June 25, 2014

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

As scientists with many years of professional experience in research and management of forest ecosystems, we are seeking your support for a National Old-Growth Conservation Policy that would preserve existing old-growth forests within the United States. The remaining old-growth forests, from the redwoods of California, to the Douglas-fir forests of Washington, to the spruce-hemlock rainforests of southeast Alaska, provide the nation with many irreplaceable ecological benefits. These include clean water for millions of Americans, outdoor recreation, and key habitat for salmon and other important wildlife species. Because old-growth forests store vast quantities of carbon, protecting these remaining forests from logging could also play a role in reducing the effects of global climate change.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service manages ~20% of the forest land in the United States, including most of the remaining old growth. These National Forest lands are to be managed in trust for the American public for "outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, and wildlife and fish purposes" under the Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act of 1960. The National Forest Management Act of 1976 (and its planning regulations of 2012) requires that forest plans must provide for "ecological sustainability" and "ecosystem integrity," including provisions "to maintain or restore ecosystem structure, function, composition, and connectivity." 36 C.F.R. 219.8(a). In addition forest plans "must provide for the diversity of plant and animal communities." 16 U.S.C. 1604(g)(3)(B).

The composition and structure of old-growth forests varies geographically among forest types and the history of natural disturbance regimes. Old-growth forests include old trees but tree sizes and ages may be variable. Old-growth forests often have dead standing and fallen trees, variable structure, and more diverse understories than younger, managed forests. The most important ecological characteristics of old growth take centuries to develop and, hence, are never achieved in managed forests with typical harvest rotations of 50-120 years. The remaining old growth has high value. For example, old-growth rainforests from the Pacific Northwest to southeast Alaska have the highest density carbon stores on Earth and the largest and oldest trees sequester and store the greatest amount of carbon.

Currently, only about 5-10% of the original old-growth forests that existed prior to European settlement remain in the United States (excluding Alaska's taiga) and most of that occurs in the Pacific Northwest and southeast Alaska. Even in the Pacific Northwest, 72% of the original old

growth has been removed. The very largest trees in the Pacific Northwest, the great "giants" with diameters in excess of 10-20 feet, were long targeted by logging and are now completely gone. In the eastern United States, old growth is virtually absent and occurs only in isolated fragments in parks or wilderness areas. The largest extent of remaining old-growth forest is found in southeast Alaska. But even there, more than half of the largest trees have been logged, and pressure continues to cut the best of what's left. The diversity and productivity of forest communities, along with the myriad of ecosystem benefits that they provide to people, have been significantly reduced.

Old-growth forests are a rare and diminishing legacy throughout the world and the US should take a leadership role in establishing sensible conservation policy. There is a pressing need to conserve what remains, as well as to restore a representation of mature forests to old growth conditions. Any conservation policy for old-growth trees and forests across the US needs to evaluate the benefits of potential restoration treatments in frequent-fire forest ecosystems where fire exclusion policies have resulted in excessive fuel accumulation (e.g., ponderosa pines of the intermountain west, mixed conifers of the Sierra Nevada, and longleaf pine forests of the southeastern US). An old-growth policy for frequent-fire forests needs to allow for active management to restore and, following restoration, sustain such forests with such activities to retain and restore old tree populations. In contrast, where old-growth forests undergo infrequent, stand-replacement events (like Pacific rainforests) the best strategy is to establish conservation reserves and leave them alone. Active management will rarely, if ever, be appropriate in such old-growth forests and has the potential to destabilize them.

We honor the social, cultural and economic value of working landscapes in America's public forest system. We anticipate the value of old growth for hunting, fisheries, recreation, tourism, and scientific research will only increase. We support investments in rural livelihoods, including ecological restoration, consistent with a National Old Growth Conservation Policy. Such a policy will also help us move past decades of unproductive social and legal conflict over the issue, thus enabling a more constructive focus on more consensual issues in National Forest management. This recognition is perhaps why so many collaborative initiatives in the U.S. West focused on forest management recommend measures to protect old growth and its attendant values. A national policy on the matter is the logical next step.

We, the undersigned scientists, respectfully request that you direct the Secretary of Agriculture and Chief of the U.S. Forest Service to utilize their authority to craft a National Old Growth Conservation Policy that fully protects the remaining old-growth forests on national forests throughout the United States and also encourages the restoration of representative stands of mature forests where old growth has been depleted. Such a policy will leave a lasting legacy benefiting all Americans. Thank you for considering our recommendation.

Sincerely,

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cc: The Honorable Tom Vilsack, Secretary of Agriculture
The Honorable Thomas Tidwell, Chief, U.S. Forest Service
The Honorable Sally Jewell, Secretary of Interior