



Our mission is to connect people to the natural world and cultivate a community of environmental stewards working together to build a greener and healthier planet through advocacy, action, and education.

April 22, 2022

Via First Class Mail & E-mail

Honorable Senator Ron Wyden
Honorable Senator Jeff Merkley
221 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

Re: Protecting Carbon Rich Trees and Forests; Undoing Rollback of Eastside Screens; Focusing Investments Near Homes & Communities

Dear Honorable Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley:

It was great seeing you both yesterday at President Biden's event at the airport. I was proud to see you both up there, along with the Oregon congressional delegation, delivering a strong message that, with the Infrastructure Act, we finally have the money to get big things done here in Oregon.

Now we need to make sure the money is spent wisely. I'd like to talk to you about what we can do to protect the remaining big carbon dense, fire-resistant trees in Oregon, especially on the East side. Specifically, I encourage you to work with the Forest Service to ensure that this funding will not be used to cut any big mature trees, as I don't believe this was your intention when you voted for the bill.

In the last few weeks, I have seen with my own eyes the damage done by the lack of oversight and the absence of clear sideboards on forest management projects. A few weeks ago, dozens of big beautiful fire-resistant Ponderosas near a popular mountain bike trail were cut down in the name of wildfire suppression and "healthy reforestation." Many of us tried to delay the destruction, so we could ask the West Bend Project managers to consider scientific advancements published after the WBP was approved a decade or so ago. Alas, despite a climate emergency, nobody in power listened to our pleas – or to the science.

The leaders of the Deschutes Forest Collaborative, in my view, understood that cutting big mature Ponderosas was a mistake, but sadly considered it good enough overall. They deferred to a logging contract which they regarded as carved in stone. They declined to hit the pause button and consider a growing body of science that's contrary to their baked in viewpoint. Recent scientific evidence teaches us that:

- Western forests have uniquely high carbon and water storage capacity and to meet net zero carbon goals we need to protect all the big trees and biodiverse forests that remain (Law et al 2021). In Eastern Oregon, big trees represent only 3% of the trees but store nearly 50% of carbon. They also provide homes for wildlife, filter clean water and reduce wildfire risk (Mildrexler et al. 2020).

- Wildfire is primarily driven by drought and wind beyond our control, not the amount of vegetation on the landscape (e.g. Bootleg, Dixie, Caldor, Marshall fires). As a result of climate change, any efforts to alter vast landscapes are misguided, will not work, and could make wildfire risk and severity worse (Downing et al 2022; Della Salla et al. 2022). Experts are telling us to work from the home out, not the forest in (Ibid). In other words, to mitigate fire risk, we should clear the areas around our homes, rather than hollowing out the mature trees miles away that serve as our continent's lungs. OSU foresters are calling for a paradigm shift in how we manage forests in view of global-warming driven droughts, loss of biodiversity, diminishing clean water and escalating soil erosion.
- Thinning releases far more carbon than fire itself, up to 5 to 10x more carbon (Status of Science on Carbon Management 2022, Mitchell, Harmon et al 2009). Field studies have shown that wildfire releases less than 2% of live tree carbon, while USFS modeled estimates of 50-85% grossly overstate the impact of wildfire (Harmon et al 2022, Campbell et al 2011). Claimed examples of success are cherry-picked from when conditions were favorable. They ignore countless examples where fires burned over and through forests previously managed by thinning, firebreaks, and fire lines. (e.g. Bootleg, Caldor, Dixie fires). Aside from the costs of such ineffectual management efforts, it cost hundreds of millions of dollars to extinguish these fires.

As you know, Donald Trump, on his way out, eliminated the Eastside Screens protection for larger, older trees that measured 21 inches DBH or greater. Numerous conservation groups and tribes were not consulted and expressed their opposition to this measure, which was widely seen as a nod and a wink to the timber industry. Jim Furnish, a former USFS Deputy Chief, wrote in opposition to the rollback (see his letter, attached). Eliminating the protections instead of strengthening them with clear and enforceable standards was precisely the wrong thing to do at the wrong time by the wrong guy. I expect to see litigation challenging the rollback soon, unless the administration takes corrective action.

President Biden is on the right track. We should be mapping carbon-rich trees. We hope that this effort, which scientists in Oregon have already been doing for some time, will lead to their protection. Yet right now there are lots of federal projects in Oregon where old trees and entire forest ecosystems are at risk. Ongoing forest thinning projects under the guise of "wildfire suppression" need to hit the pause button so forest trustees can consider their impacts on climate change, biodiversity, freshwater reserves, and recreation-driven local economies. As a starter, I'm asking you to implore the Biden administration to undo the Trump rollback of the Eastside Screens protection for large carbon-rich, fire-resistant trees and intact roadless forests.

There's lots of money from the Infrastructure Act coming to Oregon. I'm concerned about how those funds will be spent. More money, for example, is headed for the flawed WBP, a vast area which includes some of Oregon's best trails for mountain biking, which along with snow skiing and Bend's vibrant craft beer scene, is a major draw in our local tourist-driven economy. The WBP was developed nearly a decade ago and the agency seems unwilling to consider alternatives to spare big mature Ponderosas from cutting. Nor are they willing to consider the carbon costs. Or

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the latest wildfire science, which questions their old guard premises. And they don't seem to want to learn the lessons from the 2020-2021 fire seasons. Instead of regaining the public's trust, their hide-the-ball and run-out-the-clock style has further eroded it. Please see the Worthy Garden Club letters regarding the WBP's preventable blunders at: <https://www.worthygardenclub.com/lorax>

Oregon cannot afford a repeat of the disastrous wildfire season of 2020. **I would like to discuss with you how we can ensure that infrastructure investments are focused from the home out, not from the forest in.** We need commanding leadership, and we need people on the new Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Committee who are going to help our agencies make a paradigm shift to face the challenges ahead.

In sum, I would ask for three things. **First**, please help revive the Eastside Screens and strengthen them with clear, measurable, and enforceable standards that protect big trees. **Second**, please arrange for a meeting between OSU College of Forestry Dean Tom Deluca, Dr. Beverly Law and FS Chief Randy Moore regarding mapping and the need for unambiguous protections. And **third**, please implement a process that ensures that big mature trees on public lands are adequately inventoried and protected from the chopping block.

In 1971, Dr. Seuss' iconic character The Lorax warned: "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." We have also been warned repeatedly that we are in a climate emergency. I can think of no better guardians of our life-enabling forests who will heed the call to action than you two, as well as the entire Oregon delegation. Let's show the rest of the world what a few motivated Oregonians can do to save our forests and our planet. Happy Earth Day!

Sincerely,

Roger G. Worthington, Esq.
President

Encl:

Law, et al., Status of Science on Carbon Management, March 9, 2022
NGO Letter *re: Wildfires, Communities & Climate*, April 7, 2022
Furnish, Letter to FS Jeffries, Sept. 9, 2020

cc: Oregon Congressional Delegation
Jacob Egler - jacob_egler@wyden.senate.gov
Jessica Keys - Jessica_Keys@merkley.senate.gov
Dan Whelan - dan.Whelan@mail.house.gov