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First name: Toby

Last name: Blauwasser

Organization:

Title: MME

Comments: Covering 15% of the land area in five states (Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah), piñon pine and juniper forests are subject to temperature extremes and limited moisture availability. These forests are often the sole woodland provider of wildlife habitat, vegetative cover, watershed protection, and traditional food and medicine gathering in dryland and arid BLM-managed lands across the West.

Single-leaf piñon pine trees can reach ages of up to 600 years and juniper can reach ages of up to 1,600 years. These historic forests and associated undisturbed biological soil crusts store a disproportionate amount of carbon in dryland ecosystems, and are more resistant to disruptions caused by climate change.

Old-growth piñon-juniper forests are home to more than 70 bird species and are often the only suitable habitat for many of these species, whose populations are currently declining rapidly under intense pressure from climate change, development, and drought.

Although they cover hundreds of millions of acres and provide irreplaceable habitat and ecosystem benefits, piñon-juniper forests are among the least studied and most ignored North American forest types. The BLM should ensure that its inventory and criteria for mature and old-growth forests include piñon pine and juniper forests, which are the largest forest type by acreage managed by the agency.

As you know, threats to piñon-juniper forests on western public lands are many, including landscape-level mechanical deforestation projects (mainly for the benefit of cattle grazing) that tend to indiscriminately remove trees, including those that have existed on the landscape since long before Europeans landed on this continent. Making sure these ancient piñon-juniper forests and their characteristics are included in any nationwide definition of mature and old-growth forests (which will then be used to protect these areas) is extremely important, and would be a huge win for protecting the redrock wilderness.