Large and destructive wildfires are becoming more common across the West, with new records set almost every year. Although several factors contribute to this trend, a significant one is the declining health of the nation’s forests. The U.S. Forest Service, which manages 193 million acres of land, reports a backlog of 80 million acres in need of restoration and 63 million acres facing high or very high risk of wildfire.

While improving forest health and mitigating wildfire risk will require long-term policy changes, forest restoration projects offer a way to address these issues in the short term. By promoting landscapes with healthy forests and diverse forest types, restoration projects can reduce the risk of megafires and provide other conservation benefits. Drawing lessons from successful partnerships, Fix America’s Forests recommends actionable reforms that can help the Forest Service work better with states, tribes, and private partners to fix America’s forests.

Recommendations

- Improve and expand categorical exclusions
- Limit Endangered Species Act consultations to projects with on-the-ground impacts
- Require lawsuits to be filed quickly and clarify fire risk effects on injunction decisions
- Exclude prescribed burns from state emissions calculations
- Allow the Forest Service to enter longer-term contracts and cooperative agreements
- Promote and expand Good Neighbor Authority
- Establish a Forest Service restoration fund for long-term cost-share partnerships
- Open timber markets for export
4. Allow prescribed burns to be excluded from state emissions calculations.

• Smoke from prescribed burns counts against state Clean Air Act compliance, despite both the EPA and states recognizing prescribed burns are an important forest restoration tool that reduces dangerous air pollution overall from wildfires.
• Smoke from prescribed burns should be excluded from state emission calculations, in effect crediting them for avoiding worse air pollution from a later wildfire. A reform like the proposed National Prescribed Fire Act would codify this process.

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5. Scale up public-private partnerships by empowering the Forest Service to enter longer-term contracts and cooperative agreements.

• Current stewardship contract authority allows the Forest Service to enter into 10-year stewardship contracts with outside entities, and in some high-risk fire areas, contracts can even be extended for up to 20 years. (See the 2003 Appropriations Act, P.L. 108-7.)
• However, 10 years often isn’t enough. Stewardship contract authority should be amended to grant the Forest Service authority to enter into longer-term contracts and cooperative agreements for forest restoration work with the flexibility to easily extend contracts.

6. Allow the Forest Service to be a “Good Neighbor” through longer, more flexible partnerships with states, tribes, and counties.

• Good Neighbor Authority has helped the Forest Service partner with states, tribes, and counties to restore national forests as part of a broader, landscape-level approach and should be used more often.
• Current restrictions on GNA funding being spent only on federal lands should be amended to allow money to be spent on state, tribal, county, or private lands within the GNA project boundary.
• While states, counties, and tribes can all enter into GNA agreements with the Forest Service, only states can receive a share of revenues or federal compensation. Rules should be updated to treat counties and tribes as equal partners. (See proposed S.4127, Treating Tribes and Counties as Good Neighbors Act of 2020.)

7. Promote innovative wood markets by establishing a Forest Service restoration fund for long-term cost-share partnerships.

• Under the Antideficiency Act and appropriations rules, the Forest Service cannot obligate funds in advance of appropriations or after funding has expired.
• Private actors are unlikely to make the substantial investments required to expand milling capacity and innovate processing methods for small-diameter wood without long-term financial commitments to restoration projects.
• Congress and the Forest Service should work with the National Forest Foundation to create a flexible endowment fund that could be used for long-term cost-share forest restoration agreements.

8. Open timber markets for export.

• Longstanding legislation restricts timber exports from federal lands across the West to ensure a continuous supply of timber to local mills and maintain local capacity.
• However, due to a shift in federal forest management, harvest volumes have fallen substantially, and there is not enough local mill capacity to remove the vegetation needed to reduce fire risks.
• Removing export and substitution restrictions, such as those in the Foreign Assistance Act of 1968, the Interior and Related Appropriations Act of 1974, and the Forest Resources Conservation and Shortage Relief Acts of 1990 and 1997, would open western timber markets to more buyers, increasing the potential for forest restoration.