

May 5, 2023

The Honorable Jeff Merkley
Chairman
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Simpson
Chairman
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chellie Pingree
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Merkley, Ranking Member Murkowski, Chairman Simpson, And Ranking Member Pingree,

The undersigned members of the Forest Climate Working Group are writing to express our strong support for inclusion of several key programmatic investments in forests in the FY 2024 Interior Appropriations bill. The programs and funding levels discussed below are essential to maintaining local economies and forest jobs; conserving and enhancing vital habitat, watersheds, recreation access, and other forest resources; sequestering carbon to address and lessen the impacts of climate change; and providing the diverse forest products our nation will need to grow and thrive into the future.

America's forests, public and private, provide a suite of cornerstone benefits critical to our collective health and well-being. They sequester and store more than 15 percent of all U.S. carbon emissions each year, with potential to do far more. According to U.S. Forest Service data, they also are the source of clean drinking water for more than half of all Americans and over 90 percent of Western state residents, in many cases forestalling the need for expensive treatment alternatives. Our forests also provide irreplaceable habitat to a host of game and non-game fish and wildlife, including dozens of federal-listed species; iconic outdoor recreation opportunities; and economic vitality for rural, gateway, and urban communities alike. To maximize these benefits, however – and just to maintain them at existing levels in the face of rising threats to forest cover and forest health – immediate, cost-effective investments are needed. Targeted increases to existing Forest Service accounts will help to accelerate climate mitigation and adaptation, enhance forest resilience and health, assure ongoing supply of wood products from sustainably managed forests, expand forest cover through afforestation and reforestation, and slow forest conversion to non-forest uses.

Given the broad range of needs and the equally wide array of partnership assistance and leveraged program support provided by our organizations individually, this letter focuses on just a handful of shared top priorities. We respectfully ask that you fully consider other forest investments identified separately in other letters from our forestry community, requests from House and Senate members, and the President's Budget Request. In that context, we also urge that the Subcommittee specifically include the programmatic funding outlined below in the bills you develop for FY2024.

Invest in Sound Science and Data

USFS Forest Inventory and Analysis Program: The inventory, data, and analysis provided by the Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program constitute the backbone of scientific knowledge on the current state of the nation's forests, informing sound policy and forest management decisions regarding forest carbon, sustainability, and existing and expanding markets. We appreciate the FIA increase included in the FY2023 baseline, and ask that you provide no less

than that enacted level of **\$32.2 million** for the program in FY2024. We also urge you to work with the Forest Service to

- ensure that adequate Salaries and Expenses funding is provided to address the significant program expansion envisioned in the FY23 omnibus, described in the FY2024 budget justification, and detailed in the FIA Strategic Plan;
- encourage a transition to a five-year data collection cycle in response to the rapid landscape changes caused by the increasing frequency and severity of wildfires, hurricanes and other extreme weather events, and other forest disturbances;
- develop new tools, technologies, and capacities through FIA for forest sustainability monitoring, wildlife habitat assessments, and other data-related needs.

Enhance Resources for Forest Stewardship and Reforestation

USFS Forest Stewardship Program: The Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) helps landowners plan sustainable management, including carbon friendly and climate-smart practices, and to implement reforestation. FSP funds are on average leveraged 2:1 by state and private commitments, resulting in outsized returns through forest stewardship plans and other technical assistance that keep private forestlands healthy and productive to benefit clean air and water, carbon storage, timber output, and other forest-based needs. With sincere gratitude for the Subcommittee's increased funding for FSP in FY2023 in recognition of these values, we believe the program remains severely underfunded, and we recommend an appropriation of **at least \$22 million** in FY2024. This funding level is required to help address the backlog of demand, with many family-owned forests needing immediate assistance to keep their lands in forestry and maximize forest carbon and other benefits.

USFS Funding for Reforestation, Nursery, and Genetic Resources (RNGR): For nearly 20 years, the RNGR program has provided vital direct technical assistance to nurseries, including state, tribal, and private facilities, to assist in native plant and seedling production and address emerging germplasm conservation needs. These nurseries in turn provide the seed and seedling resources essential for burn scar rehabilitation, forest resilience, urban forestry, and other landscape needs with significant forest climate implications. In order to ensure adequate supplies of high-quality, genetically adapted seedlings for reforestation and to promote cost-effective planting techniques that improve seedling survival and growth, we ask that the Subcommittee direct the Forest Service to **continue and increase the use of National Revegetation Strategy dollars provided in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to expand the RNGR program.**

Foster Cooperative Working Forest Conservation

USFS Forest Legacy Program: The Forest Legacy Program (FLP) is a key resource for states working to maintain working forests and forest cover, with significant implications for carbon sequestration and avoided deforestation, while also providing for public recreation access, protecting wildlife and community water supplies, and meeting other forest-related needs. In recent years, the mandatory Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) funding requested by the administration for FLP has sometimes been reduced to accommodate other GAOA demands. We request that the full **\$94 million** in the budget request for FY2024 be included in your legislation this year to meet the specific project needs detailed in the budget.

USFS Community Forest and Open Space Program (CFOSP): CFOSP is a 50/50 matching grant program that helps local governments, tribes, and non-profits to acquire and manage forestland threatened with conversion. We ask that **funding for this important program be increased** in order to address time-sensitive opportunities for communities to help shape their economic and forest-carbon futures by taking on ownership and ongoing climate-smart management of at-risk forests.

Promote the Use of Forest Products

USFS Wood Innovation Grant Program: The Wood Innovation Grant (WIG) program provides competitive grants to projects that expand wood products and wood energy markets through development and implementation of mass timber and other wood-based alternative materials. These projects and their practical applications offer significant climate benefits by increasing carbon storage in the built environment, reducing the use of carbon-intensive non-wood building

materials, and enhancing market demand for wood that in turn sustains forest land uses, forest cover, and local forest economies. The program is authorized to receive \$25 million in FY2024; we request appropriations of **at least \$20 million**.

We appreciate your consideration of these requests, and more generally, your demonstrated strong interest in addressing forest climate needs and opportunities in your bill each year. We look forward to providing any additional information or perspective you may need.

Sincerely,