April 1, 2024

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

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We write in strong support of the recent proposal from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to amend all land management plans across the National Forest System to create consistent direction to conserve existing old-growth forests and recruit future old-growth. As USFS works to swiftly finalize and implement the proposed national plan amendment, we urge the agency to ensure the amendment is durable under future administrations. Further, we urge USFS to promote tribal co-stewardship and integrate indigenous knowledge throughout the amendment. Finally, we urge USFS to strengthen and clarify the prioritization of ecological health when managing existing old-growth forests and to include strong and consistent direction for the recruitment of future old-growth forests.

Old-growth forests are a vital resource, providing important habitat for endangered species, mitigating climate change through the absorption and long-term storage of carbon, and protecting vital watersheds that many Americans depend on. Old-growth forests are also an important element in USFS’s Wildfire Crisis Strategy, as older, ecologically intact forests are generally more resistant to wildfire than younger, smaller trees and forests with unnaturally high fuel loads resulting from a history of fire suppression. Old-growth forests also provide iconic and treasured recreational opportunities for American families and hold deep cultural significance for tribes. We are therefore pleased to see USFS prioritize efforts to increase the distribution, abundance, and ecological integrity of old-growth forest ecosystems, and we urge USFS to move swiftly to finalize and implement the proposed amendment.

We are particularly pleased that the proposed amendment prioritizes the ecological health of old-growth forests, rather than revenues generated from harvesting old-growth trees. We encourage USFS to strengthen and clarify in the final amendment the language regarding the prioritization of ecological health, including the importance of natural succession processes, in managing old-growth forests. To improve the long-term resilience of old-growth forests to wildfire and other climate change impacts, USFS must continue to provide clear and consistent direction to enhance the ecological composition, structure, and integrity of old-growth ecosystems.

In addition to monitoring and conserving existing old-growth, USFS should also provide clear, consistent, and enforceable direction for the recruitment and conservation of future old-growth forests. The future of our old-growth forests depends on the recruitment of new old-growth, but at present, the guidance in the proposed amendment for recruiting future old-growth is effectively unenforceable. USFS must strengthen language surrounding the recruitment of new old-growth and provide clear direction regarding how future old-growth should be identified, prioritized, managed, and monitored. This is crucial to the long-term success of the proposed amendment.

Throughout this process, we urge USFS to respect tribal uses, honor treaties with tribal nations, and work with tribal nations to expand co-management and co-stewardship opportunities of old-growth forests.
Tribal engagement, tribal sovereignty, and indigenous knowledge will be critical to the successful implementation of the proposed amendment, and we appreciate the steps USFS has taken so far to acknowledge this. By prioritizing a culture of co-stewardship between tribal nations and the federal government, USFS can foster a spirit of reciprocity while integrating indigenous knowledge in long-term old-growth forest management plans. Moving forward, we hope that USFS continues to allocate time and resources to fully consult tribal nations during and after the amendment process.

Old-growth forests are the bedrock of our National Forest System, providing a range of essential ecosystem services, from clean water and animal habitat to carbon sequestration and recreation. We must act to protect these forests and manage them responsibly. We strongly support the proposed national plan amendment, and we urge USFS to swiftly finalize and implement the proposed amendment and to ensure the amendment is durable under future administrations. Further, we urge USFS to strengthen and clarify the prioritization of ecological health when managing existing old-growth forests and to include strong and consistent direction for the recruitment of future old-growth forests. Finally, we urge USFS to promote tribal co-stewardship and integrate indigenous knowledge throughout the amendment.

Sincerely,

Doris Matsui  
Member of Congress

Jared Huffman  
Member of Congress

John P. Sarbanes  
Member of Congress

Summer Lee  
Member of Congress

Emanuel Cleaver, II  
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