

Intact Forests in the United States: Proforestation Mitigates Climate Change and Serves the Greatest Good

William R. Moomaw^{1*}, Susan A. Masino^{2,3} and Edward K. Faison⁴

¹ Emeritus Professor, The Fletcher School and Co-director Global Development and Environment Institute, Tufts University, Medford, MA, United States, ² Vernon Roosa Professor of Applied Science, Trinity College, Hartford, CT, United States,

³ Charles Bullard Fellow in Forest Research, Harvard Forest, Petersham, MA, United States, ⁴ Senior Ecologist, Highstead Foundation, Redding, CT, United States

Climate change and loss of biodiversity are widely recognized as the foremost environmental challenges of our time. Forests annually sequester large quantities of atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂), and store carbon above and below ground for long periods of time. Intact forests—largely free from human intervention except primarily for trails and hazard removals—are the most carbon-dense and biodiverse terrestrial ecosystems, with additional benefits to society and the economy. Internationally, focus has been on preventing loss of tropical forests, yet U.S. temperate and boreal forests remove sufficient atmospheric CO₂ to reduce national annual *net* emissions by 11%. U.S. forests have the potential for much more rapid atmospheric CO₂ removal rates and biological carbon sequestration by intact and/or older forests. The recent *1.5 Degree Warming Report* by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change identifies *reforestation* and *afforestation* as important strategies to increase negative emissions, but they face significant challenges: afforestation requires an enormous amount of additional land, and neither strategy can remove sufficient carbon by growing young trees during the critical next decade(s). In contrast, growing existing forests intact to their ecological potential—termed *proforestation*—is a more effective, immediate, and low-cost approach that could be mobilized across suitable forests of all types. Proforestation serves the greatest public good by maximizing co-benefits such as nature-based biological carbon sequestration and unparalleled ecosystem services such as biodiversity enhancement, water and air quality, flood and erosion control, public health benefits, low impact recreation, and scenic beauty.