

Member Testimony – Congressman Jimmy Panetta
July 13, 2021 Legislative Hearing
House Natural Resources Committee
National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Subcommittee

Chair Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding this important hearing today to consider several critical pieces of legislation, including my bill, the Repairing Existing Public Land by Adding Necessary Trees Act – the REPLANT Act, for short.

Before I get into the details and the merits of this legislation, I'd like to introduce myself and the communities I represent. I come from the central coast of California, home to the Los Padres National Forest, in Big Sur.

Last year, my district experienced record-breaking wildfires. Five fires burned over 640,000 acres, including 128,000 acres in the LPNF. Then, due to the lack of post-fire tree-planting, as my communities worked to rebuild, we were faced with severe mudslides and winter storms, including a storm that sent a piece of our scenic Highway 1 into the ocean. That same storm significantly damaged another federal road in my district which then threatened to cut-off access to critical services for residents in Big Sur, who had already endured so much hardship.

These cycles of extreme heat, wildfire, and mudslides are driven and exacerbated by climate change which means that unfortunately, they are not going away. This means that we need to be prepared for hotter, drier conditions and a year-round risk of extreme wildfire and storms impacting our communities, public health, and environments.

Part of being prepared means that we in Congress must pursue every opportunity to make federal funding available for post-fire reforestation to help restore naturally resilient landscapes. This type of work on our public, federal lands will not only help us better incorporate climate change into wildfire planning, but it will also help us better leverage our public lands as natural climate solutions. And this is exactly what we are aiming to do with the bipartisan, bicameral REPLANT Act, which will allow the Forest Service to substantially increase its investments in post-fire reforestation.

In 1980, Congress established the Reforestation Trust Fund to plant trees on National Forest System lands in the aftermath of disturbances, including wildfires. The fund was financed by tariffs collected from wood products and was capped at \$30 million. Over the past four decades, however, the frequency and intensity of wildfire has increased while the cap has not changed, despite the availability of increased tariff revenue, creating a massive tree-planting backlog. The REPLANT Act would remove this antiquated funding limit and direct all eligible wood product tariffs to the Reforestation Trust Fund.

This would quadruple the amount of available funding, allowing the Forest Service to plant 1.2 billion trees over 4.1 million acres. Just as important, we will be able to plant these trees in a better, smarter way with species and techniques that are better able to withstand a hotter, drier future, so we won't just be replanting the way we always have. We'll be adapting to ensure we don't see it all burn again.

Planting these trees will not only help us rebuild more resilient forests. They will not only help prevent erosion and mudslides. They will also help create nearly 49,000 jobs over the next ten years and sequester 75 million metric tons of carbon while helping safeguard our water quality.

When it comes to water quality, I think we don't often understand the role our trees play in keeping our water safe. By slowing rain as it falls and helping it soak into the soil, trees prevent soil from eroding into our waterways, reduce storm runoff, and lessen flood damage. Trees are literally natural filters that protect our streams, rivers, and lakes, and today, USDA national forests and grasslands are the largest water source in the country under a single manager, supplying 20% of all drinking water in the U.S.

I could go on and on, but I know my time is almost up, so I will close by reminding my colleagues that it's not often we have a bipartisan, bicameral, ready-to-execute and zero-cost solution to such a critical problem.

I will also note, since I know some of my friends across the aisle want to see more done on forest management, that there is nothing stopping us from working together to address those issues. Indeed, my Wildfire Emergency Act with Senator Feinstein does just that. But, as we work together on long-term policies to better manage our forests, we cannot continue to waste time ignoring our reforestation crisis.

Our forests are burning hotter and longer, and they aren't growing back on their own, all while our highways are washing out, and our drinking water is fouled. The REPLANT Act is a simple, bipartisan solution to an urgent problem, and I look forward to working with my colleagues on this subcommittee, along with on my committee, the House Agriculture Committee, to move this bill forward as quickly as possible.

Thank you.