

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 20, 2022

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Randy Moore
Chief
U.S. Forest Service
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Chief Moore:

Thank you for your leadership as you implement the provisions included in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) in your jurisdiction. As you continue this important work, we request that you utilize these funds to prioritize efforts to protect our watersheds, water sources, and communities, and invest in nature-based solutions for forest health and watershed restoration.

Climate change is impacting communities across the country and around the world. Ninety percent of the Western United States is experiencing drought conditions, and in 2021 record high temperatures were recorded in California, Nevada, and Colorado—NOAA and NASA even named 2021 the sixth-hottest year on record for the entire planet¹. Rising temperatures contribute to significant declines in river flows and water availability, leading to drier soils and landscapes, and increasing the likelihood of destructive wildfires. This includes the potential for post-fire hazards impacting reliable water access—particularly in rural areas serving disadvantaged communities and Tribes.

Forests provide critical natural infrastructure, and 65% of the clean drinking water for Western communities originates in forest watersheds. Restoring wet meadows and wetlands, reconnecting floodplains, and reintroducing beaver where appropriate can mitigate the impact of wildfire, drought, and flood while ensuring other public benefits like water quality and quantity, aquifer recharge, reduced sedimentation, carbon sequestration, and enhanced biodiversity. The IIJA invests \$5.5 billion in lands and resources entrusted to the Forest Service, many of which are managed in coordination with Federal, Tribal, and State governments, private landowners, water utilities, non-profits, and other partners. The IIJA investments recognize the importance of integrated strategies to reduce wildfire risk and improve ecosystem services. Similarly, efforts to improve forest health through watershed restoration projects can improve the climate resilience of nature-based infrastructure including our source watersheds.

We support the paradigm shift towards a community-focused, landscape-scale approach to forest health and wildfire risk reduction envisioned in the Forest Service's Ten-Year Wildfire Crisis Strategy, and we encourage the Forest Service, in coordination with partners, to further integrate and support complementary nature-based solutions such as conserving and restoring source watershed, wetland, and riparian ecosystems as part of an ongoing, agency-wide approach to reduce wildfire risk and enhance the climate resilience of western forested watersheds. While the

¹ <https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2022/01/noaa-nasa-name-2021-sixth-hottest-year-on-record/>

initial focus of IJJA investments should remain on reducing wildfire risk in vulnerable communities and watersheds, we encourage the Forest Service to also prioritize IJJA investments through existing landscape-scale programs that incorporate the restoration of natural water infrastructure to complement other ecological outcomes and forest health treatments.

Programs like the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program and Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership were authorized and funded in the IJJA based on their demonstrated record of success in facilitating landscape-scale projects that prioritize the restoration of critical watersheds. Existing Forest Service tools like the Water Source Protection Program and the Watershed Condition Framework help collaboratives to identify and prioritize cross-boundary watershed projects, and significant opportunities exist to integrate these considerations into projects using IJJA funding, as well as regular appropriations.

The IJJA includes dozens of provisions that can and should be used, at least in part, to support watershed health and related forest restoration efforts. Some of these line-items include:


- \$40 million to the Departments of Interior and Agriculture to support critical wildfire research through the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes (SWERIs) and Joint Fire Science Program.
- \$500 million for USFS to award Community Wildfire Defense Grants to at-risk communities.
- \$250 million for the Forest Service Legacy Roads and Trail Program.
- In consultation with the Department of the Interior, \$400 million in voluntary ecosystem restoration project grants on private or public land.
- \$900 million for wildfire risk reduction on National Forest System lands.
- \$100 million for post-fire restoration of National Forest System lands.
- \$150 million for USFS Ecological Restoration Contracts (Stewardship Contracts).
- \$160 million for USFS to enter into Good Neighbor Agreements with States and Tribes for restoration projects on federal lands.
- \$80 million for USFS to establish an aquatic-focused landscape-scale restoration program on federal and Indian forest lands.

Importantly, IJJA programs are intended to supplement regular appropriations, creating additional opportunities to use annual funding to address watershed-related needs. We encourage the Forest Service to incorporate this directive and look to existing programs like the Water Source Protection Program and Watershed Condition Framework as you set priorities for the next fiscal year. Further, we encourage the Forest Service to work with other federal agencies and science partners to coordinate across existing research stations, experimental areas, and centers on research and demonstration projects related to nature-based approaches to reduce wildfire risk and secure western water supplies.

We thank you for your important work directing the implementation of the IJJA, and we request that you prioritize nature-based restoration solutions as you continue to make investments in wildfire risk reduction and forest health using these funds.

Thank you for your consideration, and we look forward to hearing back from you.

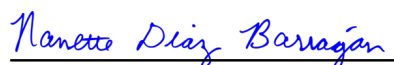
Sincerely,




Joe Neguse
Member of Congress




Doris Matsui
Member of Congress




Nanette Diaz Barragán
Member of Congress




Earl Blumenauer
Member of Congress




Ed Case
Member of Congress




Jason Crow
Member of Congress




Peter A. DeFazio
Member of Congress



Diana DeGette
Member of Congress



Susie Lee
Member of Congress



Ted Lieu
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam B. Schiff", written in a cursive style.

Adam B. Schiff
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kim Schrier", written in a cursive style.

Kim Schrier, M.D.
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dina Titus", written in a cursive style.

Dina Titus
Member of Congress