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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

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June 14, 2021

The President
The White House
1700 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

As Congress and the Administration consider strategies to address climate change, we believe it is critical that we include forest management and wildfire mitigation in our conversations around carbon emissions, sequestration, and storage. As the Chairman and the Ranking Member of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, we recently organized and held a hearing with top scientists and practitioners in their fields to discuss the vital role that forest management should play in mitigating and adapting to a changing climate and in improving the health and resiliency of our Nation's forests. Based on the testimony we received and the discussion of the Senators during our hearing, we are writing to implore you to implement policies, grounded in science, that will guide and direct America's approach to forest management. We must bring additional tools to bear in order to reduce the occurrence of deadly wildfires, help in our efforts to mitigate emissions from devastating wildfires, and sequester and store more carbon.

It is clear that our National Forests are not currently meeting their full potential to sequester and store carbon. Insect and disease epidemics that plague our forests, paired with high mortality wildfires, are producing carbon emissions and limiting further carbon sequestration. The vast forests of many western states now emit more carbon (from tree mortality and wildfires) than they absorb. According to the latest United States Forest Service (US Forest Service) data, the forests of Colorado, Idaho, Utah, Montana, New Mexico, and Wyoming were once carbon "sinks" but are now carbon "sources."

Last year's fire season yet again highlighted the need for improved proactive forest management to reduce the occurrence of wildfires. In California alone, over 4 million acres burned. In addition to the tragic and catastrophic loss of life and property, the fires in California emitted over 91 million metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, which is 25% more than the state's total emissions from fossil fuels.

The science is clear. Proactive management is far better for our forests, our economies, and the safety of our communities than simply being reactive. We can prevent further carbon emissions and increase carbon absorption if we proactively manage for healthy and resilient forests, especially through significantly increasing the use of practices such as reforestation, hazardous

fuels reduction, thinning treatments, and prescribed fire. Such practices can also protect American lives and livelihoods.

The US Forest Service has identified over 4 million acres on our National Forests in need of reforestation, but conservation groups, such as American Forests, estimate that the need on US Forest Service land is actually over 7.3 million acres, and 133 million acres more broadly across all lands. According to the Department of Agriculture, simply reforesting these acres would sequester 5% of the total carbon annually emitted by the United States. Likewise, at our recent Committee hearing, we heard testimony that deforestation by wildfire is the leading cause of the growing reforestation backlog on our National Forests. According to recent estimates, 105 million acres of land managed by the US Forest Service and the Department of the Interior, are at high or very high risk of experiencing a catastrophic wildfire. As we previously stated, large, catastrophic wildfires are significant emission events; however, the science is clear that mechanical thinning and other forest management practices, such as prescribed fire, can greatly reduce the occurrence and intensity of these devastating events.

Current US Forest Service and Department of the Interior plans and resources are inadequate to address the need and fulfill the potential that lies on these lands. Federal land management agencies are merely treating a fraction of the acres needed to make a difference. For example, the US Forest Service has conducted commercial thinning on about 130,000 acres per year, or only about 0.2 percent of the 63 million acres classified as high or very-high risk for a high mortality wildfire event that would be difficult to suppress. Of the 4 million acres that the agency has identified as needing tree planting, the agency only plans to conduct reforestation on about one-third of those acres.

We appreciate that the *Fiscal Year 2022 President's Budget* requests robust funding for both thinning and reforestation. Moreover, we appreciate the direction from you and past presidents to the land management agencies to increase and advance this important work. However, we are writing today to ask you to do more. We need to increase the pace, scope, and scale of this work, not incrementally, but by orders of magnitude. Moreover, our federal land management agencies need new direction and resources to undertake innovative approaches and bring new technologies to our forest management paradigm and our forest products sector.

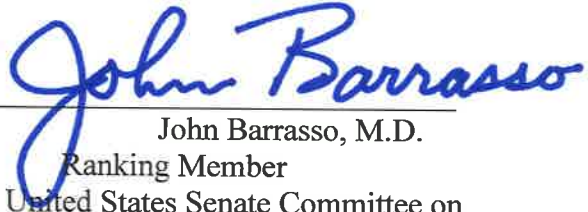
Specifically, we are requesting that you direct the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior to provide you a report of what more they can and should be doing, identify challenges or obstacles to this call to action, and describe what it would take to see that vision through completion. Further, we ask that you make this report available to the public, so that communities across the Nation can engage in this discussion as we work with you to legislate solutions. Additionally, we ask you to use the current science to guide your policy decisions around forest management. Finally, in light of US Forest Service Chief Christiansen's recent retirement announcement, we ask that you ensure the next US Forest Service Chief will carry out Chief Christiansen's recent call for a 'paradigm shift' in proactive forest management and treatments. The time is ripe to be a global leader in proactive management of our forests to make them healthy and resilient. Successfully focusing our Nation's efforts to leverage our National Forests to address the aforementioned problems will ensure not only the health of our forests, but also the health and safety of our communities, local economies, and the climate.

Sincerely,

A large, stylized handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joe Manchin, III".

Joe Manchin, III
Chairman

United States Senate Committee on
Energy and Natural Resources

A large, stylized handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John Barrasso".

John Barrasso, M.D.
Ranking Member
United States Senate Committee on
Energy and Natural Resources