



June 13, 2016

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski, Chairman
Senate Energy and Natural
Resources Committee
United States Senate
709 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Maria Cantwell,
Ranking Member, Senate Energy and
Natural Resources Committee
United States Senate
511 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jim Risch
United States Senate
483 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Ron Wyden
United States Senate
221 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mike Crapo
United States Senate
239 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Cantwell, Senator Wyden, Senator Risch and Senator Crapo:

On behalf of the American Forest Resource Council (AFRC) and its members, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the discussion draft legislation “Wildfire Budgeting, Response, and Forest Management Act of 2016.” AFRC strongly supports congressional efforts to pass comprehensive legislation to reform how wildfire suppression costs are budgeted and streamline necessary forest management activities to restore the health and resiliency of America’s overstocked, fire-prone federal forests. AFRC believes the discussion draft represents a positive step towards accomplishing this goal and urges the Senate to move the legislation forward so negotiations on a bicameral, bipartisan compromise can begin with the House of Representatives in earnest.

As you know, the health of our federal forests continues to decline due to overstocking, disease, drought, insect infestations and catastrophic wildfires. There is a clear need to both significantly increase the pace and scale of *proactive* forest management and pass a workable budgetary solution to end the nonsensical practice of “fire borrowing” that does not undermine the Forest Service’s day-to-day operations and core missions. As the Committee considers comprehensive legislation, AFRC respectfully asks that it consider the lack of sustainable timber harvests from federal forest lands and the subsequent impacts to the maintenance of the forest products infrastructure, rural economies and communities, and to basic government services that are dependent on timber receipts.

AFRC supports the concept of a streamlined environmental analysis authority for collaboratively-developed forest management projects and supports its application to all qualifying projects, rather than making it discretionary. This is critically important to ensuring that the use of this authority is not hindered by a lack of awareness or clear direction within the agency. AFRC also supports amending the stewardship contracting authority to allow retained receipts to help fund a portion of planning future projects, although this should be amended to apply to all future projects, whether administered with a stewardship contract or traditional timber sale contract. As land management agency budgets remain flat or decrease, Congressional authorization to retain receipts to plan and execute more work on the ground is essential to accomplishing your shared goals of “increasing pace and scale” of forest restoration.

I had the pleasure of meeting with Ranking Member Cantwell earlier this year and gained an appreciation for the sense of urgency the Senator has for expediting forest management activities to restore the health of eastern Washington’s fire prone federal forests. AFRC agrees with the Ranking Member that an accelerated restoration program for these forests is badly needed. However, the environmental review provisions as currently written in Section 331(c) largely reaffirm procedures available to the Forest Service under current law, rather than providing new tools that truly recognize the emergency conditions facing these forests and local communities. AFRC asks the Committee to strengthen these provisions and to broaden their application to all dry-site ponderosa pine and mixed conifer forests where restoration treatments are needed.

AFRC would also like to bring to the Committee’s attention the need for a technical legislative change in order to implement the restoration strategy of forests east of the Cascades in Oregon and Washington. A one-size-fits-all regulation known as the “eastside screens” is prohibiting collaborative, science based forest restoration projects in the region. The eastside screens – a more than 20 year-old regulation intended to be temporary – requires the retention of *all* trees greater than 21” diameter at breast height (DBH) in forest management projects on national forests in eastern Washington and eastern Oregon – regardless of species type, age, or location.

In recent years, a growing body of science (not to mention local and collaboratively built consensus) supports the removal of *some* trees greater than 21” DBH in forest restoration projects – including projects designed to protect pine trees competing with grand fir or other shade-tolerant species historically held in check by wildfire. The Forest Service has been utilizing “site-specific forest plan amendments” to permit the removal of some trees greater than 21” DBH in some projects, but a recent adverse federal court decision has restricted this practice. It is imperative that any comprehensive legislation seeking to address federal forest restoration and resiliency in dry forest types in the Pacific Northwest provide an alternative to this dated and unscientific regulation.

On behalf of AFRC and its members, we appreciate your efforts to find a balanced, bipartisan approach to modernizing federal forest management and fire funding policies and look forward to working with you and your colleagues in the House and Senate to enact a meaningful solution this year.

Sincerely,



Travis Joseph
President
American Forest Resource Council