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On behalf of the Idaho Forest Products Commission

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Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
United States House of Representatives
Wood Innovation: Sustainable Forest Products to Reinvigorate Rural Economies
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Introduction

Chairwoman Pingree, Ranking Member Joyce, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today about innovative wood products and related issues. My name is Marc Brinkmeyer and I am the owner of Idaho Forest Group (IFG). IFG is a family-owned company and is one of our nation's largest lumber producers with capacity for over 1.2 billion board feet per year and markets around the globe.

I am also here as a representative of the Idaho Forest Products Commission (IFPC), which was created by the Idaho legislature in 1992. The work of the IFPC helps assure balanced and sustainable timber, wildlife, recreation and scenic beauty for the welfare of Idaho's citizens. The Idaho Forest Products Commission is committed to providing information that leads to balanced, responsible management of Idaho's economically vital public and private forests.

At IFG and IFPC, we are strong proponents of creating rural jobs, working to improve forest health, and growing the market for wood products. I am also the past Chairman of the Softwood Lumber Board and currently serve on the Binational Softwood Lumber Council – two organizations that help drive the use of innovative wood products in the built environment.

Increased and Improved Rural Jobs

In my home state of Idaho, the forest products industry was responsible for over 31,000 jobs in 2020, according to the University of Idaho's College of Natural Resources. Forest jobs also supply competitive jobs in rural parts of Idaho, averaging $55,000 annually, nearly 40% higher than other industries. By growing demand for all wood products, we can protect existing rural jobs and support investment which is vital to any industry. Newer sawmills, like we are building in the South, utilize advanced manufacturing and material handling technologies, which require a workforce of technicians and engineers. Mass timber structures and the related application of this construction technology require advanced engineering and design training. Our industry supports rural capital investment and rural jobs.

Improved Forest Health

More intense wildfires, drought and insect infestations are a reality in the west. Forest management and restoration are needed at a much larger scale. With your support, the Forest Service can ramp up forest health activity, which will maximize carbon stored in our forests and

forest products and reduce loss of stored carbon from tree mortality. Innovative wood products, like mass timber and advanced utilization of residual wood fiber, create revenue to support investment in the technology to change the conversation around landscape restoration of our federal forests. Mass timber is an emerging technology, which can provide the same structural function as concrete and steel with a positive carbon profile. These types of advancements create higher value end use for solid wood materials that have historically been steel and concrete.

Public-Private Partnerships

The Forest Service currently has partnerships with wood products industry partners that are truly moving the needle in terms of growing markets and uses for innovative wood products. One of those partnerships is with WoodWorks. WoodWorks' mission is to make it easier for project teams to design, engineer and construct successful commercial and multi-family wood buildings in the U.S. They do so by providing free project support, a robust nationwide education program, and a wide range of published resources. WoodWorks has impacted over 4.5 billion board feet of wood use in projects in the United States since 2015. Their efforts are made possible, in part, by funding from Forest Service's Research budget and the State and Private Forestry budget. WoodWorks is working with the Forest Service to trace material from restoration thinning on a National Forest through the manufacturing process and into a completed wood building.

Another critical partnership for USDA is the Softwood Lumber Board (SLB). The SLB is an industry funded check-off program established to promote the benefits and uses of softwood lumber products in outdoor, residential, and non-residential construction. Through the USDA Check-Off Program System, the softwood lumber industry has its rightful place in agriculture. In addition to supporting Woodworks, the SLB supports the American Wood Council which advances the utilization of all wood products in construction. It is instrumental in advancing testing for seismic, fire and structural protocols necessary to advance mass timber.

As past president of the board, I have seen firsthand how effective the SLB has been in helping grow markets for innovative wood products. The SLB, along with the Forest Service, helps fund WoodWorks.

One such partnership that IFG is a member of—and that I truly value—is the Western Governors Association (WGA). WGA works in a bipartisan fashion and tackles issues, including endangered species, the wildfire and forest health problems, and recently, climate change and its role in the western experience. IFG works with the WGA to identify for Congress consensus-driven policies that will lead to healthier landscapes and communities for western states.

Growing the Market and Carbon Sequestration

Another significant benefit of building with wood products, including innovative mass timber, is carbon sequestration. Trees and other cellulosic plants absorb carbon and continue to sequester it for decades. Once the tree is harvested, its carbon content remains in wood products for the lifetime of the building. Further the product life is extended thru recycling.

The carbon footprint of wood is significantly less that steel and concrete. Wood fiber not used for construction has significant value from a BTU perspective. Substituting wood for fossil fuel-intensive materials is a way of avoiding GHG emissions. Life cycle assessment (LCA) studies consistently show that wood outperforms other materials in this area (Sathre and O'Connor, 2010).

When using a carbon calculator to evaluate the environmental impact, we often see that the use of wood in a typical 100,000 sq. ft. multifamily project can have the environmental carbon impact equivalent to pulling 500 cars off the road for an entire year. When you think about the impact of this at scale, it is quite impressive. Especially when you consider that this benefit is currently often overlooked but something we are now actively educating about.

IFG, together with other forest products companies, provided a substantial amount of the wood and related services for the mass timber for the new 62,000 square foot basketball arena at the University of Idaho. WoodWorks provided much of the technical assistance that was used to build the arena.

What Can Congress Do?

There are a number of actions that Congress can take through the appropriations process to help increase the use of sustainable forest products and grow rural economies.

USFS National Forest Systems, Forest Products Account

Congress should increase funding for the Forest Service's National Forest timber program. There must be certainty in the timber sale program so that the Logging and Hauling Families in our rural communities can have a reliable contractual pipeline to enable investment in advanced technology, which is more efficient and requires less energy than older equipment. The sale program should be directed towards sustaining and creating local jobs. This will increase the pace of forest restoration and address the forest health crisis. National Forest timber must be processed domestically, so increased timber sales generate needed jobs in economically distressed rural counties.

USFS, Research, Forest Products Lab

Congress should increase funding for the Forest Service's Forest Products Lab (FPL). FPL partners with WoodWorks, developers of wood bridges, developers of cellular nanotechnology, wood energy innovators, and more. As the use of innovative wood products grows in the U.S., the need for research and development funding is all the more critical.

USFS Wood Innovation Grants

Congress should continue funding for the Forest Service's Wood Innovations Grant Program (WIG). The program works to expand wood products and wood energy markets that support forest management and deliver economic and environmental benefits to communities. Funding goes to projects that significantly stimulate or expand wood products and wood energy markets that support the long-term management of National Forest System and other forest lands.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify, and for your continuing support. I would be happy to answer your questions.