

September XX, 2015

Dear Senator:

Our organizations write to urge you to take quick action on wild fire funding reform and reform of federal forest management this fall. As you are aware, we are enduring a record breaking fire season, with more than 8 million acres of land - the vast majority of it Federal public land - burned so far this year. Many Senators from the impacted States have committed to addressing the current system for funding wildfire suppression. We applaud this effort - but we strongly urge you to include forest management reform in any legislation intended to stop fire borrowing.

Our national federal forests are facing serious threats from fires, insects, and diseases due to lack of active forest management. The poor health of our federal forests also threatens wildlife habitat, watersheds, and neighboring non-Federal lands, as well as the vitality of rural, forested communities across the country. House passed legislation, HR 2647, contains provisions intended to both address the disruption caused by fire borrowing and expedite needed forest management to improve the health and vitality of our federal forests.

HR 2647's use of Categorical Exclusions (CE's) under the National Environmental Policy Act will allow routine, collaborative projects with known effects to be more quickly prepared, analyzed, and implemented. It will also allow needed forest recovery projects to proceed more quickly, addressing a dire need created by this summer's extreme wildfire season. The Forest Service has long experience with management techniques to reduce forest pests, thin hazardous fuels, create and maintain habitat for species, recover damaged timber and protect water quality. These projects mitigate risk and help create early successional forest habitat which is good for wildlife. These projects are routine, recurring activities with known effects, and therefore should qualify for exclusions from repeated, extensive analysis.

HR 2647 addresses both the excessive analysis requirements currently imposed on even modest, collaboratively developed forest management projects, as well as the dysfunctional system of funding suppression costs out of forest management program accounts. Provisions in the bill limit the acreage of Categorical Exclusions, and prohibits their use in sensitive areas. The legislation provides access to the disaster relief fund for wildfire suppression expenses in excess of the 10-year average.

Clearly, Congress understands that forest health conditions on over 65 million acres of our national forest system are unacceptable. Congressional leaders also understand that the wildfire suppression funding mechanisms developed in the past are no longer adequate to address the conditions we are experiencing. We urge the Senate to take up and pass legislation that address both the forest management crisis and the fire funding crisis. Anything less is a half measure.

We stand ready to work with the Senate to advance responsible solutions to these serious national problems.