risk increased while we worked through a fragmented process.”

Once approvals were finally secured, the actual construction and vegetation clearing was completed quickly.

“In this case,” Bowling said plainly, “prevention took weeks. Permitting took years.”

His testimony underscored a practical point: electric cooperatives stand ready to invest in prevention. What they need is regulatory certainty and a coordinated federal partnership

that allows critical mitigation work to move at the speed of risk—not at the pace of paperwork.

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CAPTION: Jason Bowling, Chief Executive Officer at the Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative, testified February 24 at a Congressional subcommittee hearing on federal legislation to streamline the process of reducing wildfire threats on federal property.