

October 3, 2016

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski  
The Honorable Maria Cantwell  
Committee on Energy & Natural Resources  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Rob Bishop  
The Honorable Raul Grijalva  
Committee on Natural Resources  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Pat Roberts  
The Honorable Debbie Stabenow  
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable K. Michael Conaway, Chairman  
The Honorable Collin C. Peterson  
Committee on Agriculture  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senators & Congressmen:

We urge you to take action this Congress on wildfire funding and federal forest management reform. The 2016 Fire Season has once again illustrated the poor health of our National Forests, and reemphasized the need for a long-term solution to develop a sustainable means to pay Federal wildfire suppression costs.

In spite of widespread agreement on the extent and severity of the problem, Congress has yet to create a durable solution to the problem of fire borrowing and forest management reform. Our nations' federal forests are facing serious threats from fires, insects, and diseases due to a 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. Legislation under consideration in each of your committees, as well as the bicameral Energy Bill conference, 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.

Any durable solution to the fire borrowing and forest management crisis should, in our view, include provisions which:

Builds on the use of Categorical Exclusions (CE's) under the National Environmental Policy Act to allow certain types of projects to go forward to address specific forest health needs, including hazardous fuels reduction and creation of early seral habitat;

Streamlines NEPA (action/no action) for collaboratively developed forest management projects, as well as expedited judicial review for covered projects.

We also urge you to address obstructionist litigation and affirm the professional judgment of agency professionals by incorporating the pilot authority for the Forest Service to experiment with binding arbitration as an alternative dispute resolution mechanism found in S. 3085. The pilot program in the bill would preserve access to judicial remedies, while allowing experimentation with a potentially time and money saving alternative. All covered projects should be given greater deference in the courts and be allowed to go forward under existing judicial review procedures for hazardous fuels reduction projects.

Clearly, Congress understands the severe forest health problems on over 65 million acres of our National Forest System. Congressional leaders also understand that the wildfire suppression funding mechanism developed in the past is no longer adequate to address the conditions we are experiencing.

These issues cut across jurisdictional lines, and we recognize the complexities that result. The House has acted on a comprehensive bill, which has also cleared the Senate Agriculture Committee. However, we urge you to work with your colleagues to bring a consensus bill that addresses both fire funding and forest management to the President as soon as possible. Anything less is a half measure. We stand ready to work with your committees to advance responsible solutions to these serious national problems.

Sincerely,

Federal Forest Resource Coalition  
American Loggers Council  
New Mexico Forest Industry Association  
Minnesota Timber Producers Association  
Montana Logging Association  
Intermountain Forest Association  
Colorado Timber Industry Association  
Great Lakes Timber Professionals Association  
Associated Logging Contractors – Idaho  
American Forest & Paper Association  
New Hampshire Timberland Owners Association

Associated Oregon Loggers  
Michigan Forest Products Council  
Minnesota Forest Industries  
American Forest Resource Council  
Forest Resources Association  
Black Hills Forest Resource Association  
Allegheny Hardwood Utilization Group  
Oregon Women in Timber  
Hardwood Federation  
Montana Wood Products Association  
California Forestry Association