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August 12, 2019

The Honorable James E. Hubbard
Under Secretary, Natural Resources & Environment
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Vicki Christiansen
Chief, U.S. Forest Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Chief Christiansen & Under Secretary Hubbard:

I write to express my interest in working with you to improve the health of our forests and watersheds. Last Congress, we passed significant bipartisan legislation that unlocks more funding and provides new management tools for the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), an important partner in Colorado. I ask that you quickly implement the 2018 Farm Bill and 2018 Omnibus Fire Fix to invest in long-awaited Forest Service needs in our state.

Chronic underfunding and years of fire borrowing have decimated the USFS's ability to fulfill their mission. The agency recently estimated that nearly 80 million acres across the country are at risk from severe wildfires, drought, insects, and disease. In Colorado alone, there are over 834 million dead standing trees and wildfire directly threatens nearly 3 million residents. The health of our forests and watersheds are directly connected, and as a result, with 48 percent of our watersheds considered "degraded", water users across the state are at risk.

Funding and budget constraints have also hampered the ability of the USFS to maintain our public lands and improve infrastructure to keep pace with our outdoor economy. In 2016, over 146 million people visited our national forests, contributing \$9 billion to local economies. Forest-related industries supported hundreds of thousands of jobs and generated \$6 billion in income. Yet the USFS capital improvement and maintenance budget has decreased by 20% over the last ten years, with the road budget alone down 33%. Spending on recreation (-6%), law enforcement (-10%), and trail maintenance (-6%) have all decreased over the last decade.

These challenges have placed a significant burden on Colorado communities and many have stepped up to foot the bill and keep their economies growing. For example, Summit County, Pitkin County, Eagle County, Garfield County, and local municipalities are spending over \$300,000 annually to fund seasonal rangers in the White River National Forest, which draws visitors from around the world. Elsewhere, Chaffee County recently passed a tax initiative to help fund more local wildfire mitigation work. Overall, cities and towns across Colorado have and will continue to spend millions of dollars of their own money contributing to USFS activities, for everything from fire mitigation to recreation programs and trail maintenance.

As you know, Congress recently worked to address these challenges by providing the Forest Service new budget flexibility and more tools to manage our forests. The 2018 Omnibus, signed into law on March 23, 2018 (P.L. 115-141), included provisions to stop the destructive practice of fire borrowing and improve how the federal government pays to fight wildfires starting in FY20. This means the agency should no longer hold funding back in fear of running out of suppression funds. Instead, the agency should immediately, upon receiving funding, plan and implement projects. The bill also included several bipartisan forest management reforms such as expanded good neighbor authority, new flexibility for stewardship contracting, and expedited wildfire mitigation projects. The 2018 Farm Bill, signed into law on December 20, 2018 (P.L. 115-334), built on this work by enabling innovative forest health partnerships, reauthorizing and doubling funding for the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP), and authorizing cross boundary fire mitigation treatments. Once fully implemented, the 2018 Omnibus and 2018 Farm Bill will empower the Forest Service to better fulfill their mission.

The USFS now has a unique opportunity to put the funding and new authorities to work in Colorado and across the country. Accordingly, I ask that you quickly implement the authorities provided in P.L. 115-141 and P.L. 115-334, adequately staff local and regional offices, and prioritize projects in Colorado, including those that:

- Improve Forest and Watershed Health: The USFS must work to improve forest health through the use of expanded good neighbor authority, expedited wildfire mitigation treatment, and improved stewardship contracting provided in P.L. 115-141 and Title VIII of P.L. 115-334. The USFS should also extend successful CFLRP projects located in Colorado (Sec. 8629 of P.L. 115-334), fund new Colorado partnerships using the Water Source Protection Program (Sec. 8404 of P.L. 115-334), and fully establish the Watershed Condition Framework to monitor the health of priority watersheds (Sec. 8405 of P.L. 115-334). The USFS should continue to support collaborative proposals, such as the Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative, and aim to maintain a healthy forest industry. However, in using these authorities, the USFS should invest in projects in the wildland-urban interface, and those aimed at community safety, fire prevention, and forest restoration rather than relying solely on board feet of timber as a metric for success.
- Maintain our Public Lands: The USFS must maintain our public lands by making significant new investments in maintenance and infrastructure, such as for USFS roads, trails, and visitor amenities. The USFS should also increase staff, including seasonal rangers and law enforcement personnel, particularly in popular, high-use forests in Colorado. To accomplish these goals, the USFS should fully implement the Trails

Stewardship Act that passed in 2016 (P.L. 114-245) by formally publishing a national strategy to expand the role of volunteers for trail work and reissuing guidance to implement the strategy. While USFS recently sought to eliminate the Job Corps and centralize the approval of all partnership agreements, it should instead work to increase on-the-ground staff capacity and expand the use of conservation corps. In accomplishing this, it should consider the new authorities provided in the John S. McCain III 21st Century Conservation Service Corps Act that the President signed into law earlier this year (Sec. 9003 of P.L. 116-9).

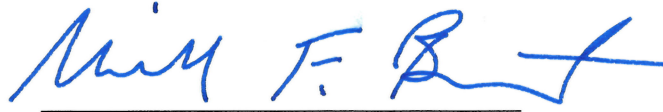
- Address Local Challenges: The USFS should help address local housing and infrastructure challenges through partnerships with cities and communities near high-use forests in Colorado. The USFS should issue guidance, as necessary, to fully implement Sec. 8623 of P.L. 115-334 and initiate projects in FY20. This new authority provides the USFS the opportunity to utilize and share unused space for affordable housing, storage, and infrastructure needs in rural and mountain towns. Municipalities in Colorado are interested in working with the USFS to develop some of the first projects in the country under this authority, and we encourage your continued engagement.

In light of your new authorities and our priorities, I also request the following information:

- The current NEPA-approved shelf stock for wildfire mitigation, hazardous fuels, and forest restoration projects on USFS land in the United States, Region 2, and Colorado.
- The current USFS infrastructure and maintenance backlog (to include the entire 370,000+ miles of USFS roads) in the United States, Region 2, and Colorado.
- A list of projects initiated and/or completed using the new authorities provided in P.L. 115-141, including the total acres treated under these new or expanded authorities in the United States, Region 2, and Colorado.
- The revenue received to date, and anticipated, under Good Neighbor Authority and how it has been spent.
- The status of implementation for Title VIII of the 2018 Farm Bill (P.L. 115-334), including a timeline for implementation steps, projected FY20 activities that will use these authorities, and the projected acreage to be treated in the United States, Region 2, and Colorado under these new authorities.
- The status of the new advisory committee for the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP), including an anticipated timeline for the selection of new projects or the extension of existing projects.
- A list of the projects to date, and their related NEPA decisions, that contribute to meeting the USFS's 3.7 billion board feet target objective in FY2019

Thank you for your attention to this matter and I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Brian F. B.", is written above a horizontal line.

CC: Brian Ferebee, Regional Forester, U.S. Forest Service Region 2