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First name: Rep. Steve

Last name: Gunderson

Organization: Environmental Quality Council

Title: Chairman

Comments: I am writing to express the Environmental Quality Council's concern with the U.S. Forest Service's approach to an executive order for the management and stewardship of old growth forests. Specifically, we object to the proposal to prepare an environmental impact statement amending all land management plans for the National Forest system to include old-growth forest conditions. The council is concerned the forest service will not meaningfully consider state input from and interests of Montana during this process. We do not believe existing old-growth forest definitions need to be redefined in the first place. The council fears that rekindling an old debate may cloud future forest management projects and only exacerbate Montana's crisis of forest health and threat of wildfires. Montana is facing unprecedented challenges related to forest health and wildfire management. Overgrown and unhealthy forests have significantly increased the risk of catastrophic wildfires, endangering lives, property, and natural resources. It is essential that we take proactive measures to address these urgent issues and protect our communities and ecosystems. Instead of amending every individual forest plan, the EQC urges the department to prioritize forest management projects that promote active forest management, reduce fuel loads, and restore forest resilience. These projects, such as prescribed burning, thinning, and fuel reduction treatments, are critical for mitigating the risk of wildfires, improving forest health, and enhancing ecosystem diversity and resilience. Furthermore, investing in forest management projects will create jobs, stimulate local economies, and support the livelihoods of rural communities that depend on healthy forests for their economic well-being. By prioritizing forest management over regulatory initiatives, we can achieve meaningful and sustainable outcomes that benefit both people and the environment. Thank you for considering our concerns and taking action to safeguard our forests and communities. ATTACHMENT:

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