

Testimony of Alexandra Murdoch, Vice President of Policy, American Forests

Before the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies

House Committee on Appropriations

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Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on American Forests' fiscal year 2021 appropriations recommendations for U.S. Forest Service programs that are critical to achieving climate-informed restoration and reforestation of America's forests. We sincerely thank the Committee for FY20 funding levels, which provide the Forest Service with important tools and resources to manage all our nation's forests. We particularly appreciate the FY20 increase in funding for the Urban and Community Forestry Program and are grateful to the Committee for recognizing the importance of the program and providing increases to address stresses and pressure on urban tree canopy and support the benefits they provide.

American Forests was founded in 1875 by citizens alarmed by the state our forests. At that time, America was growing quickly and we were clearing our forests to make way for new farms, towns, and railways. This development came at a price. In the 1600s, almost half of the United States was forested and these forests provided clean drinking water, fish and game, and shelter and goods for people living nearby. But by the start of the 20th century, we had cleared over 25% of our forestland, and our drinking water was seriously at risk¹. Thankfully, in 1911 Congress began to protect our forests and waters by authorizing federal purchase of 'forested, cutover, or

denuded lands' to protect important watersheds. Today, National Forest lands are the largest source of municipal water supply in the U.S., serving over 60 million people.²

Today we also know our forests play an important role in regulating our climate. In Congress and the White House, we see emerging bipartisan recognition that forests and climate-informed forest management are an important strategy for mitigating climate change. At American Forests, we agree with that consensus. Today US forests and forest products annually sequester and store 15% of US carbon emissions from burning fossil fuels. New research suggests we could nearly double this natural carbon capture with the right actions. Managing and protecting our national forests in a changing climate is a critical piece of the climate puzzle.

Unfortunately, our national forests are at serious risk and at the US Forest Service, foresters have many of the right tools but do not have the resources they need to keep our national forests healthy and to help them adapt to a changing climate. In fact, over 40% of our national forests -- 80 million acres -- need restoration. Some forests are overcrowded with too many trees per acre but foresters do not have the resources to thin them. Trees weak or dead from drought but must be left in place. When lightning strikes, these trees can become fuel for catastrophic uncontrollable fires. A growing backlog exists of over 1.2 million acres that need reforestation after such catastrophes. The good news is many of these challenges can be addressed through existing programs -- if proper funding levels are provided.

Foresters rely on good scientific data to manage our forests -- from baseline data that describes carbon stocks and helps illuminate fluxes and trends to applied scientific information such as vulnerability assessments that reveal climate-driven threats. Increased investment in the USFS

Forest and Rangeland Research program can provide the tools for foresters to identify, prioritize and manage climate-driven risks to forests.

Foresters need to restore an estimated 80 million acres of national forests with climate-informed management practices to ensure these forests are healthy and resilient in a changing climate. To do so, they need significantly increased investments in programs that improve forest carbon, adaptation and resilience outcomes both on federal lands and across boundaries, including the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, Hazardous Fuels Reduction and Vegetation and Watershed Management programs.

Over 1.2M acres of national forests need reforestation, a backlog that grows with every catastrophic wildfire or infestation from pests and disease. After a catastrophic event, foresters have the tools they need to stabilize the landscape in the first year. However, they need funding to implement post-fire reforestation treatments for up to three years on lands unlikely to recover naturally in addition to increased reforestation investment through the Reforestation Trust Fund.

Healthy and resilient national forests can deliver critical power to slow climate change. We have urgent forestry work ahead to keep our national forests healthy and resilient so that they can provide the clean water that over 60 million Americans depend on and also vigorously sequester carbon and provide resilient and reliable storage. We are greatly heartened by the optimism and enthusiasm emerging in our country that reforesting America is the right response to address climate change. Business leaders are playing an essential and growing role by funding millions

of trees planted all across America and pledging investment through the 1 Trillion Trees initiative announced at the World Economic Forum in late January.

At American Forests, we have worked with partners to plant over 60 million trees in the last three decades alone so we understand the opportunities and challenges ahead. By investing in our national forests through existing programs, Congress has the power to activate the greatest single lever for quickly advancing large-scale forest carbon mitigation activities in the U.S.: scaling up the pace and extent of restoration and reforestation on our national forests. Our children and grandchildren will thank you.

¹ <https://www.fia.fs.fed.us/library/brochures/docs/2000/ForestFactsMetric.pdf>

² U.S. Forest Service. Water Facts. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/national-forests-grasslands/water-facts>