



April 3, 2019

Chair Debra Halaand
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
1328 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Ranking Member Don Young
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
1329 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairs and Ranking Members:

Our organizations are committed to working collaboratively with governments and stakeholders to maintain and improve the ecological resiliency of California's fire adapted forests, across all ownership types, and to support efforts to reduce wildfire risk to communities and other public values.

Climate change and prolonged drought, human population growth and development, and a history of fire suppression and intensive management have reduced the resiliency of many California forests, resulting in uncharacteristic and devastating megafires. These huge blazes incur significant economic, environmental and social costs. In 2018, California experienced the largest, deadliest, and most destructive wildfires in recorded history. There is an urgent need to invest in high priority forest restoration and community protection efforts across all forest ownerships in California.

Maintaining and restoring the resiliency of California's national forests will be critical to broader efforts to improve forest conditions across the state. Roughly half of California's 33 million forested acres are managed by the federal government, with the USDA Forest Service in control of a significant portion of those federal forests. National forests also harbor and are adjacent to communities that are at significant risk of high-severity wildfire, and therefore include priority acres for forest restoration and fuels reduction projects.

Insufficient funding and staffing are key barriers to addressing this problem. The State of California has made an unprecedented \$1 billion, 5-year commitment to improving forest health and resilience. Other stakeholders and NGOs, including water utilities like Placer County Water Agency and Yuba Water Agency, are also making major financial and in-kind investments in healthy forested watersheds. It is imperative that Congress increase federal appropriations to take maximum advantage of these partnership and collaboration opportunities.

Last year's Consolidated Appropriations Act reformed how the Forest Service is funded to fight wildfires. Beginning in FY 2020, the "funding fix" provides the agency with additional budget authority to pay for wildfire fighting costs that exceed the FY2015 level of \$1.011 billion. As a result, the Forest Service's budget is stabilized and the need for costly "fire borrowing" can be limited. For decades, borrowing raided other agency accounts to pay for cost overruns in wildfire suppression; limiting that practice will allow for more sustained resiliency building and community protection actions on the ground.

The wildfire funding fix also provides Congress with an opportunity to reinvest in Forest Service programs that maintain and restore forest, watershed and habitat resiliency, thus reducing wildfire suppression costs moving forward. Due to rapid escalation of suppression costs, many of these key programs have not grown commensurate with needs on the ground. There are several programs that support Forest Service resiliency-building and community protection efforts.

We recommend that Congress significantly reinvest within the following priority National Forest System programs in the FY 2020 Forest Service budget:

Hazardous Fuels – The program targets high priority areas for fuels reduction, including within the Wildland Urban Interface, using tools like ecological thinning and prescribed and managed wildfire. It also supports partnerships with state and local jurisdictions to treat non-federal acres. We support a significant increase in the hazardous fuels budget and recommend that the Committee direct the Forest Service to allocate increased funding to ecologically-based forest restoration projects that reduce risks of catastrophic wildland fires and involve significant non-federal (state, private, and NGO) investment and stakeholder engagement. Congress should press the Forest Service to continue to invest in advanced risk assessment and decision support tools to support prioritization. In addition, to ensure high returns on investment, Congress should direct the Forest Service to continue tracking performance measures that reflect not just work completed, but also achievement of desired resiliency and risk reduction outcomes on the ground, both within and outside of the WUI.

Vegetation and Watershed Management – The program emphasizes restoration and improvement of watershed conditions. Watersheds within the Sierra Nevada alone provide clean water for more than 25 million people. The program also emphasizes the use of stewardship contracts to improve forest and habitat conditions, along with reforestation, hazardous fuels, and invasive species control. One example is the recently approved French Meadows Project on the Tahoe National Forest, where diverse partners including the water utility, state and county governments, and conservation NGOs worked together on project planning and analysis; the

Project will be implemented through a Master Stewardship Agreement between the Forest Service and Placer County. It is critical that the Forest Service continue to pursue and track improvements in watershed conditions, function and resiliency, as well as the miles of stream habitat restored or enhanced.

Wildlife and Fisheries Habitat Management – The program supports management to protect and restore wildlife habitat, including aquatic habitat and watershed restoration. For forests, the program supports reforestation and revegetation efforts. Habitat improvement projects, such as for northern goshawk, spotted owl and fisher in California forests, also contribute to forest resiliency and restoration. The program also supports prescribed burning in forests to maintain and improve habitat conditions, in turn reducing hazardous fuel loads.

Land Management Planning, Assessment and Monitoring – Forest plans provide the basis for making strategic decisions about resiliency building and community protection efforts. If designed properly, forest plans can support efficient implementation of landscape scale integrated restoration projects. Zoning within forest plans helps identify community protection, ecological restoration, and areas of high ecological integrity prioritized for passive restoration.

State and Private Forestry – Within this category, we particularly support funding for Landscape Scale Restoration. Under this program, the Forest Service works collaboratively with states and other partners to address critical forest priorities using an “all lands” approach. The 2018 Farm Bill officially codified the Landscape Scale Restoration program and authorized \$20M in annual appropriations, which we support.

The Forest Service has proposed a consolidation of numerous budget line items, including those noted above, into a single Vegetation, Fuels Landscape Management line item. Under any scenario, whether adopted by Congress or not, we stress the need for robust performance metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of resiliency building and community protection actions.

Thank you for considering these recommendations.

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