



## Disaster Looms for America's Natural Resource Treasures<sup>1</sup>

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The intent of this brief is to ask for your immediate action to help halt what is becoming the demise of America's natural resource treasures. The public lands are especially at risk. Specifically, we need your immediate help to support new legislation and ensure key leadership positions are in place to facilitate effective change.

The National Wildfire Institute (NWI), a coalition of conservation leaders, has been working for the last decade to develop and promote solutions to improve the health and sustainability of the forested landscapes and their natural resources across America. The NWI is concerned about the 885 million acres of forests in our country with a particular focus on the 193 million acres of National Forests and Grasslands. The NWI has held workshops, helped write legislation designed to improve the management of forests, and assisted Congress on critical projects.

In association with a wide-range of partnerships, several issues have come to the forefront, including the decline of forest health, loss of forest productivity, loss of jobs and community stability, reduced habitat for wildlife, and the decline of available clean water. All of this, in part, can be contributed to the emergence of destructive catastrophic wildfires and the associated costs required to put these fires out.

The costs, in the billions of dollars every year, use up more and more of the funds intended for other land conservation purposes. When the Appropriated funds provided by Congress for fire suppression are all expended, a terribly disruptive process known as "fire borrowing" begins, whereby targeted investments for all other work in the Forest Service are diverted to address the fire effort. It happens year after year.

Paradoxically, due to the extremely high costs of fire suppression, averaging over \$1 million per hour, fewer funds and resources are available for everything else, including support for the very programs and restoration projects that reduce the fire threat. Clearly, we are in a destructive cycle and the natural resources that we all depend on are at stake.

During the last twenty years, conservation leaders in government have talked continually and at times eloquently about the need for more forest restoration to ensure America's forests are healthy, sustainable and more resilient to disturbances such as wildfire and damage due to insects and diseases. Yet, change that makes a real difference on the landscape remains elusive. Some of the reasons are the laws and regulations – while initially might have been well-intended – are halting on-the-ground management activities designed to improve land conditions that we are so concerned about. Another paradox has been created.

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared by the National Wildfire Institute, August 20, 2017.

Outdated laws and cumbersome regulations are not the only reason for the decline of forest conditions. The NWI believes that the lack of aggressive, creative leadership is a significant problem and must be improved. The Departments and agencies that help manage our natural resources must be more visionary and able to create the type of corporate organizations, skills, methods and team behavior required to meet the contemporary conservation demands facing our country, now and ahead.

The wildfire issue must be addressed now. Practices in wildland fire, influenced at times by conflicting laws, congressional intent, and executive direction, have led to an untenable and unstable situation. Fundamentally, the "status quo" will not succeed. We need to lead a change, not allow change to lead us. For example, observe the current 2017 fire season. While it seems to be worse than ever before, it is not that much different than, say, the last five years. The new norm is that large scale destructive wildfires are all too common and they destroy lives, communities and render entire landscapes useless.

In real time, wildfires are decimating huge amounts of our public and private forests, threatening entire towns and killing people -- both fire responders and those they strive to protect. Taxpayers are losing \$20 to \$100 billion (or more) a year in wildfire related damages to infrastructure, public health and natural resources. Wildfires are a major cause of losses to the forest products industry. Businesses are being forced to close.

Currently, much of the western part of the country is covered in a blanket of smoke. The yearly increase in temperatures, combined with a giant overstock of young ready-to-burn forest growth creates an explosive combination, and will only get worse if major steps are not taken immediately to lessen the fire risk through a long-term campaign of true fire management.

On the current path, the USDA Forest Service, as an example, will become the USDA *Fire Service*, and the world's premier conservation organization as we know it will soon disappear. We know how to address this wildfire debacle. Now, leaders must decide if there is the will to proceed.

Other things are blocking sound land stewardship. For example, the Equal Access to Justice Act (EAJA) continues to provide an easy opportunity for many frivolous lawsuits that stop excellent forest management projects. The timber harvest output from our National Forests has slipped from a high of about 12 billion board feet in 1973 to almost inconsequential 3 billion board feet today (mid-1940 levels).

This amount does not even keep up with the yearly growth rate. For reference, we grow about twice as much wood in America each year than we use. Accordingly, the forests are getting clogged and more susceptible to disturbances. We know from a sustainability viewpoint, a minimum 6 billion board feet annual timber harvest from our National Forests is very reasonable.

Due to lack of forest management activities that help remove some of the excess wood, we have gone from about 38 million acres of high fire prone landscapes in 2001 to about 80 million acres today on the National Forests. That includes an average of \$300 million spent annually for hazardous fuels treatment over the last 15 years. It is abundantly clear that the pace and scale of forest restoration on the National Forests is not close to adequate.

The antiquated Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, and others like the Clean Water Act of 1972, continue to stymie badly needed resource management projects in their tracks. This has resulted in forests becoming unhealthy and unsustainable, closing a large proportion of sawmills, less markets for wood products, and a frightening loss of jobs to rural communities.

This reduction in overall forest stewardship on the National Forests continues to reduce the amount of available clean water. contributes to massive beetle attacks killing entire forested landscapes, and sets the stage for the next monster wildfire or other major disturbance. A vibrant culture and way of life in rural America is vanishing. This destructive cycle that includes lack of progressive land management, catastrophic wildfires and community instability must be broken.

Some attempts are being made to deal with this alarming situation, with collaborative projects for thinning and salvage of burned and beetle-killed timber. However, it is not enough. And, all too often, the EAJA or some other mechanism simply stops these salvage projects from going forward and the wood that could still be used immediately after a disturbance is left standing and dead -- completely wasted.

While this illustrates a grim picture of the possibility of saving our treasured forests, there are actions that can be taken. Numerous pieces of legislation that can help address the issues mentioned are being offered by Congress. Your support and encouragement is needed to help pass these into law. A contemporary example is The Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017 (H.R. 2936).

Additionally, the current Administration is far behind in staffing key leadership positions in the Department of Agriculture and other Departments and agencies that help manage our natural resources. Please call your contacts and tell them about your concerns for the need to speed up effective governance and fill these critical positions now.

We also need you to be aware and supportive of new innovations in the utilization of lower value wood and wood waste through technologies such as nanotechnology, Green Building Construction, including advanced composites; and, torrefied (heat stabilized) wood for energy. These all offer pragmatic market-based solutions to help improve forest conditions.

For example, wood-based nanotechnology applications include: packaging barrier coatings, structural composite panels for construction, automotive applications and a host of industrial tools and consumer products.

It is estimated that a strong, *well-established* wood utilization program that uses these new technologies could reduce future fire suppression costs in the range of 12-15 percent (some suggest as high as 23 percent) per year through cost-effective uses of hazardous fuels. Based on the fire season this year, that savings amount would be about \$350 million -- significant funds that could be directed toward other forest management investments and not literally “go up in smoke.”

The National Wildfire Institute thanks you for your interest and applauds your efforts to save our national resource treasures. Please act now. We would be honored to offer you our assistance.