

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 23, 2014

Senator Jack Reed
Chairman
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on
Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Lisa Murkowski
Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on
Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Reed and Senator Murkowski:

We write today to encourage you to prioritize forest management over additional land acquisitions by the Forest Service as you begin drafting the Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 Interior and Environment Appropriations bill.

The condition of our federal forestlands continues to deteriorate. Over the past 10 years, bark beetle epidemics and wildfires have devastated millions of acres of forestland, particularly in western states. Large landscapes of dead and infested trees pose a significant threat of forest fires, as evidenced by last summer's historic Colorado, California, and Idaho wildfires. However, over that same 10-year period land managed by the Forest Service has continued to grow with the Forest Service acquiring over 700,000 acres at a cost of \$635 million.

In order to adequately address the bark beetle and wildfire devastation as well as other management needs, Congress should ensure that the Forest Service prioritize limited resources to adequately manage the lands for which it is currently responsible, rather continue to acquire additional property. Timber harvests are a proven successful management tool that increase forest health, contribute \$2.7 billion to the economy, and provide 16.5 jobs for every million board feet harvested. Responsible timber harvests reduce the risk of catastrophic fires, improve the health of our forests, and slow the spread of insect infestations such as the pine beetle. We appreciate President Obama's renewed interest in timber harvests as indicated through his FY 2015 budget request, which would result in a timber harvest of 3.1 billion board feet. However, this represents an increase of only 300 million board feet from FY 2014. Considerably more proactive forest management practices should be implemented to improve forest health and mitigate the risk of forest fires.

To address the critical need for timely management in several portions of the National Forest System, the 2014 Farm Bill includes a provision to allow for management projects in designated "priority" areas to be expedited with the assistance of a variety of stakeholders, including state governments. Since passage of the Farm Bill, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has designated 94 national forest areas in 35 states as priority areas due to insect and disease threats. As you draft the FY 2015 Department of Interior and Environment Appropriations bill, we believe that funding for management activities within these areas should be prioritized over funding for additional federal land acquisitions.

As you know, the administration's budget requests \$51 million in funding for Forest Service land acquisitions, which is an almost \$7.5 million increase compared to FY 2014 levels. The Forest Service has also requested a transfer of almost \$76.7 million in mandatory funding from the Department of Interior for land acquisition. During a period of unsustainable deficits, significant backlogs in forest infrastructure, and rapid forest health deterioration, we believe the limited amount of appropriated taxpayer dollars under the committee's jurisdiction would be better utilized directed to managing the land already under the Forest Service's purview rather than increasing the acreage under Forest Service ownership.

Congress should focus more on enabling the Forest Service to better care for and maintain the land it currently owns before authorizing it to acquire more. Therefore, we respectfully request that you consider reducing funding for land acquisitions and redirect that funding to help the Forest Service adequately and more proactively manage the lands currently under its ownership preferably directly to management projects in areas the Forest Service has already designated as priority areas as authorized by the 2014 Farm Bill.

Thank you for your consideration of this request, and we look forward to working with you to improve the health of our forests in a fiscally responsible manner.

Sincerely,









Mark

Ron Johnson

John Cornyn
