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Comments: I am writing to express my support for the USDA's proposal to adopt a National Forest Plan Amendment to Conserve and Steward Old Growth Forests, while recommending the addition of mature forest protections to the final rule. President Biden exercised commendable leadership in issuing Executive Order 14072 on Earth Day 2022, which committed the US to identify, inventory, and protect mature and old-growth forests on federal lands. This proposal is a meaningful step toward implementing the Executive Order.

As USDA works to finalize this critical proposal, USDA should ensure that the final rule protects mature trees and forests, and not just old-growth. In many interior Western States, including New Mexico, we have very little old-growth forest because of both human activity and natural ecological disturbance cycles. However, mature forests serve as similarly critical providers of habitat and ecosystem services in places lacking old-growth. Both old-growth and mature forests benefit the quantity and quality of water runoff from snowy mountain watersheds, protecting these already-strained water resources. Protecting mature forests is also necessary to preserve and expand the benefits of old growth because mature forests are the old growth of tomorrow.

We must protect mature forests in places like New Mexico and other Western States affected by wildfires and insect outbreaks, so we can recover old growth, protect biodiversity, and ensure our forests are a powerful natural climate solution now and in the future.