

Forest Health & Resilience, Climate Change & Wildfire: A Statement of Principles on Public Policy

Nationwide, our forests are at a crossroads. The power of our nation's forest carbon sink to curb the effects of climate change is unmatched by any other sector, land use, or clean technology when appropriately and professionally managed. But as the climate changes, many forests are increasingly at risk – vulnerable to drought, insect infestation and disease, prone to extreme weather events like hurricanes and floods, and in the west, more likely to face severe wildfire. In the face of a changing climate, we must prioritize forest health and resilience, embrace active and sustainable forest management, and address climate change by keeping our forests – and the valuable forest carbon sink – intact.

While fires are a natural and important part of many forest ecosystems in the United States, severe wildfire is caused by a set of complicated and compounding factors – including dry weather cycles exacerbated by the effects of climate change, decades of fire exclusion and fuel buildup in many forests particularly those on federal lands and smaller family holdings, and lack of adequate resources to realistically anticipate, suppress, and recover from severe wildfire.

Severe wildfire is a reality we must address across all forest ownerships by embracing the science of modern forestry, prioritizing funding to match today's fire realities, and anticipating needs so that we can recover quickly following a fire. Working together, we must prioritize:

- **Reducing wildfire risk.** Many forests, particularly those on federal land and smaller family holdings, are overstocked – with increasing tree densities and a dangerous buildup of brush, dead trees and other vegetation. Fuels reduction is needed to ensure a healthy number of trees per acre, and to remove unhealthy, dead or dying trees and brush.
- **Protecting people and property.** We need realistic approaches for wildfire management to meet the realities we are facing on the ground. Increased capacity to fight wildland fire in its early phases will help keep wildfires from becoming costly and uncontrollable public safety threats. Increased funding is needed to recruit, train and support wildland professionals.
- **Recovering quickly.** We should seek to reestablish forests quickly across all ownerships following a fire. In areas where severe fire is a regular threat, we need to support reforestation, which protects the soil, restores damaged watersheds, and reestablishes critical habitat for wildlife.

Because wildfire crosses boundaries, decisions about how to manage public forests impact neighboring private forests and communities. Public forests in areas where wildfire is common should be managed for forest health, resilience, and reduced wildfire risk. Well established forestry practices can help accomplish these goals in many public forests as they do in private forests, while acknowledging that such practices are typically not appropriate for areas designated as wilderness, national parks, roadless areas or other similar forest reserves.

As representatives of the forestry and forest products sector, we offer the following guidance on wildfire policy:

- **To reduce wildfire risk:**
 - Embrace active and sustainable forest management across all land ownerships to keep forests healthy and resilient while reducing the risk of severe wildfire.
 - Anticipate the annual impacts of fuels accumulation, hotter, drier conditions and more extreme weather events by predicting and prioritizing fuels reduction, vegetation management, and strategic fuel breaks across the landscape.

- Increase and strategically prioritize federal investment in state and private forestry and in conservation programs to enhance technical and financial assistance for active forest management on all lands.
 - Encourage active management of non-reserved at-risk federal lands, reduce costly barriers to sound management and risk reduction practices, and encourage the use of prescribed fire where appropriate.
 - In fire prone areas, increase and strategically prioritize financial and technical assistance and low interest equipment loans for smaller private forest owners and contractors to help reduce fuel loads.
 - Encourage and support cooperation across ownerships to identify and prioritize areas for improved forest management to reduce wildfire risk. Many public and private forests would benefit from improved forest management through cooperative agreements like Good Neighbor Authority and shared stewardship, which bring federal and state forest managers, private forest owners, local communities and other key stakeholders together to improve forest health and reduce the risk of wildfire across the landscape.
 - Support healthy forest products markets that help keep private working forests as forests and enable investments that help landowners afford fuels treatments and keep private and public forests healthy and resilient.
- **To protect people and property:**
 - Support rural communities and businesses on the front line of the wildland-urban interface where the risk of loss of life is most acute. Support community awareness programs and provide incentives for communities to reduce fire risk.
 - Provide federal investment to recruit, train, and support state and local wildland fire professionals, to build our national capacity for wildland fire suppression in the state forestry agencies and local fire departments and other wildland fire professionals that are often first responders on federal lands.
- **To recover quickly:**
 - Fully fund efforts to reforest and restore damaged federal lands, including through expansion of the Reforestation Trust Fund.
 - Support family landowners with technical and monetary assistance to prioritize reforestation following a wildfire.
 - Encourage reforestation and continued investment in private timberlands, including through tax policies that provide recognition of the full value of timber damaged in catastrophic events.

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