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April 16, 2013

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
Jamie L. Whitten Building
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20010

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We have been concerned for some time that federal forest lands throughout the West are experiencing serious environmental stresses that affect the health and vitality of these ecosystems. They are overgrown; they exhibit all the symptoms of an unhealthy ecosystem; and they demand urgent attention. Now is the time for the U.S. Forest Service to accelerate its efforts to promote sound forest management policies that maintain ecological balance.

As you know, millions of acres in states throughout the West have fallen victim to bark beetles and other insect and disease plights. These epidemics, an overgrowth of vegetation, and the persistent drought have increased the number and complexity of wildfires, leading to exponentially higher suppression costs. The workload and costs to restore these forests and reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfires is staggering and necessitates an immediate commitment of financial and other resources. Western Governors have passed numerous policies acknowledging the extent and severity of our forest health crisis. We have met with you and your staff on many occasions and shared our concerns, yet we remain dissatisfied with the pace of response.

It is our understanding that in 2010 only about 30 percent of the total U.S. Forest Service budget was allocated to manage our national forests. In the mid-1980s, that number was closer to 70 percent. Most of the agency's budget is spent on fire suppression, administrative support, research, and other programs. The current approach to resource allocation results in fewer funds available to manage the more than 193 million acres of national forests for forest health and fuels reduction. To that end, we request a specific accounting of the areas in which these funds have been spent. We further request that the U.S. Forest Service work to put the private sector to work on vegetative management activities on National Forest lands throughout the West.

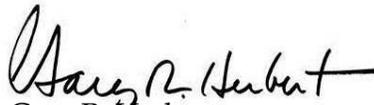
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We support the goals of the U.S. Forest Service's Restoration Strategy, which will increase restoration acres while utilizing the wood produced by these efforts. Achieving the goals of this strategy will require developing and implementing new, more efficient ways of doing business and forest products industries are an integral part of this effort. We request that the U.S. Forest Service provide state-by-state specifics on how many additional acres it plans to treat through the Restoration Strategy over the next five years, including how much biomass, board feet, and other forest health and restoration projects are envisioned. We would also like to work with you to convene a forest industry task group to identify ways that the timber industry can assist with forest management. Private sector forest professionals are a cost-effective tool that the U.S. Forest Service can utilize to handle this immense workload. They stand ready and willing to do so.

By improving forest management through the use of the private sector, we also help support our declining forest industry and suffering rural economies. Our forest industries are already faced with low margins and limited markets; if we lose these industries, any restoration efforts will suffer a significant blow. As Governors, we support the type of proactive forest management that leads to healthy rural communities, improved forest conditions and increased utilization of wood products as outlined in the U.S. Forest Service Restoration Strategy. In addition, we are committed to successful implementation of the Western Regional Action Plan – National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy. We support efforts to fully utilize existing mechanisms and provide additional authorities to the U.S. Forest Service, including Stewardship End-Result Contracting, grants, agreements, local labor force, opportunities to increase biomass utilization, and Good Neighbor policies.

With continued uncertainty due to sequestration and the potential for further federal budget cuts, we recognize the financial challenges involved in such an endeavor, but believe that engaging the forest products industry as a partner can help alleviate some of these challenges. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,


Gary R. Herbert
Governor, State of Utah
Chairman, WGA


John Hickenlooper
Governor, State of Colorado
Vice Chairman, WGA