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The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

On December 17, 2017, April 9, 2018, and June 19, 2018 I wrote you letters about the critical state of the nation's landscapes created by catastrophic wildfires and their impacts to loss of life and property. All of my letters strive to show how enhanced forest management will reduce the destructive force of wildfires that we are witnessing now, especially in the west.

Yesterday [August 17, 2018], I viewed a YouTube video of your recent Cabinet Meeting. At this meeting, you and Secretary of Interior Zinke talked about the current wildfire situation. You concluded, there are things can be done before the fires start and the problems would not be near as severe if not for the "poor maintenance" of the forests. Then, Secretary Zinke stated that this situation is due to "gross mismanagement [of the forests] for decades" while concluding that fuel loads are up and the density of the forests are higher than ever.

You are both correct. Accordingly, I would like to reconfirm to you what I said in my letter dated June 19, 2018. That is, "...the management of America's forestlands, with a concentration on our National Forests, needs to be emphasized so wildfires can remain smaller and begin again to be a tool for improved forest health as opposed to destructive events that destroy lives, communities and landscapes."

I also stated that part of the reason for the lack of management [vs. *mismanagement*] has been the shifting of resources [funding, skills, projects] away from land management actions to help with fire suppression. This, as Secretary Zinke stated, has been happening for decades. In the USDA Forest Service, for example, there has been a 40 percent reduction in all non-fire personnel over the last 30 years. This has created a huge void in the ability of the agency to exercise its direct role in the management of the National Forests and its indirect role in the management of non-federal forests. Simply put, the overall ability of the Forest Service to achieve its conservation mission across all land ownerships has stalled. This is a key point. We must backfill the huge gap that has been created in lost non-fire skills and foregone forest-management activities now.

To do this requires additional funds. Yet, the current 2018 budget and your 2019 proposed budget offer little ability for the void to be filled. Thus, with all due respect, the words at the Cabinet Meeting appear to me as empty words. Please allow me to be wrong.

Recently I wrote a commentary on this issue that was published in the August *The Forestry Source*. I have attached this for your review. A key feature of this commentary is the need for increased funding that has been so depleted over the years. I am calling it a “forest fix.” If you want forest maintenance to be improved, please act now. Review your proposed budget for 2019 and adjust it so aggressive forest management will enable effective fire management. The Forest Service alone needs +\$1.3 to +\$2.2 billion.

Mr. President, if you want the wildfires to slow and become less destructive – indeed become a tool to improve forest maintenance – then you have to emphasize forest management. This includes expanded hazardous fuel removal; forest thinning; and, timber salvage. In return, these actions will enable forests to become healthy, sustainable and more resilient to disturbances such as wildfires. By doing this, you can offer a growing America a wide-range of ecological and commercial goods and services from our forests including clear air and water; timber and associated wood products; wildlife habitat; tourism; recreation; and flood control – as well as significantly reduced impacts to people and their property from wildland fires.

Very respectfully,



Michael T. Rains

Commentary

An Open Letter to Congress: We Need a Forest Fix¹

By Michael T. Rains

Wildfires are destroying America's landscapes. What can be done? There is a way out of this dilemma: America's forestlands, especially our publicly owned national forests, are in need of aggressive, active management so that wildfires are less destructive and can eventually become a land conservation tool.

In 1995, the US Forest Service spent 16 percent of its annual appropriated budget on fire suppression. It now spends more than half of its budget on fighting fires. Judging by forecasts for the 2018 fire season, it is safe to say that this trend will continue. Along with this shift in funding, there continues to be a corresponding shift in staff, with about a 40 percent reduction in all non-fire personnel over the last 30 years. This is a key point.

As the agency's fire program has grown larger, fewer resources have been available for everything else the Forest Service does, meaning its ability to carry out its core land conservation mission has all but stalled. Our federal forests are not being managed at a pace and scale required to help them become healthy and resilient to wildfires and other disturbances, such as insects and drought, which have killed millions of trees in California alone in recent years. Without adequate management, our forests become overcrowded, so that when wildfires occur, the results are larger fires of higher intensity—and such fires are extremely destructive to everything in their path.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018 included what is being called the "fire fix," with emergency fire-suppression funds available beginning in 2020. However, for this year and 2019, the Forest Service can expect to continue shifting resources to fire suppression and away from activities that can help reduce fire size and intensity. The agency is working at cross purposes.

Many observers conclude that the fire fix will solve everything. This is not true. The act does authorize emergency firefighting funds ranging from \$2.25 to \$2.95 billion per year, from 2020 to 2027. And the 10-year average for fire suppression—a figure used by the Forest Service for budget-development purposes—will be frozen at the 2015 level. All of this is good news.

However, the fire fix certainly does nothing to backfill the huge gap that has been created in lost non-fire skills and foregone forest-management activities. It is critical that this be recognized and that new momentum be immediately established for the next step: deploying an aggressive forest-management strategy so that effective fire management can be achieved and sustained.

¹ Published in the *Forestry Source*, Vol. 23, No. 8, August 2018.

This strategy will require new funds—in the range of \$1.3 billion to \$2.2 billion for the next three to five years, at minimum—to help replenish the skills and work shifted away from the Forest Service’s forest-management programs. The Consolidated Appropriations Act does not include these additional funds. Unless they are provided, the fire fix will have little to do with helping fire become the conservation tool America’s landscapes require.

“It doesn’t solve the problem. Solving the problem is stopping the damn fires [from becoming so large and destructive], not spending more money to put them out once they get started,” said Rep. Rob Bishop (R-Utah), chair of the House Natural Resources Committee, as reported in *The Hill* on March 22 (tinyurl.com/ybmtlejv). In other words, the only alternative to managing forests so that they are less prone to burning at high intensities is spending more and more money on controlling ever-larger wildfires, with no end in sight.

Improving fire management through enhanced forest management means roughly doubling the current timber harvest level from the national forests to at least six billion board feet (bbf) per year. Some legislators have called for harvest levels of 3.4 to 4.0 bbf, and Forest Service chief Victoria Christiansen said recently that the agency plans to sell 3.4 bbf this year. Unfortunately, this harvest level will not allow for any significant change in forest management or fire-risk reduction. The focus will continue to be on fire suppression. In short, the current funding level and harvest targets are woefully inadequate. I cannot overstate the importance of this.

A 1999 General Accounting Office (GAO) report noted that “the most extensive and serious problem related to the health of forests in the interior West is the over-accumulation of vegetation, which has caused an increasing number of large, intense, uncontrollable, and catastrophically destructive wildfires” (*Western National Forests: A Cohesive Strategy is Needed to Address Catastrophic Wildfire Threats*, gao.gov/products/RCED-99-65). A year later, when the National Fire Plan, “Managing the Impacts of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment,” was written, it was thought that about \$850 million would be required annually to more effectively address the issue of hazardous-fuels removal.

More recently, a 2013 Congressional Research Service report noted that “If a comprehensive program were undertaken to reduce fuels on all high-risk and moderate-risk federal lands, using GAO’s treatment cost rate of \$300 per acre, the total cost would come to \$69 billion—\$39 billion for FS lands and \$30 billion for DOI [Department of the Interior] lands—for initial treatment. This would come to \$4.3 billion annually over 16 years” (tinyurl.com/ya3kllfp).

The current Forest Service budget is nowhere close to adequate for reducing fuels on all high-risk and moderate-risk federal lands. In 2001, there were an estimated 38 million acres on our national forests considered to be at high risk from destructive wildfires. Today, the estimate is 80 million acres. So, after spending about \$5 billion on hazardous-fuels treatments since 2001, there are an additional 42 million acres at high risk. To overstate the obvious: You cannot address a problem of this magnitude with such excessively inadequate resources.

Earlier, I stated that, due to the extreme costs of fire suppression, fewer funds and resources are available to support the very programs and restoration projects that reduce the fire threat. A program that emphasizes the innovative, cost-effective use of biomass is a prime example. Some examples of uses for biomass are wood-based nanotechnology; “green” building construction, including advanced composite materials; and certain aspects of energy production, such as torrefaction, which removes moisture and volatiles from woody biomass, leaving bio-coal, an advanced, more-efficient form of wood, for energy. Such uses offer pragmatic market-based

solutions to help forests become more resilient to such disturbances as widespread catastrophic fire loss. Biomass uses are outcomes from restorative actions to our forests.

It is estimated that a strong, well-established program in cost-effective biomass uses could create high-value markets from low-value wood that would otherwise be left dead or dying. Combined with a more adequate timber harvesting program, this could reasonably help restore up to 19 to 20 million forested acres annually. This pace and scale of restoration could reduce future fire-suppression costs in the range of 12 to 15 percent (some suggest as high as 23 percent)—about \$350 to \$500 million—based on the 2017 fire-suppression costs of the Forest Service. Simply put, it makes good economic sense to aggressively invest in biomass uses as part of an overall forest-management strategy. Consider that an aggressive investment in biomass uses by the Forest Service would cost about \$33 million, a fraction of the amount spent fighting one large fire, and a drop in the bucket compared to the more than \$2.4 billion the Forest Service spent on fire suppression in 2017.

In summary:

The management of the nation's forests, especially its national forests, needs immediate, aggressive attention.

- Years of shifting resources (skills, money, and projects) from non-fire work to the fire effort has created a huge gap in the ability of the Forest Service to carry out forest-management actions on the ground. Thus, wildfires are larger and more intense than ever before.
- The so called fire fix can help slow the shift of non-fire activities for the fire effort. But stakeholders cannot let the fire fix keep them from understanding that the real brass ring the Forest Service is searching for is the effective fire management that results from aggressive forest management. That is, the *fire* fix is only the first step toward a *forest* fix.
- As the 2018 fire season unfolds, it is easy to forecast another destructive year and that \$5 billion will be expended by federal, state, and local bodies to suppress wildfires across the country.
- Funding for forest-management actions, including targeted hazardous-fuels treatment, is woefully inadequate. In fact, at the current funding level, forest health will continue to decline and the impacts of wildfires on the land and people's lives will only get worse.

US taxpayers are losing \$70 to \$350 billion a year in wildfire-related damages to infrastructure, public health, and natural resources. Wildfires are a major cause of losses to the forest-products industry. And an estimated 120 million people in more than 46 million homes are at risk due to wildfire; 72,000 communities are directly in harm's way. Thousands of heroic firefighters have died protecting people and property. How many more reasons does it take before we can begin to improve America's forests so that fire can be used as a conservation tool and no longer feared? Clearly, now is the time for a forest fix.