

To: The Honorable John Kerry, United States Special Presidential Envoy for Climate
The Honorable Gina McCarthy, White House National Climate Advisor
Cc: The Honorable Tom Vilsack, United States Secretary of Agriculture
The Honorable Deb Haaland, United States Secretary of the Interior
Re: Conserve Older Forests in the United States to Fight Climate Change
Date: October 28th, 2021

The Honorable John Kerry and Gina McCarthy,

Conserving our last remaining older (mature and old-growth) forests and trees on federal public lands in the United States is one of our country's most straightforward, impactful and most cost-effective climate solutions in addition to rapidly reducing greenhouse gas emissions across all sectors of the economy. Taking administrative action to halt the logging of older forests on the United States' federal lands will represent a broad win for this Administration by mitigating and adapting to the current and future impacts of climate change, conserving habitat to counter the biodiversity crisis, and securing a wide range of co-benefits. Unfortunately, thus far the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management have not produced credible proposals for combating climate change nationwide, or for conserving carbon-rich older forests and trees on the lands they manage. The administration should correct that error by stopping the logging of older forests and trees on public lands in the United States.

Conserving all remaining mature and old-growth forests and trees on public lands is directly in line with several stated objectives of the Biden administration, including the Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad and efforts to protect 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030. The Biden Administration also specifically highlighted forest protections in its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) strategy. It is critical that the US follows through on its climate commitments in the NDC and demonstrates meaningful action to other countries around the world through meaningful and concrete actions to conserve older forests and trees.

Older forests are important from a climate change mitigation perspective for at least two reasons. First, they store vast amounts of carbon accumulated over decades to centuries. Cutting those forests down emits the majority of that carbon back to the atmosphere. Second, older forests are sequestering vast amounts of carbon from the atmosphere—a critical tool as emissions reductions alone are an insufficient strategy for countering the worsening climate crisis.

The benefits of protecting older forests do not stop there. They are essential biodiversity reservoirs--the profound complexity of older forests sets the stage for the abundance of life found in these areas. And with a rapidly changing climate producing more droughts and greater storm events, older forests are well springs for clean water and flood control.

This summer, the Biden administration announced that it would halt large-scale old-growth logging in the Tongass National Forest. While a critical protective step, additional action is urgently needed to both expand older forest and tree protections across the United States and to ensure that the protections are enduring for the benefit of this and future generations. Instead of protecting older forests and trees, the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management have advanced controversial and problematic recommendations to intensively log public forests in the hopes of storing carbon in short-lived wood products. But comprehensive carbon accounting and numerous recent scientific publications do not support this narrative — it is clear that storing and sequestering carbon on the landscape is a far more effective strategy.

Unlike many other developed nations, the United States still has significant amounts of carbon-rich older forests and trees that can be drafted into the fight to address the climate and biodiversity crises. As the United States enters the international climate conference in Glasgow this November, it is vital that the Administration demonstrate leadership and restore US credibility through significant, effective climate actions. It is not enough to simply pressure developing countries on older forest and rainforest protections — the US must take meaningful action to conserve and restore carbon-rich forests and trees across all our forest types here at home. We strongly urge President Biden to take administrative action to halt the logging of older forests and trees on public lands in the United States, and to ensure federal agencies work to recover these carbon rich landscapes for their climate, biodiversity, and watershed benefits to our nation.

Sincerely,

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