

COLORADO FOREST AND WATER ALLIANCE

Climate, Forests, Wildfire, and Water Policy Principles

POSITION: Science tells us that healthy, resilient forests are critical to long-term climate solutions and water security. To that end, we want to ensure new legislation and policy creating land designations (such as Congressionally designated Wilderness acres, etc.) promote active management of forested acres using scientifically proven tools including planting, harvesting, thinning and prescribed fire.

New wildfire dynamics and climate stresses create a need to identify new considerations as we adapt our watershed management. Our position is to advocate and support policies, legislation, new land designations, and other mechanisms affecting forested lands that are consistent with the following principles:

- 1. *Restore forested headwaters as a pathway to water security and climate solutions.***
 - Nature connects forests and water, additionally forests influence the carbon cycle and therefore climate. Policy should connect forests, climate and water – not treat them as separate and divisible.
 - Avoid carbon emissions from catastrophic wildfires that threaten lives, public health, property, and forest ecosystems.
- 2. *Forest projects need to occur at landscape scales:***
 - Endorse and support forest health treatments at larger (landscape) scales.
 - Restricting forest treatments to areas adjacent of development (Wildland-Urban Interface) does not efficaciously address the threat of catastrophic wildfire.
- 3. *Steward the snowpack and protect water resources.***
 - Select critical water supply watersheds as priority areas for forest treatments. Many of the West's headwaters are on the national forests and improving the health of those forests is critical to ensure secure, sustainable supplies of clean water.
- 4. *Keep forests as forests.***
 - Manage existing forests to sequester and store carbon through increased forest growth, improved forest health, and reforestation. Sustainably reforest burned areas so trees can play their role capturing carbon and converting to oxygen.
- 5. *Promote the use of wood products to sequester and store carbon.***
 - Durable, long-lasting wood products sequester carbon indefinitely.
 - Support sustaining markets and infrastructure to utilize wood products.
- 6. *Prioritize Science over emotion.***
 - Sound science is foundational to addressing climate induced threats to watersheds and forests. One critical source of unbiased, relevant science comes from local federal and state land managers who are working for the public interest – we should listen to them.
- 7. *Light on the land.***
 - Design forest restoration projects that minimize negative environmental effects and increase environmental benefits.
 - Utilize existing roads wherever feasible to support forest restoration and management. New road construction is expensive – both economically and environmentally.
- 8. *Incentivize cross boundary solutions.***
 - Threats to watershed and forest health crosses property boundaries. Fire, disease, and tree attacking insects, must be fought collaboratively across private and public lands at larger scales to be effective.
- 9. *Reflect the true cost.***
 - Weigh short term projects' costs and environmental effects against long-term benefits of healthy, resilient forests that protect water and mitigate climate change. Downstream benefits for agriculture, wildlife and fish, municipal water, and a myriad of recreation opportunities must also be analyzed, considered and valued.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that climate change is rapidly changing the environment and the context for cohesive policy that considers the interlocking pieces of forests, fire and water supply. The 2020 wildfire season, the latest in a succession of “record” fire seasons is ample evidence. Wildfires burned at elevations up to 11,000 feet and well into late October in Colorado – in ways we have not seen before. Proposing static solutions – in such a dynamic and fast changing environment – is inadequate to the challenge. Traditional approaches such as legislation that restricts options for land management, however well intentioned, may actually increase risks to land health rather than achieve the espoused goal of land “protection”. It is time to recognize that we are in a different time and build policy and legislation that reflects our new reality.

As renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold famously said, “If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good...and to keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering”. We advocate that “intelligent tinkering”, the type necessary to create resilient forests and watersheds requires that we *also* keep every tool in our land management toolkit. Losing our ability to manage vegetation in ways that reduce wildfire threats and sustain forest health due to overly limiting policy or legislation simply is not effective in an era of climate change.

The members of the Colorado Forest & Water Alliance (COFWA) have joined together for mutual assistance in advocating at state and federal levels for policies, funding, and programming that support meaningful and measurable improvements in forest health and watershed resiliency benefiting Colorado.

Colorado Forest & Water Alliance Members: Colorado Water Congress, Colorado Timber Industry, Club 20, and the Watershed Health Investment Partners

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