



May 6, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader, United States Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker, U.S. House of Representatives
1236 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader, United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader, U.S. House of
Representatives
2468 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: Federal Infrastructure and Stimulus Legislation

Dear Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi and Minority Leader McCarthy:

Thank you for your continued leadership in helping our nation survive the Coronavirus disaster. As Congress moves towards stimulating the economy through infrastructure and COVID-19 economic stimulus legislation, the California Forest Watershed Alliance (CAFWA) encourages you to include provisions to sustain and increase the resilience of our National Forest System (NFS), so it continues to generate benefits for people, including urgently needed jobs. CFWA is a chartered coalition including The Nature Conservancy, the Association of California Water Agencies, the California Farm Bureau, the California Forestry Association and Rural County Representatives of California¹.

¹ For more information about CFWA see: <https://www.caforestsandwatersheds.org/>



The California Forest Watershed Alliance (CAFWA) is an urban-rural coalition representing water interests, local governments, the conservation community, agriculture, and the forestry sector, created to promote the restoration and improvement of California's forested watersheds. For more information, visit www.caforestsandwatersheds.org.

If sustained in a resilient condition, our National Forests provide a comprehensive suite of key benefits including:

- Headwater forests and meadows that provide clean drinking water
- Jobs and economic contributions to communities (e.g. tourism, forest management, recreation)
- Air quality
- Carbon sequestration
- Wildlife habitat, open space, scenic viewing, cultural, recreation and wellness opportunities
- Timber and other wood products

The following are examples of Forestry Projects within the American River watershed that are ready to go; i.e. NEPA and/or CEQA are accomplished and some funding is already in place:

- 1) **French Meadows Forest Restoration Project:** Already underway one-of-a-kind French Meadows partnership is a 22,000 acre headwaters forest restoration Project that includes treatments with combination of hand and mechanical thinning, mastication, hazard tree removal, meadow restoration, reforestation and prescribed fire. Year one of many has been accomplished.
- 2) **Michigan Bluff Community Hazardous Fuel Reduction Project :** The proposed Michigan Bluff Community Hazardous Fuel Reduction Project will be conducted on approximately 2,380 acres of federal United States Forest Service (USFS) Tahoe National Forest (TNF) land, and 280 acres of private State Responsibility Area (SRA) lands that surround the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) area of the Project. A variety of treatments will be carried out on these lands to lower fire risk, Green House Gas (GHG) emissions, and increase the potential for sustainable forest cover.
- 3) **Nyack Fuel Reduction Project:** The Nyack fuel reduction project involves over 700 acres of various fuel reduction treatments near the North Fork of the American River, a wild and scenic river.

CAFWA believes providing funding for the following program areas will significantly increase the pace and scale of forest restoration.

U.S. Department of Agriculture – Forest Service

Restoration, construction and maintenance work are needed within our federal forests, whether to improve roads, reduce wildfire risk or increase the ability of our forests to capture and store Carbon. The following forest-related economic development recommendations would support quality jobs while enhancing forest health and resilience.

Catastrophic Wildfires: It is imperative to consider our country's readiness to fight wildfires in the COVID-19 context. It is critical that Congress ensure sufficient resources are available as the wildfire season begins, especially in the West. Federal, state and local wildland firefighting departments across the country will need support to ensure firefighters are able to mobilize and coordinate in a safe manner. In California, where devastating wildfires have displaced thousands of people, claimed lives and caused billions of dollars in damages, readiness includes addressing a massive backlog of thinning, controlled burns and other wildfire planning work. This work is underway with available state funding but could absorb and deploy a substantial infusion of federal Hazardous Fuels funds to minimize future losses, particularly in a year when precipitation has been well below normal and could lead to a robust wildfire season.

Collaborative Landscape Restoration Program: The Collaborative Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) has a proven track record in improving forest health, mitigating wildfires, and supporting rural economies. The CFLRP has reduced the risk of megafires on more than 2.9 million acres. Collaborative forest projects support local jobs, improve wildlife habitat, and reduce hazardous fuels in critical watersheds. These projects bring together local governments, timber and utility stakeholders, and conservation groups. This community-based approach recognizes the importance of local knowledge when it comes to forest management.

Capital Improvement and Maintenance: The Forest Service is the largest federal land and road manager in the lower 48 states and responsible for maintaining more than 375,000 miles of roads, more than 12,000 bridges and 143,000 miles of trails. Forest roads are critical for providing the public access to their lands, access for controlling catastrophic wildfire, and are critical for assisting forest stewardship efforts. Forest roads that are in disrepair hinder all of these activities, and also degrade water quality, which is a critical issue for water agencies in California.

For roads alone, the Forest Service has a maintenance backlog of more than \$5 billion, which includes only a portion of the most frequently used roads. As of February 2019, National Forests in California had a deferred maintenance backlog, for its transportation infrastructure, of nearly \$461 million dollars. Funding for this account goes to construction and maintenance of roads and facilities, as well as forest thinning and restoration. Most of the funding goes to local contractors, which helps local economies.

National Forest System: There are approximately 80 million acres of national forest lands in need of restoration, including wildfire risk reduction, and many projects are already “NEPA-ready.” In California alone, the Forest Service’s regional leadership has identified nearly 10 million acres needing treatment over the next twenty years. The Forest Service should be directed to focus on the highest-priority projects (i.e. those with the highest wildfire risk), partner with states like California who are providing substantial wildfire mitigation funding and work with the numerous collaboratively developed projects within each region. Hazardous fuels reduction work often relies on contractors and is labor intensive but has many co-benefits to improve forest health while protecting communities from catastrophic fires.

State and Private Forestry: States have invested much time in their state forest action plans (SFAPs). Grant funding for states would help to prioritize SFAPs that focus on fuels reduction, forest health, urban trees and other projects. This infusion of funding would primarily support rural jobs but also urban jobs.

Water Source Protection Program: The U.S. Forest Service Water Source Protection Program builds on existing partnerships between cities, businesses, water utilities, farmers and ranchers, and the Forest Service to provide matching funds for forest health projects on lands that provide water resources for downstream users and calls for the Forest Service to carry out watershed protection and restoration projects on NFS lands through water source investment partnership agreements with water users.

Department of the Interior

Wildland Fire Management: The Department of the Interior is responsible for risk reduction on more than 420 million acres it manages and another 55 million acres of tribal lands held under trust. Like the Forest Service, investments focused on highest-priority fuels management would result in boots on the ground, restored landscapes and safer communities and water supplies. For California, doing so is critical to safeguarding our nation’s most iconic species (e.g. giant sequoia) and landscapes like the Sierra Nevada.

Thank you for your attention to this request.

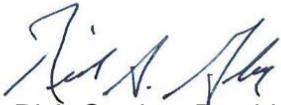
Sincerely,



Staci Heaton, Senior Regulatory Affairs Advocate
Rural County Representatives of California



Elizabeth Forsburg, Associate Director,
External Affairs and Policy
The Nature Conservancy



Rich Gordon, President
California Forestry Association



Dave Eggerton, Executive Director
Association of California Water Agencies



Robert Spiegel, Governmental Affairs Advocate
California Farm Bureau Federation

cc: Members of the California Congressional Delegation