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First name: JT

Last name: Simmons

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Secretary of Agriculture Vilsack and all others involved in this monumental decision,

I am a college student studying Environmental Science at Harding University. I'm from Searcy, Arkansas, which is close to several large tracts of public land. From the Ozark National Forest to the Ouachita National Forest, my growing up was defined by exploration in public lands. My time in these special places in National Forests has led me to my studies, exploring the different facets of ecosystems and humans' impacts on them. As I look back through my life, I have been shaped as a person by intact public land. Specifically, I have been drawn for years to more preservation-style places within National Forests, including wilderness areas, special interest areas, and other outdoor recreation sites such as National Park locations. Last summer, I hiked the 486 mile Colorado Trail, visiting numerous Forest Service locations and seeing parts of the state few get to see. Overall, I have spent much time in Forest Service public lands, and so feel that my comments may be of value as the Department prepares to develop such monumental policy for the coming decades.

Being from Arkansas and having extensive experience within the Ozark and Ouachita National Forests, the common theme between all of these pristine places has been the old growth forests. The diversity and grandeur of those ecosystems is unparalleled and is truly a treasure fit to be conserved. These forests, especially east of the Rocky Mountains, are increasingly rare and once lost, take lifetimes to recover. I am encouraged by the recent actions of the US Forest Service to take steps to protect these rare and threatened ecosystems, and hope that these actions progress to sound policy. As such, I want to encourage the Forest Service to continue exploring paths of policy to protect the existing old growth ecosystems from further loss. I would like to bring to your attention a few suggestions I have to the Forest Service as the administration looks forward to drafting policy:

- I suggest that the new policy tighten restrictions on commercial logging of old -growth and mature forests. The language used thus far is promising, but remains too ambiguous. Leaving the option open for old-growth forests to be logged or harvested, even if commercial interests are not the primary reason for timber management, created the potential for abuse. The exception given in the language leaves open the opportunity for the heart of the policy to be bypassed by the short-sighted actions of future administrators. Additionally, manual timber removal as a vehicle of change is not sustainable as a land management policy. I encourage the USFS to explore other options that would allow natural processes to be the main force of change in these lands, such as prescribed burns.

- I strongly urge you to remove any exceptions or exclusions that would not allow the Tongass National Forest to be given equal treatment than any other National Forest unit. The Tongass National Forest contains the last bastion of intact old-growth landscape left in the United States, and if the USFS is serious about conserving these landscapes, then this crowning jewel of the NF system absolutely must be protected.

- I suggest that going forward, concrete pathways towards the identification, development, and raising of new areas of old-growth forest are necessary to meet the stated goals of the new policy. Especially to the east of the Rocky Mountains, there is a massive lack of old growth forest due to over a century of systematic exploitation. Thus, there is a need for the identification and protection of already mature forests, to create a reasonable chain of succession as existing old growth forests inevitably are removed by natural processes.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my comments regarding this monumental policy change. I hope that my input has been helpful and I urge the USFS to continue exploring options for the future of old growth forests.

Thank you,

-JT Simmons  
Harding University Class of 2027  
Environmental Science Major