

Office of the Governor

September 29, 2009

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

In May I wrote to you to express my concerns about the health of the forests in the Intermountain West, the most pressing issue being the bark beetle outbreak that is taking a heavy toll across the West. I also spoke of the need for a viable forest products industry as a tool for forest health management and forwarded some suggestions to provide short-term relief to the industry. To this end, I would like to thank you and the Forest Service staff for your efforts in addressing some of my concerns by addressing the rate re-determinations on timber sales. In this time of extremely tight capital, these and other administrative and programmatic shifts are essential — not only to the preserve jobs, but also to help conserve our forests and manage the growing beetle epidemic.

Turning directly to the question of forest management in the face of the pine beetle infestation, it seems that catastrophic wildfires may become more prevalent and, in turn having significant impacts on watersheds, wildlife, recreation, and the future viability of our forests. These impacts will be wide-ranging, large in scale and scope and long-lasting. While it may be too late to change the general course of this beetle occurrence, we must look ahead to the condition of our forests and other resources 50 to 100 years down the road, and act now and decisively.

The Intermountain West is a unique part of our nation. Rural communities surrounded by vast expanses of primarily federally owned lands have created their own culture and distinct lifestyle for the relatively few people who live here. This culture along with the natural beauty and open spaces of the region have created a recreation mecca for people from all over the country, and the world, who want to backpack, hike, fish, hunt, or otherwise enjoy the 'wide open' country.

Much of the nation's water supply originates from our mountains. Traditional industries like ranching, mining, and forestry have helped to create the allure of the region, and together with recreation, have provided a relatively secure economic base. I am afraid that many of these resources and values may be at risk given the current state of forest health across the West.

The Forest Service regions that make up the Intermountain West, Region 2, Region 4 and to a lesser degree parts of Region 1, have been traditionally underfunded compared to other regions within the agency. For example, Regions 2 and 4 collectively total 54 million acres of national forest land, or 29

percent of the entire national forest system. However last year these Regions only received 17 percent of the US Forest Service's budget. These forests are simply too important to our national and natural heritage to be functionally forgotten, especially in the devastating wake of the pine beetle.

The condition of Wyoming's national forests is increasingly causing alarm outside of Cheyenne and other state houses in the West. Recently, the Boards of County Commissioners in Lincoln and Carbon counties in my state passed emergency resolutions asking that I petition you for help in addressing the bark beetle outbreak. I have attached copies of their Emergency Resolutions. Anytime conservative counties like these invite federal spending and management, we take note.

In order to begin addressing the forest health issues that are manifesting in the Intermountain West, we must start to consider solutions at a regional level with interagency and multi-state involvement. With your direct assistance and leadership, I propose that we convene a group of stakeholders to begin addressing some of the most critical facets of management of the bark beetle epidemic at a regional scale. By copying all Governors within the Intermountain West, I am imploring their action as well.

With your capable leadership, I am confident that we can direct a meaningful path forward to manage the bark beetle epidemic that addresses both localized impacts such as those raised by Wyoming County Commissioners and also manages the situation at a more ecological and regional scale. Specifically, I propose that we collectively consider:

- Engagement of the options for emergency response under NEPA; and
- The funding mechanism for paying for fire suppression on federal lands, specifically full funding for the Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement Act, S.561, 111th Cong. (2009) (FLAME Act); and
- Development of a National Forest System planning rule that allows for both comprehensive forest planning and immediate action for treating bark beetle outbreaks; and
- Development of a specific contract for stewardship agreements that address goods for services, bonding flexibility, liability, accountability and other issues; and
- Strengthen the process that blends federal, private, state and local funding for habitat and fire risk reduction projects; and
- Develop a mechanism for expedited contracting and bid letting; and
- Develop a process to better facilitate cross-border collaborative projects, similar to the provisions in Senator John Barrasso's Good Neighbor Forestry Act, S. 1122, 111th Cong. (2009); and
- Under the authority of the Forest Landscape Restoration Act, manage bark beetle outbreaks through landscape scale treatments; and

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- Develop meaningful incentives to encourage both traditional and non-traditional forest products operations, including changes to the biomass definition in proposed federal carbon credit legislation to be more inclusive of "biomass" from federal lands; and
- Increase federal funding for the Intermountain West both for the National Forest System and State & Private programs; and
- Conduct hazardous fuels reduction work around campgrounds, dispersed camping sites and within 300 feet of designated roads and trails on National Forest System lands; and
- Focus hazardous fuels reduction efforts around the wildland urban interface.

Given the current state of many, if not all forests in the Intermountain West, now is the critical time for the states and the federal government to come together to work on collaborative management objectives that both reduces the wildfire risk and ensures the long-term health and sustainability of our forests. With the diverse opinions on roadless, forest planning, management, and even the role of fire in the ecosystem, we as leaders need to be able to sit down and have a full and robust discussion. Your direct involvement in this endeavor is critical to the success of such an undertaking.

I look forward to your commitment that you will work with us to address this crisis that faces our forests. I pledge to you my full commitment to this effort and stand ready to assist in the convening of a regional discussion on management of this unprecedented bark beetle epidemic.

Best regards,



Dave Freudenthal
Governor

DF:TS:pjb

c: The Honorable Senator Mike Enzi
The Honorable Senator John Barrasso
The Honorable Representative Cynthia Lummis
The Honorable Governor Mike Ritter
The Honorable Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter
The Honorable Governor Gary Herbert
The Honorable Governor Mike Rounds
The Honorable Governor Brian Schweitzer
Regional Forester Rick Cables
Regional Forester Harv Forsgren
Nancy Sutley, CEQ Chairman
Tom Tidwell, Chief of the USFS
Robert Bonnie, Senior Advisor to the Secretary of USDA for Environment and Climate