

November 9, 2021

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker, United States House of Representatives  
1236 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer  
Majority Leader, United States Senate  
322 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Majority Leader Schumer:

As researchers and practitioners with the overwhelming weight of the scientific evidence behind us, we write in support of the Forestry title of the Build Back Better reconciliation package pending before Congress. In our view, the \$27.7 billion investment in science-driven, ecologically based forest and fire management is an historic commitment that should be enacted into law. This investment supports dry forest restoration, climate- and wildfire-adaptation, fire risk reduction, and carbon storage as well as collaboration, forest inventories, monitoring and adaptive management, and other forest programs.

A minority view opposes forest and fire management that involves cutting trees or fire use, such as prescribed burning; however, as recent events and the preponderance of scientific evidence demonstrate, the combined influence of more than a century of fire exclusion and rapid climate warming jeopardizes both forests and communities.<sup>1</sup> The scientific evidence also shows that combinations of forest and fire management can mitigate wildfire impacts and protect our forested communities from the ravages of climate-driven wildfires.<sup>2</sup> The most successful resilience treatments are those that facilitate the role of low- to moderate-severity fire as an ecological process.<sup>3</sup> Mechanical treatments in dry pine, dry and moist mixed conifer, pine and oak woodlands, and hardwood forest types reduce tree density, remove ladder fuels, and prepare forests for a warmer, drier climate. To mitigate future fire behavior and severity, prescribed burning is necessary to reduce hazardous fuels.<sup>4</sup> Revitalizing and supporting Indigenous burning practices is also a key component of landscape and community resilience.

The scientific consensus is clear; the forest and fire management programs supported by the Build Back Better package work to restore forests and increase climate- and wildfire-adaptation of forests and nearby communities. Treatments in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) help reduce the spread of wildfire in urban environments, while landscape restoration treatments are effective in mitigating fire intensity and reducing vulnerability to drought and wildfire.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, such treatments are rightfully attributed with positively altering wildfire behavior in this summer's Caldor Fire near Lake Tahoe, as well as other wildfires such as the Black Butte and Lick Creek Fires in Oregon. These changes in wildfire behavior, made possible through past fuel reduction treatments, likely saved both lives and structures.

Concern has been expressed about the potential carbon and climate impacts of the forestry provisions in the package. Vegetation removal, forest thinning, and the use of prescribed fire all increase carbon emissions in the short term. But these emissions pale in comparison to those of modern peak season wildfires in fire-excluded forests.<sup>6</sup> Forested area and density have increased dramatically since the late 19th century as fires were excluded and suppressed. The resulting conditions cannot be maintained under a warming climate. Science-based restoration and adaptation results in forests that are more resilient to wildfire and drought, which results in lower greenhouse gas emissions in the long term.<sup>7</sup>

Without urgent action to restore our forests through the use of proven tools like variable density thinning, thinning from below, prescribed burning, Indigenous burning practices, and retention of carbon-rich older trees and forests, we jeopardize one of the best climate mitigation options we have: extensive multi-aged forest cover in the western United States.<sup>8</sup> We have already lost many mature and old trees and forests, and climate change science forecasts a tripling of those losses by 2050.<sup>9</sup> Climate- and wildfire-adaptation that fosters more durable “carbon stores” in older fire- and drought-tolerant trees should be a priority.<sup>10</sup> Efficient and effective fire management, both the suppression and application of fire, is also key to protecting our communities and ecosystems. These legislative priorities include investment in fire management that recognizes the strain both climate change and past forest and fire management place on our fire management service.

The best available science makes clear that there is no future without fire and smoke, but we can influence when and how communities and forests experience them. The Build Back Better package provides the resources managers need to implement and monitor proven climate- and wildfire-adaptation strategies. This legislation will provide much-needed funding for vital programs and on-the-ground work to restore and protect our cherished forests.

Sincerely,

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