

Oregon lawmakers ask federal agencies to protect and restore old-growth forests

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U.S. Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley and U.S. Representatives Earl Blumenauer, Peter DeFazio and Suzanne Bonamici this week asked the U.S. Departments of Interior and Agriculture to follow congressional intent in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to protect and restore old-growth forests as well as protect other carbon-rich mature forests in Oregon and nationwide.

The Oregon lawmakers wrote that the U.S. Forest Service's climate plan and 10-year wildfire strategy of hazardous fuel treatments and prescribed fire to reduce wildfire risks also must recognize the climate crisis and expand to include plans for mature and old-growth forests.

Their letter – also signed by 19 Senate and House colleagues -- noted the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) included historic investments in wildfire risk reduction and forest restoration on national forests and public lands, requiring prioritization of funding for projects that fully maintain or contribute toward

restoring the structure and composition of old-growth stands consistent with the characteristics of that forest type.

“The important climate and biodiversity values of old growth forests that Congress emphasized in this provision exist throughout the federal forests, not just in those areas most subject to fire, and not just in old growth forests but also carbon-rich mature forests,” the lawmakers wrote Interior Secretary Deb Haaland and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. “Protection of these values for the long term is key to accomplishing the Administration’s commitments to climate and biodiversity protection.”

In addition to Wyden and Merkley, other senators signing the letter are U.S. Sens. Alex Padilla (D-CA), Martin Heinrich (D-NM), Ed Markey (D-MA), Patty Murray (D-WA), Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Michael Bennet (D-CO). In addition to Blumenauer, DeFazio and Bonamici, other U.S. representatives signing the letter are U.S. Reps. Nanette Diaz Barragan (D-CA), Sara Jacobs (D-CA), Jared Huffman (D-CA), Ruben Gallego (D-AZ), Chellie Pingree (D-ME), Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC), Veronica Escobar (D-TX), Steve Cohen (D-TN), Mark Pocan (D-WI), Jerry McNerney (D-CA), Mike Levin (D-CA), Nikema Williams (D-GA) and Diana DeGette (D-CO).

The lawmakers asked in their letter for answers to the following questions by March 31:

1. What specific steps do USDA and the DOI plan to take to follow this direction for implementing their climate plans, 10-year wildfire strategy, and other agency planning processes?
2. What monitoring requirements and metrics will USDA and DOI use to analyze the progress of protecting and restoring these forests across the country? Specifically, what performance measures do you intend to use to report progress to Congress given that “acres treated” does not incorporate old growth preservation or restoration? How do you intend to develop new, spatially-explicit, outcomes-based performance measures to track and report progress in restoring and preserving old growth forests?
3. What are the priority projects for restoring mature and old growth forests with IIJA funds under the 10-year plan? Which projects do you anticipate funding in the first two years of IIJA implementation and how do you plan on selecting projects in future years?
4. The 10-year strategy makes use of the concept of firesheds. How is restoration of old growth forests incorporated into the fireshed model? If it is not, how do you intend to ensure old growth is prioritized in your approach to funding allocation?