Tuesday, June 25th, 2024

Dear Chairman Westerman and Ranking Member Grijalva,

On behalf of Megafire Action, a non-profit dedicated to enacting policy solutions to end the crisis of destructive megafires, I'm grateful that the House Natural Resources Committee is marking up H.R. 8790, the Fixing Our Forests Act (FOFA). We strongly support the advancement of bipartisan policies to address the megafire crisis, and hope that all Members will consider supporting the Fixing our Forests Act.

Decades of mismanagement and accelerating climate change are driving an alarming rise in catastrophic megafires, which are characterized by their extreme intensity, uncontrollable scale, and unprecedented damage to the natural and built environment. By some measures, the number of structures destroyed has increased by 160% over the last two decades, exhausting federal, state, and local resources. The ecological toll they wreak threatens to permanently transform landscapes and remake entire ecosystems. There is also a significant climate impact from megafires – as extreme fire behavior can transform ecosystems from carbon sinks to net carbon emitters. We are running out of time to prevent widespread devastation to human health, our ecosystems, communities, and the climate.

The devastating urgency and scale of this challenge demands multifaceted, aggressive, and location-based policy solutions. FOFA is a strong step in that direction, reflective of the considerable need to update forest management and hazardous fuel mitigation practices to improve resiliency against megafires for generations to come. Forest management techniques such as prescribed fire and selective forest thinning can help improve forest and landscape health in vulnerable areas and reduce the risk of catastrophic fire. This legislation will help increase the pace and scale of urgently needed interventions.

Moreover, FOFA capitalizes on the burgeoning opportunity to use new technology, modeling techniques, predictive analytics, and artificial intelligence to help us meet our resilience goal faster, cheaper, and better. Megafire Action particularly supports the legislation's inclusion of a proposed Fireshed Center, a joint effort between the Forest Service and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), to help modernize decision making and break down barriers to collaborative planning. USGS can bring specific capabilities in the data analysis space and a structural flexibility that promotes innovation to this center, making it the ideal partner for the Forest Service. Megafire Action also supports the Westerman Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute #1, which would further flesh out and clarify the purpose and capabilities of the Fireshed Center. The inclusion of a testbed pilot program for innovative wildfire mitigation, the expansion of Good Neighbor Authority, and investments in biochar utilization will help get us on a sustainable mitigation track.

The bipartisan process led by Chairman Westerman and Representative Peters has resulted in legislation that maintains critical environmental protections for forests and communities while also expediting the pace and scale of urgent forest and landscape management projects. We're encouraged that

legislation sets acreage limitations for categorical exclusions under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) at 10,000 acres – similar to that requested by state governments, including in California. It also includes strong language on the need for tribal partnerships and sovereignty, critical to the success of effective forest management.

Megafire Action looks forward to working with the bill's sponsors and Members of the Natural Resources Committee to continue improving the Fixing our Forests Act. We appreciate your thorough consideration of this legislation and would welcome the opportunity to discuss further with you. With any further questions, please feel free to contact Megafire Action CEO Matt Weiner at matt@megafire.org.

Sincerely,

Matt Weiner
CEO, Megafire Action

cc Members of the House Natural Resources Committee