

Dear Farm Bill Conferees:

As scientists with extensive experience in the fields of natural resource management and forest and wildfire ecology, we write to raise concerns about the threats to science-based forest management and public engagement across our national forests posed by the House-passed farm bill.

In June, the House and Senate passed farm bills with very different approaches to solving environmental problems in the national forests managed by the U.S. Forest Service. As you negotiate the 2018 farm bill, we urge you to avoid the House's proposals, which are inconsistent with science-based management principles and would seriously damage our national forests while reducing Americans' say in how these forests are managed.

Everyone agrees that our national forests provide important wildlife habitat, supply clean drinking water to hundreds of cities and towns, and offer outdoor recreation opportunities to Americans nationwide. Where opinions differ is in the care and protection of forests, and those differences have major consequences for our national forests and the people who live, work, and recreate on them.

In the spring, Congress enacted reform of the nation's system of funding wildfire suppression in our national forests. As a result, Forest Service programs will no longer be robbed to pay for fire suppression, and more resources will be available for much needed restoration and community protection efforts. The House's proposals in the farm bill, by contrast, would curtail the transparency, citizen input, and informed decision-making that help ensure national forest management projects are scientifically based and socially acceptable.

Wildfire, especially when it affects our homes and families, appropriately heightens emotions, and wildfire management challenges will only increase with the increasingly acute effects of climate change. Protection of life and property should always be the top priority during any wildfire. Fuel reduction activity to reduce wildfire impacts needs to prioritize areas near communities in what is known as the Wildland Urban Interface, rather than remote backcountry areas of our national forests.

Wildfire funding and management should concentrate on effective, science-based prevention programs such as controlled burning and fuel reduction. But the House bill does not properly address these issues. Instead, it ignores the critical role of climate change in driving today's wildfires and focuses on accelerated commercial logging and road building — which generally exacerbate fire risk — with little consideration of impacts on water quality, wildlife, or recreational values.

Contained in the House farm bill are a number of new "categorical exclusions" from the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for particular projects or management situations. NEPA, signed into law by President Nixon, has helped ensure for almost a half century that all stakeholders have a voice in management decisions. It also ensures that a project's impacts are properly evaluated using

applicable scientific information. However, the House bill limits public input and environmental review on logging projects as large as 6,000 acres (almost 10 square miles) when removing fire-damaged trees, spraying herbicides, or creating openings for wildlife.

Projects designed to improve forest conditions and wildlife habitat must include input from scientists and interested stakeholders, including state and tribal wildlife agencies. This will help ensure that commercial logging activities, including thinning, conform to forest management plans and are conducted using the best scientific management practices and at ecologically appropriate scales.

Many of the House bill's forestry provisions are not supported by science. For instance, the bill seeks to aggressively expand post-fire "salvage" logging on public lands to prevent wildfire, when in reality post-fire logging occurs primarily for economic reasons and rarely contributes to ecological recovery in the disturbed area. Post-fire logging of dead or dying trees is appropriate near roads where standing dead trees pose a safety hazard but should generally be avoided in areas where maintaining natural ecosystem processes is a priority. However, the House language does not recognize this key distinction.

The House legislation also exempts the Forest Service from analyzing cumulative environmental effects of multiple categorical exclusion projects in the same vicinity. This violates a fundamental principle of scientifically sound public land management — that of ensuring that management activities collectively do not produce environmentally destructive outcomes.

These exemptions from conservation law would dramatically reduce public participation in decision making on the national forests. These forests are public lands, managed for a variety of services benefiting many different stakeholders. Management alternatives should be provided to the public for their consideration to help ensure that multiple interests are balanced. Adoption of procedures usurping public participation, as proposed by the House, would result in major public pushback against active management.

By exempting controversial projects from meaningful evaluation and public engagement, the House farm bill runs counter to basic principles of science-based forest management, including the use of best available science and the application of robust decision-making processes. If they were to become law, the House farm bill's forestry provisions would result in poorly planned, ineffective and harmful management actions that fail to address the vital need to improve the climate and fire resiliency of our national forests and the safety of our communities.

Congress must avoid measures that would reduce public support for urgently needed active management on our national forests. Weakening conservation laws and removing scientific underpinnings of management decisions is not constructive. We urge you to reject the rollbacks of environmental safeguards in the House farm bill.

Sincerely,

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