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Congressman Greg Walden
Chairman, Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
1210 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C., 20515

Dear Congressman Walden,

The non-profit Evergreen Foundation has stood at the forefront of this nation's forest health debate since it began in the late 1980s. In fact, *Evergreen Magazine*, our periodic journal, was the first national magazine to feature the West's forest health crisis on its pages. We did so in a 1989 report titled, "Grey Ghosts in the Blue Mountains," an examination of the underlying causes of the mountain pine beetle infestation then sweeping eastern Oregon's Blue Mountains.

Since "Grey Ghosts" was published, we have produced eight more special editions designed to call public and congressional attention to solutions to the ecological crisis that now grips more than 190 million acres of federal forestland across the West. The solution, of course, is more active management of federal forests: the greater use of thinning and prescribed fire regimes that mimic natural disturbance patterns that were more prevalent in western forests before European settlement began.

In the course of our many field investigations, we have interviewed dozens of fire ecologists whose collective experience spans hundreds of years. Significantly, not one of them supports the "let nature take its course" approach advocated by our country's best known environmental groups. They don't support this ill-advised approach because the frequency and ferocity of wildfires scientists are observing in western federal forests has moved well beyond what ecologists call "the range of natural variability."

Put simply, there is nothing "natural" about these wildfires. Small wonder then that the *same* late seral forest conditions federal agencies are trying to perpetuate are being lost in wildfires that are burning with greater destructive force than any for which fire ecologists can find evidence in soil layers or tree rings dating back more than 2,000 years. Even worse, some 50 million yet to burn acres now bear a Category 3 designation, meaning they are at highest risk of immediate wildfire. Millions of these acres provide designated critical habitat for spotted owls, grizzly bears, salmon and hundreds of other plant and animal species listed as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Against this backdrop, with all of its dreadful ecological, economic and social consequences, remarkably bi-partisan House and Senate coalitions ratified the Healthy Forests Restoration Act in the fall of 2003, less than a year after the Rodeo-Chediski, Biscuit and San Diego fires left the entire country wondering what could be done to pull the West's great national forests back from the brink of ecological collapse.

HFRA laid vitally important groundwork, providing federal forest management agencies with administrative tools needed to initiate large scale, long term forest and rangeland restoration projects in high risk areas. But it fell short of public expectations where post-fire salvage and restoration work is concerned. In the aftermath of the Biscuit Fire the nation observed that it is still possible for radical environmental groups to thwart urgently needed work, including the salvage of dead and dying timber, reforestation, soil stabilization and brush control; this despite the fact that such work is widely supported among both rural and urban voters.

Liberal defined, restoration forestry enjoys a much stronger scientific basis than is generally realized. It dates to 1907, when the U.S. Forest Service began to experiment with thinning and prescribed fire regimes at its Fort Valley, Arizona research station, the first such station in the country. This research, and subsequent field work conducted at most of the Forest Service's research stations, is very well documented in reports and repeat photography spanning more than a 60 years. In fact, if unrelated anecdotal photographic records are added to the mix, the record dates back more than a century. How much more evidence is needed before we begin the kind of on-the-ground restoration work needed to capture the economic and environmental benefits that flow from active, science-based management of federal forests? How much more must be lost before a new, more enlightened course is charted; a course that recognizes and accepts the necessity of managing risk and the futility of ignoring it?

Based on a century of scientific, historic and anecdotal evidence, and our own reputation for fact-finding, we are pleased to add The Evergreen Foundation to the long and impressive list of scientists, forestry organizations and federal agency personnel that are supporting The Forest Emergency Recovery & Research Act [HR 4200] co-sponsored by you and Congressman Brian Baird [D-WA]. Our examination of your proposed legislation leaves no doubt in our minds that HR 4200 lowers some of the procedural barriers radical environmentalists have used to thwart the speedy, science-based recovery of forests brutalized by catastrophic events, most notably wildfires and windstorms.

Apart from the impressive and expanding body of scientific evidence that supports this legislative approach, past experience has also produced some notable examples of the ecological and economic benefits that accrue in the aftermath of speedy salvage and restoration; the most notable being western Oregon's Tillamook, a miracle forest emblematic of the will and determination of Oregonians who took on the job of salvaging and replanting in the aftermath of not one, but three, terrible wildfires. Today, the Tillamook is such an impressive forest that Oregon's voters were recently asked to set aside half the forest in a no-management reserve, a proposal they wisely rejected.

The Tillamook's splendid recovery stands in remarkable contrast to what is happening on southern Oregon's Siskiyou National Fire where little has been done to recover what was lost in

the 500,000-acre Biscuit Fire. Amid timber sale appeals and litigation, less than one percent of what was killed by the fire has been salvaged. Worse, nothing is being done to prevent the invasion of brush species that will prevent wind-born ponderosa and fir seeds from finding mineral soil in which they can take root, leading some scientists to estimate that natural forest recovery may take 300 years. Contrast this timeframe with the 40-some years it took for the Tillamook to recover in the aftermath of a very aggressive salvage and replanting effort. Contrast it also with the unmistakable aftermath one sees at Mount St. Helens: the remarkable recovery of Weyerhaeuser forests and the adjacent moonscape that bears witness to the federal decision to let nature take its course in nearby national forests flattened by the force of St. Helens' 1980 eruption.

Tillamook-like forest recovery stories replay themselves all across the western United States, bearing witness to man's quite remarkable partnership with nature. HR 4200 codifies this partnership in a way replicated by only two other pieces of federal forestry legislation: the 1924 Clarke-McNary Act and the 1944 Sustained Yield Forest Management Act. Clarke-McNary put the Forest Service in the fire fighting business, funding the West's early public-private firefighting cooperatives and the Sustained Yield Act sought to balance growth, harvest and mortality to insure that the nation's federal forests were not exploited.

With so many remarkable success stories at hand, with so much evidence in history, and in recovering forests themselves, you would think environmental groups would be among the most enthusiastic supporters of science-based restoration. Alas, they are its most ardent opponents. It is as though they don't want the public to discover the truth about the many economic and environmental benefits that flow from forest salvage and restoration. I am not sure why this is but, increasingly, the same groups that oppose forestry also oppose its ties to capitalism and entrepreneurship, principles deeply rooted in the American experience. How else do we account for their fervent opposition to the very idea that companies engaged in forest restoration work ought to be allowed a reasonable profit from their investments in necessary technologies and skills?

Although I found nothing lacking in either HFRA or HR 4200, I do wish Congress would concurrently fund the Forest Service's Forest Products Laboratory at Madison, Wisconsin more adequately than it has in recent years. Few in Congress seem to realize the absolutely vital role this lab's scientists are playing in the development of commercial uses for woody biomass and small diameter trees fire ecologists say must be removed from at-risk forests if the risk of catastrophic wildfire is to be substantially reduced over time. As we reported in "Giant Minds, Giant Ideas," *Evergreen*, October, 2003, developing profitable, *unsubsidized* markets for this largely useless material is a vital first step in reducing fuel-load levels in the West's at-risk forests.

Time is running out Congressman Walden, not just for desperately ill federal forests, but also for the family-owned sawmilling infrastructure that was developed in concert with the Congress, the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the Department of Commerce in the two decades that followed the Second World War. Most of the sawmills that survived the collapse of the federal timber sale program have secured new, more reliable log sources, and no longer have much interest in doing business with the federal government. Yes,

some of these companies will bid on the occasional federal timber sale if wood quality is high and the price is right, but I know of no company, family owned or otherwise, willing to invest its capital in biomass or milling technologies dedicated solely to processing small diameter logs federal forest restoration programs may someday yield.

Frankly, I don't expect this situation will change until – or if – someone in Congress figures out how to stuff the litigation genie back into the bottle. This is not good news for the so-called “New West,” with its trophy log homes, ski resorts, golf courses, wine shops, art galleries, gated communities and legions of telecommuters. Because minus unsubsidized wood and biomass markets, minus the risk capital, creativity, technological genius and commitment private enterprise delivered to the federal government in spades for more than 60 years, restoration forestry will remain a distant dream, and the West's great publicly owned forests will continue to die and burn. This is hardly the outcome you and your colleagues hope for, but it is today's reality.

I will readily concede that in today's society, restoration forestry isn't the jobs issue it once was. And there is no public mandate to protect trophy log homes or gated sylvan enclaves: outsized symbols of the New West prosperity. *But there is a public mandate to protect the common ground most of us still share:* human life, communities, municipal watersheds, air and water quality, fish and wildlife habitat and the wellspring of year-round recreation opportunity woven so tightly into the fabric of both the Old and New West. In both literal and figurative senses, HR 4200 takes significant and positive steps in the direction of restoring the sanctity and stability of the common ground shared by the majority of Americans who love forests and want them protected from harm, no matter its source.

Best wishes,

Jim Petersen
Editor, Evergreen Magazine
Executive Director, The Evergreen Foundation

“We must always consider the environment and people together, as though they are one, because the human need to use natural resources is fundamental to our continued presence on earth

Jim Petersen, Evergreen, April, 1989