HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES
RANKING MEMBER BRUCE WESTERMAN

To: House Committee on Natural Resources Republican Members
From: National Parks, Forests and Public Lands Subcommittee; Aniela Butler (Aniela@mail.house.gov) and Brandon Miller (Brandon.Miller@mail.house.gov)
Date: July 19, 2021
Subject: Republican Oversight Forum titled "Preventing Catastrophic Wildfires and Restoring Forest Health and Resiliency"

On **Thursday, July 22, at 10:00 a.m. EDT**, the Committee on Natural Resources Republicans will host an oversight forum titled "Preventing Catastrophic Wildfires and Restoring Forest Health and Resiliency." The forum will examine catastrophic wildfires that continue to wreak havoc across our Western states while exploring the necessary steps required to address the main driver of this crisis, which is the rapidly declining health and resiliency of our forests caused by years of inadequate management.

Member offices are requested to notify Chandler Guy (Chandler.Guy@mail.house.gov) **no later than Wednesday, July 21, 2021, at 4:00 p.m. EDT** if their Member intends to participate. All Members are encouraged to participate. This will be a hybrid forum where Members can join in person without needing to use their personal computers. We will have tables, chairs, microphones, and a camera set up in Room 268 in the Capitol Visitor Center so Members can participate together without logging onto Zoom individually. To continue hearing from local stakeholders and rural Americans who don't have the resources to travel to D.C., we will still provide a virtual option for out-of-town witnesses via Zoom.

I. KEY MESSAGES

- Our Western States have become painfully accustomed to historically devastating fire seasons year after year. More than 75 million acres burned in the last decade and over 10.2 million acres burned last year, ranking as the second worst fire season in the last half century.

- Currently, the country stands at National Preparedness Level 5, the highest preparedness level for wildfires, and over one million acres have already burned. Amazingly, we are currently on track to surpass last year's historic wildfire season with a whopping 33% more acres burned already compared to this time last year.

- 70% of the nationwide acreage burned by wildfires in 2020 was on federal lands, a clear reflection of the poor state of our national forests and public lands. A combination of onerous regulations, burdensome consultation requirements,

bureaucratic red tape and delays, and frivolous litigation have made our forests overgrown, diseased, and fire-prone powder kegs.

- Fringe environmental groups work diligently to push the false narrative that climate change is solely responsible for the worsening wildfire crisis and have vilified active forest management as incompatible with science. Their deceitful misinformation campaign must not go unchecked when overwhelmingly the science suggests that actively managing our forests is the only way to restore healthy forests and prevent wildfires.

- House Natural Resources Republicans, led by Ranking Member Bruce Westerman, are focused on real, science-based solutions that the Forest Service can implement now to reverse the troubling trend on our federal lands and address threats to forest health like wildfire, drought, insects, and disease. The Resilient Federal Forests Act meets this present challenge head on by restoring forest health, increasing resiliency to wildfire, and supporting the economic revitalization of rural communities.

II. WITNESSES

Panel I

- **The Honorable Greg Gianforte**, Governor, State of Montana

Panel II

- **The Honorable Jim Hubbard,** Former Deputy Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, U.S. Department of Agriculture
- **The Honorable Joel Bousman,** County Commissioner, Sublette County, Wyoming
- **Mr. Tom Spezze,** National Director of Field Conservation and State Policy, National Wild Turkey Federation

III. BACKGROUND

The Current Wildfire Crisis

The enormity of the wildfire crisis in the United States cannot be overstated. Over 75 million acres have burned in the last decade; to put this in context, only five U.S. states are larger than 75 million acres. Last year ranked as the second worst year for wildfires in the past half century, with over 10.2 million acres burned.[1] The record for the worst fire season was set just five years prior in 2015, when 10.3 million acres burned. Alarmingly, we are currently on track to surpass last year's historic wildfire season with a whopping 33% more acres burned as of July 15th compared to this time last year. Current drought conditions will likely only exacerbate this crisis, as "extreme, record-breaking heat leading up to this week has resulted in rapid deteriorations in drought conditions across the Pacific Northwest,

[1] https://www.iii.org/fact-statistic/facts-statistics-wildfires

northern Great Basin, and Northern Rockies."[2] The country is currently in its highest National Preparedness Level[3] with active fires burning in Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.[4] Undeniably, the root of this issue begins on our federal lands, which accounted for over 70% of the acreage burned last year.

This wildfire crisis has wreaked havoc across our Western communities. Since 2005, over 89,000 structures were destroyed by wildfires, leading to an untold number of deaths and enormous personal losses.[5] Entire towns have literally gone up in smoke. Last year, three of the largest wildfires in Colorado state history occurred.[6] Further, in 2017, the Tubbs Fire killed 22 people and destroyed 5,600 structures.[7] Just two years ago, the Camp Fire in California destroyed over 18,000 structures and 85 people tragically lost their lives.[8] The towns of Paradise and Concow were both essentially destroyed, losing over 95% of all structures.

Source: Sky News, 2018.

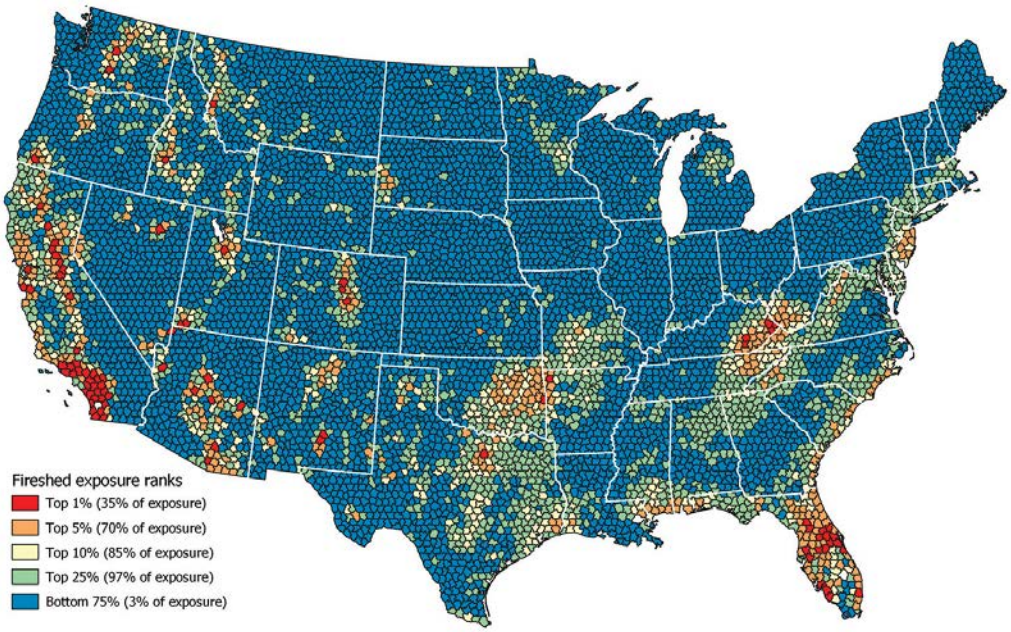
Unfortunately, these extreme scenarios are now becoming a familiar reality for Western communities. According to the latest Forest Service fireshed[9] mapping, 71% of BLM lands and 89% of Forest Service lands "have the potential for wildfires to ignite and spread to

[2] U.S. Drought Monitor, "National Drought Summary for July 13, 2021," https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/Summary.aspx.
[3] The National Multi-Agency Coordination Group (NMAC), establishes Preparedness Levels throughout the calendar year. Preparedness Levels (PL) are dictated by fuel and weather conditions, fire activity, and fire suppression resource availability throughout the country with a scale ranging from the lowest, 1, to the highest, 5. As of July 14, 2021 at 6 p.m. MDT the National Preparedness Level is 5
[4] NIFC, https://www.nifc.gov/fire-information/nfn.
[5] Barrett, Kimiko. "Wildfires Destroy Thousands of Structures Each Year." *Headwaters Economics*, 4 Dec. 2020, headwaterseconomics.org/natural-hazards/structures-destroyed-by-wildfire/.
[6] Minyvonne Burke, "3 of the largest wildfires in Colorado history have occurred in 2020," 10/23/20, NBC News, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/3-largest-wildfires-colorado-history-have-occurred-2020-n1244525.
[7] Phil Helsel, "California wildfire that killed 22 in wine country was caused by homeowner equipment, not PG&E," 1/24/19, NBC News, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/california-wildfire-killed-22-wine-country-was-caused-homeowner-equipment-n962521.
[8] Press, Associated. "List of Missing in Camp Fire Down to 1." *FOX40*, FOX40, 2 Aug. 2019, fox40.com/news/california-connection/one-still-missing-in-camp-fire/.
[9] A fireshed is a landscape-scale area that faces similar wildfire threats where a fire management strategy could affect fire outcomes.

communities."[10] Forest Service researchers, through cutting-edge fireshed simulation modeling, have identified hundreds of western communities with higher predicted fire risk than the horrific tragedy that occurred at Paradise in 2018.[11] In fact, extremes like what occurred in Paradise, CA, could frighteningly become the norm, as 1,812 communities in the Western United States could be significantly impacted by future wildfires that will expose an estimated 4,000 structures to wildfire annually.[12] Sobering fire models have even predicted plausible extreme fire scenarios in the near future where almost 500,000 buildings could be lost to wildfire in a single fire season.[13] Other scenarios have identified the probability of wildfires igniting on National Forest System lands and burning over 1.5 million acres in Southern California, destroying 100,000 structures and putting thousands of lives at risk.[14]

Across the United States, there are now 1 billion acres at risk of wildland fire.[15] As demonstrated by the most recent fireshed map, many Western communities rank in the top 10% of highest risk firesheds, which account for 85% of nationwide wildfire exposure:

[10] Alan Ager, et al. "Development and Application of the Fireshed Registry," USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Region, May 2021.
[11] Ager AA, Palaiologou P, Evers C, Day MA, Ringo C, Short KC. Wildfire exposure to the wildland urban interface in the western US. Applied Geography, 2019; 111:102059. DOI: 10.1016/j.apgeog.2019.102059; and USDA Forest Service. Wildfire risk to communities. USDA Forest Service. 2020. Available at: https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/fire/wildfirerisk.
[12] Alan Ager, et al. "Cross-Boundary Wildfire and Community Exposure: A Framework and Application in the Western U.S.," USDA Forest Service, May 2019.
[13] Finney MA, McHugh CW, Grenfell IC, Riley KL, Short KC. A simulation of probabilistic wildfire risk components for the continental United States. Stochastic Environmental Research and Risk Assessment, 2011; 25:973–1000; and Short KC, Finney MA, Vogler K, Scott JH, Gilbertson-Day JW, Julie W, Grenfell IC. Spatial datasets of probabilistic wildfire risk components for the United States (270m) 2020. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2737/RDS-2016-0034,
[14] Eliza Barclay, "This is a worst-possible wildfire scenario for Southern California," Vox, https://www.vox.com/2019/9/10/20804560/climate-change-california-wildfire-2019.
[15] Chris French, Testimony before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, 6/24/21, https://www.energy.senate.gov/services/files/AAF7DF40-2A47-4951-ADA4-4B124AD3894F#:~:text=In%20the%20United%20States%2C%20there,high%20risk%20of%20wildland%20fire.



Source: Alan Ager, May 2021.

While assessing the risks to life and property are vital, catastrophic wildfires and unhealthy forests also have a litany of consequences for the environment and clean air and water. For example, over 65% of the fresh water supply in Western states comes from forested watersheds.[16] Nationwide, "80 percent of the freshwater resources in the U.S. originate on forested land, and more than 3,400 public drinking-water systems are located in watersheds containing national forest lands."[17] Wildfires cause short- and long-term damage to watersheds by contaminating the areas with burning ash and debris and making the ecosystems more susceptible to flooding and erosion. Moreover, wildfires also contribute to poor air quality by turning Western forests into carbon sources instead of sinks.[18] In fact, the wildfires in California alone last year emitted roughly 112 million metric tons of carbon dioxide, which is equivalent to the emissions of 24.2 million passenger cars driving in a single year.[19] When U.S. travel came to a near halt after COVID-19, the wildfires in California and Oregon alone wiped out all the resulting U.S. clean air gains.[20]

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[16] EPA, "Wildfires: How Do They Affect Our Water Supplies?," 8/13/19, https://www.epa.gov/sciencematters/wildfires-how-do-they-affect-our-water-supplies.
[17] USGS, "Water Quality After A Wildfire," https://ca.water.usgs.gov/wildfires/wildfires-water-quality.html.
[18] Murphy, Zoeann, and Chris Mooney. "Montana's Forests Have Swung from Pulling Carbon Dioxide out of the Air to Putting It Back Again." The Washington Post. January 29, 2019. Accessed January 31, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/national/gone-in-a-generation/forest-climate-change.html?utm_term=.8d7a6e691000.
[19] "California's 2020 Wildfire Emissions Akin to 24 Million Cars." *Bloomberg Law*, news.bloomberglaw.com/environment-and-energy/californias-2020-wildfire-emissions-akin-to-24-million-cars.
[20] Dormido, Hannah, et al. "Smoke from Wildfires Wiped out the U.S. Pandemic-Related Clean Air Gains in 2020." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 17 Mar. 2021, www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2021/03/17/air-pollution-us-wildfires/.

Wildfires also destroy wildlife habitat for a variety of species and can impede access to recreational opportunities for years afterwards. Agency staff rate catastrophic wildfire as one the biggest threats to endangered species habitat and as wildfires continue to increase in size, number and intensity, their adverse impacts to wildlife habitat grow as well. Hot, long burning fires burn nutrients out of the soils and reduce water retention, both of which are critical to the reestablishment of vegetation after a fire. For example, 80% of habitat loss for the Northern Spotted Owl has been caused by catastrophic wildfires over the past 20 years.[21] In Washington last year, wildfires reduced pygmy rabbit populations by half and wiped out 30 to 70 percent of the state's Greater Sage Grouse population.[22]

Finally, the literal costs of fighting wildfires have grown exponentially. From 2015 to 2020, the Department of the Interior and Department of Agriculture (USDA) spent a combined $14.1 billion of taxpayer money on fire suppression costs. Last year alone, the agencies spent $2.27 billion on suppression costs.[23] Suppression costs are not the only costs associated with growing catastrophic wildfires. The Forest Service conservatively estimates that it has a 1.3 million-acre reforestation backlog, which does not account for the 2020 wildfire season. Fully addressing the Forest Service's reforestation needs, which are continuing to grow with each new fire season, will require millions of dollars of investment over several years.[24]

The Root Cause: Decades of Mismanagement

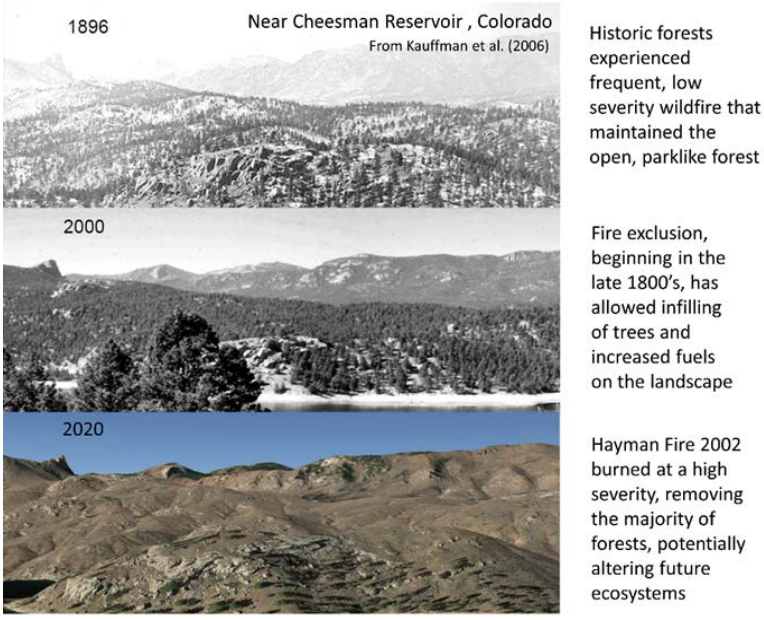
A century of fire suppression and decades of mismanagement resulted in a perfect storm of overstocked and unhealthy forests left susceptible to wildfires, insects and disease, and drought. The Federal land management agencies have now identified a combined 117 million acres of federal land at high or very high risk for wildfire, representing nearly one-fifth of the overall land overseen by the agencies.[25]

Many U.S. forests are overloaded with dangerous dry fuels that have been allowed to accumulate through a lack of thinning, prescribed burns, and mechanical treatments.[26] Overstocking makes forests less resilient by increasing competition among trees for the water, minerals, and sunlight necessary to sustain a healthy forest. California, which had over 4 million acres burn last year and a record-breaking "gigafire,"[27] exemplifies this situation well. Before settlement, California forests had roughly 64 trees per acre. The same forests now have over 300 trees per acre.[28] As a result, over 149 million trees have

[21] Raymond Davis, Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) Interagency Regional Monitoring, 20 Year Report Status and Trend of Northern Spotted Owl Habitat, https://www.fs.fed.us/r6/reo/monitoring/downloads/nso/Nwfp20yrMonitoringReportSummaryNsoHabitat.pdf.
[22] New York Times, "Blazes on West Coast Scorch Habitats for Endangered Species," 9/16/20, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/16/us/fires-oregon-california-washington.html
[23] Data provided by the Congressional Research Service.
[24] Data provided by the U.S. Forest Service.
[25] https://www.crs.gov/Reports/R46583?source=search&guid=8a080671120b4e7f92061e82e8a2bdf3&index=6
[26] Ingram, Robert G. "Robert G. Ingram: Forest Fuel Management - the Ugly Truth." *TheUnion.com*, October 9, 2020, www.theunion.com/opinion/columns/robert-g-ingram-forest-fuel-management-the-ugly-truth/.
[27] CNN, "California fire is now a 'gigafire,' a rare designation for a blaze that burns at least a million acres, 10/6/20, https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/06/us/gigafire-california-august-complex-trnd/index.html
[28] Data provided by the Forest Service.

now died across the state due to increased competition for resources, higher susceptibility to insects and disease, and intense hazardous fuel loads that have ignited dangerous wildfires.[29]

This mismanagement is due in large part to a mixture of bureaucratic red tape, onerous regulations, and frivolous litigation. These factors delay or cancel critical forest management projects by diverting agency time and resources from important management activities to endless analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (42 U.S.C. 4321, NEPA), circular consultations with other agencies, and obstructionist lawsuits. For example, the Forest Service has spent 7 years and an estimated 15,000 pages of documentation analyzing a roughly 7,000-acre treatment project in the Nez-Perce Clearwater National Forest in Idaho, or approximately 0.008% of the National Forest acreage estimated to be at moderate to high risk of catastrophic wildfire.[30] In Montana, the Forest Service completed 1,300 pages of documentation for a project on the Lewis and Clark National Forest that proposed treating roughly 330 acres per year over 20 years.[31] In total, the Forest Service is carrying out only 2 percent of needed fuel reduction treatments per year[32] and at this paltry treatment pace will not be able to reverse the deteriorating health trends of our national forests for several decades.[33]



Source: U.S. Forest Service, 2020

Far too often, Committee Democrats have ignored this simple truth. They continue to push the false narrative that warming temperatures alone are responsible for the increasing vulnerability of our forests to catastrophic wildfire.[34] While warming temperatures certainly exacerbate and lengthen fire seasons, ignoring the clear need for more management reflects a blind commitment to extreme environmentalist ideology and

[29] Umair Ifran, "California has 149 million dead trees ready to ignite like a matchbook," Vox, https://www.vox.com/2019/2/13/18221822/california-149-million-dead-trees-wildfire.
[30] Data provided by FFRC.
[31] *Id*.
[32] Fretwell, Holly, and Jonathan Wood. "Fix America's Forests: Reforms to Restore National Forests and Tackle the Wildfire Crisis." *PERC*, 12 Apr. 2021, www.perc.org/2021/04/12/fix-americas-forests-reforms-to-restore-national-forests-and-tackle-the-wildfire-crisis/.
[33] *Id*.
[34] "Is Global Warming Fueling Increased Wildfire Risks?" Union of Concerned Scientists. July 24, 2018. Accessed January 31, 2019. https://www.ucsusa.org/global-warming/science-and-impacts/impacts/global-warming-and-wildfire.html#.XFNv7apKiUl.

a disregard for sound science and reality. Radical environmental groups have worked hard to make the American people believe that active forest management is incompatible with science and will lead to irresponsible forestry practices like clear cutting of our nation's forests.[35] This willful misinformation campaign must not be allowed to go unchecked. Active forest management is not a radical idea, and it is indisputably supported by sound science.[36]

The Dire Need for Active Management and the Resilient Federal Forests Act

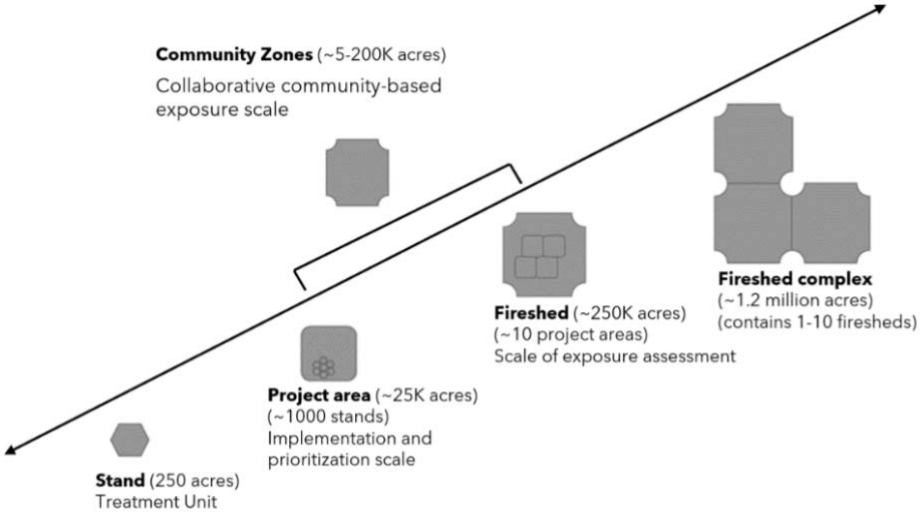
Active forest management encourages sustained healthy growth, while removing much of the dangerous fuels buildup that lead to catastrophic wildfires that destroy lives and property, ruin critical wildlife habitat, reduce water quality and watershed health, and emit enormous amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Healthy forests utilizing active forest management provide significant benefits to the environment, to the nearby communities, and to the economy.

House Natural Resources Republicans, led by Ranking Member Bruce Westerman, will soon introduce the Resilient Federal Forests Act (RFFA) to provide a comprehensive solution to address the rapidly declining health of American forests and prevent catastrophic wildfires. The bill achieves this by expediting environmental analysis, reducing frivolous lawsuits, and increasing the pace and scale of critical forest restoration projects. Many of the provisions included in RFFA have passed the House previously in both the 114th and 115th Congresses.[37]

In addition to other positive improvements, RFFA includes a brand-new fireshed management concept based on the fireshed risk maps recently released by the Forest Service as well as the principles of shared stewardship. This new language, included in Title I of the bill, will allow the Forest Service to target treatments in the highest risk areas with the most degraded forest health conditions. Currently, community wildfire mitigation plans are organized around individual community boundaries "rather than spatial containers that delineate the scale of wildfire risk to [the community]. Mitigation plans are thus decoupled from landscape efforts to manage fuels and ignitions on the larger landscape of public and private wildlands, creating a scale mismatch."[38] This creates issues for reducing overall fire risks as reducing risk "is a multiscale, cross-boundary problem that requires spatial planning frameworks to organize location-specific mitigation measures and efficiently allocate finite resources."[39] Utilizing a Scenario Investment Planning Tool, the Forest Service has developed ways to target treatments to

[35] "Memo: House Farm Bill Forestry Title Potentially Disastrous for National Forests." *The Wilderness Society*, www.wilderness.org/articles/media-resources/memo-house-farm-bill-forestry-title-potentially-disastrous-national-forests#.
[36] Locatelli , Bruno, and Emilia Pramova. "Forests and Adaptation to Climate Change: What Is at Stake?" *World Resources InstituteEmilia Pramova*, 23 Sept. 2013, www.wri.org/our-work/project/world-resources-report/forests-and-adaptation-climate-change-what-stake.
[37] https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/2647; and https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/2936.
[38] *Id*. "Development and Application of the Fireshed Registry."
[39] *Id.*

control and alleviate fire growth and intensity near these at-risk communities.[40] These planning tools enable strategic treatments over limited areas in these firesheds in order to reduce the size and severity of wildfires and increase the resiliency of the overall fireshed.



Source: Tania Ellersick and Alan Ager, 2020.

RFFA will unleash and empower the Forest Service to utilize and streamline this scientifically sound breakthrough by incentivizing shared stewardship and expediting fireshed management projects. Working together across boundaries and utilizing tools like Good Neighbor Authority, the federal government and state partners will designate Fireshed Management Areas and perform assessments that rely on the latest science to design forest management projects.[41] These projects will be categorically excluded under the NEPA (without statutorily mandated acreage limits[42]) and subject to the same judicial review standards under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (Public Law 108-148). Projects will be prioritized based on those that have the primary purpose of protecting public health and safety, restoring watershed health, improving critical habitat, and safeguarding critical infrastructure. This new tool, which the Forest Service can immediately implement and use, will truly allow the agency to increase the pace and scale of necessary forest management projects to improve the health and resiliency of our nation's forests.

[40] Information provided by the Forest Service.
[41] *Id*. "Development and Application of the Fireshed Registry."
[42] Instead, the Forest Service and states will set recommended acreage limits for projects in Stewardship and Fireshed Assessments based on the best science specific to the applicable fireshed.