

October 2, 2017

Majority Leader Mitch McConnell
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Minority Leader Chuck Schumer
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Speaker Paul Ryan
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Speaker Ryan and Leaders McConnell, Schumer, and Pelosi:

As you know, our nation is experiencing another catastrophic wildfire season. Over 8.5 million acres have already burned this year and we may break the record that was set just two years ago. Some of the worst devastation has occurred on overstocked, unhealthy federal forestlands, where wildfires have affected millions of Americans living in nearby communities and polluted the air with toxic smoke. We need Congress to reform the federal forest management policies that are a key cause of the worsening wildfire seasons and deteriorating forest health.

A tremendous amount of attention is being focused on the need end the practice of “fire borrowing,” where the U.S. Forest Service is forced to raid non-fire accounts when its suppression budget is exhausted. We support reforming this nonsensical system that has an enormously disruptive effect on the agency’s budget and operational certainty. However, fixing fire borrowing alone will not address the underlying forest health crisis that is literally fueling these severe fires or contain the exponential growth in wildfire suppression spending.

Any effective solution to the forest health and wildfire crisis must also include meaningful policy and legal reforms to increase federal forest management and thinning activities. 60 to 80 million acres of federal forestland is overstocked and facing serious threats from fires, insects, and disease due to lack of active forest management. The Forest Service estimates that there are over 6 billion dead and dying trees across the West. Growth and mortality rates continue to far outpace fuels reduction and timber removals on our national forests. We also know that many wildlife populations are suffering due to the growing lack of habitat diversity on our federal forests.

While we can’t completely prevent wildfires, science shows that active forest management and thinning helps reduce their size and severity. Active management can also improve the resiliency of forests to the effects of climate change and drought, while also creating and maintaining wildlife habitat. Over the past decade, countless committee hearings in both the House and Senate have come to these same conclusions. The hearings have also identified key barriers to increasing the pace and scale of restoration efforts, which include the excessive (and costly) analysis requirements imposed on even modest federal forest management projects and activist lawsuits that seek to delay and obstruct.

Legislative proposals in both Houses take common sense approaches to expedite needed forest management projects under existing environmental laws, including Categorical Exclusions under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and streamlined NEPA procedures for larger, collaborative projects through an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or Environmental Assessment (EA). Congress also needs to place reasonable limits on the activist litigation that forces federal land managers to “bulletproof” NEPA documents and expend limited agency resources defending projects from the never-ending procedural lawsuits.

The forest health crisis affecting our forests will only be addressed if we treat its underlying cause through more active management. Bipartisan support exists for reasonable reforms that can help restore the health of our forests and the rural communities that are often forgotten in this debate. While we strongly support putting an end to fire borrowing – a high-profile symptom of the crisis – we urge you to advance responsible forest management solutions to meaningfully address this serious national problem.

Sincerely,

Alabama Loggers Council
Allegheny Forest Alliance
Allegheny Hardwood Utilization Group
American Farm Bureau Federation
American Forest & Paper Association
American Forest Resource Council
American Loggers Council
Arkansas Timber Producers Association
Associated California Loggers
Associated Contract Loggers & Truckers of Minnesota
Associated Contract Loggers – Idaho
Associated Oregon Loggers
Association of O&C Counties
Audubon Minnesota
Black Hills Forest Resource Association
Black Hills Regional Multiple Use Coalition
California Forestry Association
Carolina Loggers Association
Cloquet Minnesota Chamber of Commerce
Club 20 (Colorado)
Colorado Timber Industry Association
Communities for Healthy Forests, Inc.
Douglas Timber Operators
Federal Forest Resource Coalition
Forest Resources Association
Grand Rapids Minnesota Chamber of Commerce
Great Lakes Timber Professionals Association
Hardwood Federation
Healthy Forests, Healthy Communities
Hibbing Minnesota Chamber of Commerce
Independent Logging Contractors of Alabama
Intermountain Forest Association
Intermountain Roundwood Association
Itasca Economic Development Corporation, MN
Jobs for Minnesota
Louisiana Logging Council
Louisiana Loggers Association
Maple Flooring Association
Michigan Association of Timbermen
Michigan Forest Products Council
Minnesota Deer Hunters Association
Minnesota Forest Industries
Minnesota Timber Producers Association
Mississippi Loggers Association
Missouri Logging Council
Montana Logging Association
Montana Wood Products Association
National Alliance of Forest Owners
National Wild Turkey Federation
New Mexico Forest Industry Association
Northern Arizona Loggers Association
Pennsylvania Forest Products Association
Professional Logging Contractors of Maine
Range Assoc. of Municipalities and Schools (MN)
Sierra-Cascade Logging Conference

South Carolina Timber Producers Association
Southeastern Wood Producers Association
Southern Oregon Timber Industry Association
Texas Forestry Association
Texas Logging Council
Timber Industry Labor Management Committee
Virginia Loggers Association
Washington Contract Loggers Association
Washington Forest Protection Association