

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 17, 2022

Secretary Tom Vilsack
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Secretary Deb Haaland
United States Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretaries Vilsack and Haaland:

Thank you for your leadership in managing America's national forests and public lands for the benefit of our climate, watersheds, wildlife, and communities. We write today to request that your agencies move forward with your obligations set out in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) to protect and restore old growth forests and further encourage you to take additional action to protect other carbon-rich mature forests across the nation for the long term.

We appreciate that the Forest Service's Climate Adaption and Resilience plan (climate plan) and its 10-year wildfire strategy each highlight the importance of strategic implementation of hazardous fuel treatments and prescribed fire to reduce wildfire risks and to increase forest restoration. However, in light of the worsening climate crisis, it is also imperative that the U.S. expand that effort and optimize the climate value of mature and old growth forests throughout the country and within USDA's and DOI's climate response and strategies.

As you know, the IIJA included historic investments in forest restoration on national forests and public lands. Among other investments, section 40803(a) appropriates \$3.4 billion for wildfire risk reduction and forest restoration on these lands. Along with additional requirements, section 40803(g)(6) of the IIJA requires the prioritization of funding for projects that:

fully maintain or contribute toward the restoration of the structure and composition of old growth stands consistent with the characteristics of that forest type, taking into account the contribution of the old growth stand to landscape fire adaption and watershed health, unless the old growth stand is part of a science-based ecological restoration project authorized by the Secretary concerned that meets applicable protection and old growth enhancement objectives, as determined by the Secretary concerned.

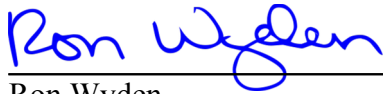
We view this language to be consistent with the goals of the 10-year wildfire strategy and clear that Congress recognizes the importance of protecting and restoring old growth forests to enhance climate action, biodiversity, and fire resilience. Therefore, we respectfully request you respond to the following questions by March 31, 2022:

1. What specific steps do USDA and the DOI plan to take to follow this direction for implementing their climate plans, 10-year wildfire strategy, and other agency planning processes?
2. What monitoring requirements and metrics will USDA and DOI use to analyze the progress of protecting and restoring these forests across the country? Specifically, what performance measures do you intend to use to report progress to Congress given that “acres treated” does not incorporate old growth preservation or restoration? How do you intend to develop new, spatially-explicit, outcomes-based performance measures to track and report progress in restoring and preserving old growth forests?
3. What are the priority projects for restoring mature and old growth forests with IJA funds under the 10-year plan? Which projects do you anticipate funding in the first two years of IJA implementation and how do you plan on selecting projects in future years?
4. The 10-year strategy makes use of the concept of firesheds. How is restoration of old growth forests incorporated into the fireshed model? If it is not, how do you intend to ensure old growth is prioritized in your approach to funding allocation?

Further, these efforts should clearly build toward the goal of establishing broad policy beyond implementation of these near-term funds and projects that will protect old growth and other carbon-rich mature forests across the nation. The important climate and biodiversity values of old growth forests that Congress emphasized in this provision exist throughout the federal forests, not just in those areas most subject to fire, and not just in old growth forests but also carbon-rich mature forests. Protection of these values for the long term is key to accomplishing the Administration’s commitments to climate and biodiversity protection.

Thank you for your leadership in managing America’s national forests and public lands. We look forward to supporting you in this important work.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Earl Blumenauer
Member of Congress



Peter A. DeFazio
Member of Congress



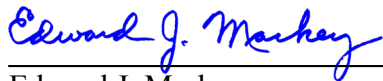
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



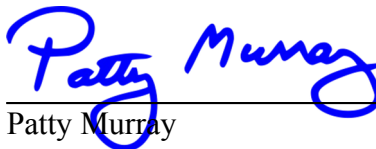
Alex Padilla
United States Senator



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator




Patty Murray
United States Senator



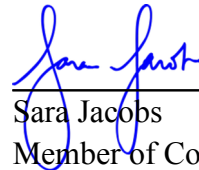
Cory Booker
United States Senator



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



Nanette Diaz Barragán
Member of Congress



Sara Jacobs
Member of Congress



Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



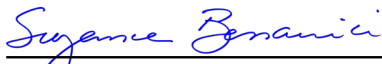
Ruben Gallego
Member of Congress



Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress



Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



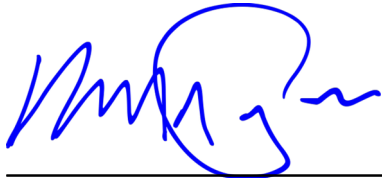
Suzanne Bonamici
Member of Congress



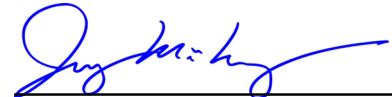
Veronica Escobar
Member of Congress



Steve Cohen
Member of Congress



Mark Pocan
Member of Congress



Jerry McNerney
Member of Congress



Mike Levin
Member of Congress



Nikema Williams
Member of Congress



Diana DeGette
Member of Congress

CC: Randy Moore, Chief, U.S. Forest Service
Tracy Stone-Manning, Director, Bureau of Land Management