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Comments: I am writing to provide my comments on the U.S. Forest Service's recently released Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) concerning the conservation and monitoring of old-growth forests. As a person of faith deeply committed to the protection and healing of God's Creation, I commend the Forest Service for taking this important step towards fulfilling President Biden's Executive Order to strengthen the nation's forests. However, I believe that the final policy must be significantly improved to provide robust and lasting protections for mature and old-growth forests. Specifically, the final policy must include concrete actions to protect and recover old-growth forests that have been lost over the past centuries.

I live in New Mexico, where wildfires are obliterating our forests, scorching the ground and creating flash flooding because the water can't seep into the ground. Our foolish policies of suppressing wildfire for many years has created tinder-box forests. We must do a better job of opening the canopies of these forests. We need to learn from the indigenous communities that have cared for our forests and wild lands for so many generations.

Mature and old-growth forests are critical for mitigating climate change, as they store 17.2 billion metric tons of carbon in the U.S. and remove 35 million metric tons of carbon from the atmosphere. Preserving these forests from logging is essential for maintaining their role in climate regulation. Older trees also retain more moisture, reducing wildfire risk, and their canopies provide shade that helps cool the climate.

These forests are vital for clean air and water, wildlife habitats, and preventing soil erosion and flooding. Logging old-growth trees to save the forest is a false solution; they are worth far more standing than as timber.

By safeguarding mature forests, we can ensure they become the old-growth of future generations. The policy must establish meaningful protections for both mature and old-growth forests to address the most pressing environmental challenges of our time. Our actions today will determine the health and wellbeing of God's Creation for generations to come.

I urge the Forest Service to finalize a strong policy that truly protects our mature and old-growth forests, enhancing the resilience and wellbeing of all of God's Creation.