

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 8/28/2022 11:08:57 PM

First name: Helene

Last name: Lesslie

Organization:

Title:

Comments: I believe that it is of the utmost importance to do all we can to protect our environment from the devastating climate changes that we are now experiencing, and we need to do as much as we can, as quickly as we can. I urge the Biden administration to conduct a comprehensive inventory of mature and old-growth piñon pine and juniper forests on the Colorado Plateau during this first stage of implementing Executive Order 14072.

It is important that ALL old-growth and mature forests, in dryland ecosystems as well as the better-known alpine and Pacific Northwest environments, are conserved for the benefit of wildlife, air and water quality, climate adaptation, and so much more. The following information needs to be taken into consideration of their environmental value:

*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.

Even though 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.

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 and their protection for today and for the future is extremely important in preserving our environment.