

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 22, 2024

Secretary Tom Vilsack  
United States Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write regarding the Forest Service's proposed nationwide forest plan amendment for old-growth forest conservation and management. While it may help the nation address the pressing threats of climate change, including climate-induced wildfires and biodiversity loss, it is also an opportunity to update forest plans across the country for responsible management far into the 21st Century.

More than half of the current federal forest plans are outdated by years if not decades. They need to be revised to align with the public's expectations, account for threats such as uncharacteristically severe wildfire, and preserve essential community benefits such as clean drinking water and access to outdoor recreational opportunities. As an important step to updating management plans, we encourage the expeditious completion of this old-growth amendment. We believe the amendment has the potential, if done correctly, to reduce conflicts around timber harvest of older forests, enhance the resilience of our forests to the effects of climate change, ensure better ecological outcomes, and better position the United States as a world leader in managing our public lands as natural climate solutions.

Essential to this effort is the need to braid together western science and Indigenous knowledge to proactively steward mature and old growth forests. Indigenous people have managed forests since time immemorial for the propagation of First Foods, natural and cultural resources, wildlife management, and religious ceremonies, providing multiple uses and benefits to their communities prior to European colonialization that decimated native populations and disrupted the reciprocal relationship between people and the land. Ecocultural restoration of these practices, in conjunction with western scientific principles, is necessary if we are to truly conserve our forests for future generations.

Old-growth forests were once common throughout the country, but colonialization, more than two centuries of logging, over a century of fire suppression, and decades of worsening effects of climate change have left us with dwindling reserves of older forests that in many cases are degraded and susceptible to disturbance. We ask that the agency adopt a durable and meaningful approach for recovering the distribution and abundance of old-growth forests across the entire National Forest System. We must ensure efforts to restore and steward old-growth forests are comprehensive and cohesive across the country and retain enough flexibility to be successfully adapted to all forest types.

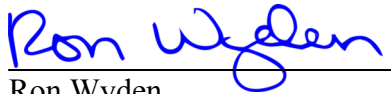
This amendment must also incorporate strong monitoring, accountability, and adaptation measures to ensure that old-growth forests are appropriately stewarded over time. Monitoring of

these forests must also account for the climate benefit these forests provide by assessing the amount of carbon they capture and sequester. The United States is an international leader in natural climate solutions, and this amendment provides an opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of improved forest management and conservation for the rest of the world. Management decisions in mature and old-growth forests across the National Forest System should be driven by the goals of the amendment to maintain and expand old-growth conditions and the desired climate and conservation outcomes of Executive Order 14072. We also ask that you ensure consistency between the ongoing climate-smart forestry amendment to the Northwest Forest Plan and the national old growth amendment through regular communication with the Northwest Forest Plan Federal Advisory Committee and the two planning teams.

This amendment is a step forward in conserving and restoring our irreplaceable cultural and biological old-growth forest heritage, improving the overall health of our national forests, and addressing the Wildfire Crisis. We encourage you to prioritize development and completion of the Forest Service's nationwide forest plan amendment, including continued robust engagement with Congress, Tribal Nations, and the public.

Sincerely,

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden  
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator



Debbie Stabenow  
United States Senator



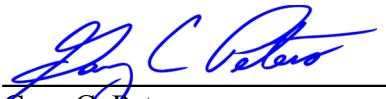
Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator



Martin Heinrich  
United States Senator




Michael F. Bennet  
United States Senator



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Gary C. Peters  
United States Senator



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Raphael Butler  
United States Senator