



WESTERN GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION

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December 11, 2009

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W., Room 6151
Washington, DC 20240

Secretaries Vilsack and Salazar:

Thank you for your agencies' participation in the Western Governors' Association Forest Health Advisory Committee (FHAC) meeting held in Boise, Idaho on October 22nd. It was encouraging to hear from Jay Jensen and Rhea Suh that you are reconvening the Wildland Fire Leadership Council.

The previous Council worked collaboratively with the WGA to ensure broad-based stakeholder participation in key areas, such as developing and implementing the goals of the National Fire Plan, the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy, and the Implementation Plan. We intend to stand strong with the new Council in crafting strategies and taking actions appropriate to today's conditions and needs. Active membership in the recently re-formed FHAC includes experienced leaders from rural Western communities and reflects the collaborative structure called for in the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy. Together, we are committed to working closely and supportively with the Council, the Administration, and Congress in addressing the critical forest and rangeland health issues and wildfire problems confronting our Western states.

One immediate need is to improve coordination of hazardous fuels reduction projects, wildfire planning, and the allocation of available financial and human resources. Increased collaboration in that effort with key stakeholders at all levels is essential to ensure comprehensive and coordinated action, as well as more efficient use of scarce resources. Your strong leadership in the Council is critical, and we recommend participation by Secretary Janet Napolitano of the Department of Homeland Security in the development of a pre-disaster hazardous fuels and wildland fire policy framework that focuses on collaboration and the critical needs of our Western rural communities and valuable natural resources.

Rural communities are the frontline stewards of our Western landscapes, and the economic events of the past year have taken a devastating toll on them. In a recent letter to Representatives Minnick and Schrader of the Bipartisan Healthy Forest Caucus (copy enclosed), we identified an urgent need for maintaining and developing traditional markets for wood products, as well as supporting a new emerging woody biomass utilization and bioenergy industry.

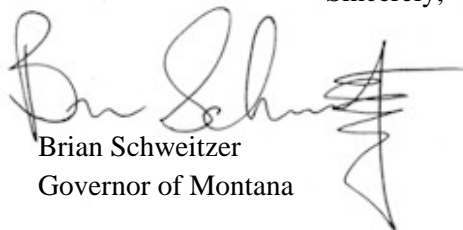
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Congressional and administrative action is required to save and create jobs that will support future forest restoration. We need your assistance to re-build a robust, diverse, and sustainable forest industry to accomplish wildfire mitigation, landscape-scale ecological restoration, and other appropriate management of public and private forestlands.

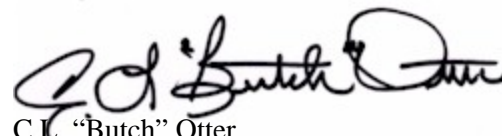
We welcome your strong leadership in the Council to address present and future effects of our changing climate. There is an immediate need for strategic and collaborative management of our forested landscapes due to the impacts of insect and disease outbreaks, such as the Western bark beetle. Western communities already are surrounded by dead and dying forestlands, weakened by insect and disease, and highly vulnerable to lightning strikes and subsequent wildfires. Much of the nation's water supply originates in the impacted Western watersheds, and the negative effects on their water quantity and quality is likely to be substantial and extremely costly to remediate.

The future of our forests and the products and services they provide depends on what we do now. Working collaboratively, we can develop and implement an effective strategy to address the problems and needs outlined above. Members of the FHAC would like to meet with your staff in the near future to outline a strategic path forward, one which leads to on-the-ground action beginning in the 2010 spring field season.

Sincerely,



Brian Schweitzer
Governor of Montana



C.L. "Butch" Otter
Governor of Idaho

cc: Secretary Napolitano

Attachment