

March 1, 2023

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow  
Chairwoman  
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,  
and Forestry  
United States Senate  
328A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Boozman  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,  
and Forestry  
United States Senate  
328A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Member Boozman:

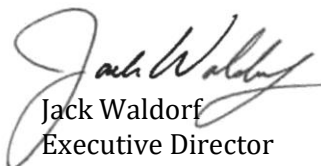
In advance of the Committee's March 1 hearing, "Farm Bill 2023: Conservation and Forestry Programs," attached please find three Western Governors' Association policy resolutions:

- WGA Policy Resolution 2021-03, National Forest and Rangeland Management;
- WGA Policy Resolution 2021-04, Species Conservation and the Endangered Species Act; and
- WGA Policy Resolution 2023-01, Working Lands, Working Communities.

These policy resolutions express Western Governors' shared perspectives on forest health, species conservation, and opportunities to promote cohesive cross-boundary resource management and stewardship across multiple land ownerships. I request that you include this document in the official record of the hearing, as these resolutions articulate specific policy recommendations pertinent to the Committee's consideration of the 2023 Farm Bill Conservation and Forestry titles.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and your consideration of this request. Please contact me if you have any questions or require further information.

Sincerely,



Jack Waldorf  
Executive Director

Attachments (3)



## Policy Resolution 2021-03

### National Forest and Rangeland Management

#### A. BACKGROUND

1. The American West encompasses a huge landmass representing 2.4 million square miles, or over two-thirds of the entire country. Over 116 million people live in these states and they reside in large, densely populated cities, smaller cities and towns, and in rural areas.
2. Western communities share a unique relationship with natural resources. Communities in the West depend upon healthy forests and rangelands for jobs, recreation, and quality of life. Conversely, effective natural resource management is only possible if rural and resource-dependent communities are healthy, vibrant, and prosperous.
3. There are approximately 346 million acres of timber land in the West, of which 104 million acres are privately owned. In the United States, rangelands comprise about 31 percent of the total land area, approximately 761 million acres, which occur mostly in the West.
4. A high proportion of western lands are managed by the Federal government. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), through the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), manages over 168 million acres of forests, rangelands, and grasslands through the National Forest System (NFS). Approximately 11 percent of all western lands are in the NFS. Western states include more than 75 percent of our national forest and grassland system.
5. Department of the Interior (DOI) agencies, through the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), manage a substantial portion of the West's forests and rangelands. The BLM manages over 245 million acres in the West, of which 155 million acres are managed for livestock grazing.
6. Healthy forests and rangelands provide a number of important ecosystem services and are a vital component of western ecosystems. In addition to providing food, fuel and fiber, forests and rangelands clean the air, filter water supplies, control floods and erosion, sustain biodiversity and genetic resources, and provide opportunities for recreation, education, and cultural enrichment. Properly managed forests and rangelands can sequester greenhouse gases.
7. National forests and rangelands are economic drivers in western states. These public lands serve as critical economic engines and support local economic activities including grazing, wood products, mining, and recreation.
8. Public and private forest managers require forest products infrastructure to achieve community vitality and land management goals, including ecological restoration objectives and healthy and resilient forests.
9. Invasive species have damaged many of the forests and rangelands throughout the West and continue to be a threat to the West's working landscapes. Plant pests, such as the

emerald ash borer, can cause significant environmental, economic, and human health impacts to western forests by destroying urban, suburban, and wildland canopy covers and imperiling the species that depend upon them. Invasive annual grasses, such as cheatgrass, medusahead and ventenata, pose a major threat to western rangelands by increasing the risk of wildfire, outcompeting native grasses, and diminishing soil and water quality. Invasive species management is an essential component of effective forest, rangeland and wildfire management.

10. In recent decades, the number, severity and overall size of wildfires has increased across much of the U.S. In that time, wildfire seasons have become longer and more intense. In areas that once experienced a four-month fire season, fire seasons may now last six to eight months. Many longstanding practices of the western wildland fire service, including reliance on “1039 seasonal” and permanent subject to furlough staff, were developed in an era with shorter, less intense fire seasons.
11. The USFS operates five regional research stations that work on a range of biological, physical and social science fields to promote sustainable management of the nation’s forests and rangelands.
12. States have a particular interest in improving the active management of federal forest lands. State governments have trust authority over water, wildlife and forest resources, along with primary authority and expertise to protect community health and safety. Poorly managed forests can have significant and broad impacts on the landscapes and communities of the West, including negative impacts to air quality and public health, degradation of rivers and streams and associated water quality (including drinking water), reduced forage for domestic livestock, wildlife diseases, impaired habitats and water for wildlife and fish, and the loss of forest products and associated jobs.
13. Relative to decades past and other forest landowners, forest managers today operate under a constrained decision space as they work to address contemporary issues such as climate change, invasive pests and diseases, habitat diversity, fuel build-ups and fire risk, fish passage barriers, unmaintained roads, and legacy impacts. Adding to this challenge are concerns about the economic and social vitality of rural communities that experience effects from reduced timber supply and compromised forest health. Displaced workers, declines in school enrollment, aging demographics, property loss, business closures, and revenue effects due to wildfire and high unemployment are not uncommon to these communities.
14. Due to the current USFS funding model, many of the legacy roads and water crossing structures are not being maintained, leading to washouts, mass wasting, and sedimentation of salmonid spawning habitat. Many culverts and bridges installed over the past few decades do not meet current fish passage criteria and are past their design life and now failing. This lack of maintenance has resulted in a significant increase in the number of fish passage barriers, which is limiting fish access to important spawning and rearing habitat.
15. States are managers as well, and many western states own extensive public land holdings that require forest products infrastructure to achieve community vitality and land management goals, including ecological restoration objectives and healthy and resilient forests.

16. The USFS business model has historically been based on a combination of federal appropriations that were supplemented with revenue from resource sales and fees. Until the early 1990s, the USFS was a net contributor to the federal treasury. Over the past 20 years, timber sales have dramatically declined.
17. In addition, the last decade has seen several large, very expensive wildfires, which have increased USFS wildfire suppression costs from 13 percent of the agency's FY 1991 budget to nearly 50 percent over the last several fiscal years. Consequently, under the current agency budgeting framework, forest management, hazardous fuels reduction, habitat improvement, road maintenance, road abandonment, fish passage barrier removals, and outdoor recreation programs have been negatively affected across national forests and DOI lands.
18. An April 2015 USFS study, the "Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program 5-Year Report, FY 2010-2014," found that the past century of wildfire suppression and legacy management practices have contributed to forests being overstocked and primed for larger and more intense blazes, and that changes in land use and increasing social pressures make it difficult for the agency to let fire play its natural role of clearing the forest understory in certain forest types. Active forest management has historically played a pivotal role in the growth and mortality cycle of forests to manage fuel loading, which in turn can reduce fire-fighting costs and improve habitat resilience. Today, the USFS estimates that roughly 90,625 square miles – an area larger than Utah – is at high or very high risk of severe wildfire and in need of treatment.
19. Insect infestation and disease have damaged many of the forests throughout the West. Severe drought conditions that are affecting western states, particularly California, have only exacerbated insect infestations and tree mortality. The effects go well beyond fire risk, and timber and fiber production are negatively affected, threatening the viability of the surviving forest product infrastructure. The significant decline in forest health has also created serious threats and challenges to watershed integrity, wildlife and fisheries habitats, recreational uses, businesses and tourism. All of these impacts present substantial challenges for forest-dependent communities across the West.
20. The dire forest conditions, unmet management needs, and the failure to provide lasting protections for some landscapes have brought diverse stakeholders together to find solutions. Community collaboration on forest health projects is robust in numerous places across the West, forging broad agreements among diverse stakeholders on projects that encompass fuels reduction, fiber production, habitat restoration, long-term protection for critical areas, and other community objectives. It is not uncommon to find mill owners, hunters and anglers, loggers, small business owners, conservationists, and local elected leaders working together around the table.
21. Collaborative planning and project implementation across National Forests and state and private forest lands on a larger scale allows for more diverse interests to address their particular needs for a landscape or a watershed. Taking a broad look at a landscape for planning purposes minimizes the challenges associated with managing lands for the benefit of a particular species or to address a specific need. Well-planned projects that are strategically placed across a landscape can result in a higher level of benefits than those that are more randomly or opportunistically placed. Processes associated with planning and implementing a project have become so time consuming and expensive for National Forests

in particular that a disincentive often exists for their managers to proceed with management actions that are needed to attain desired ecological, social, and economic objectives.

22. The full benefits of collaborative efforts have not been realized on the land. Working constructively with collaborators requires resources to be productive and the federal agencies often lack the necessary staff and funding.
23. Even when collaborative forest health projects enjoy broad support from diverse stakeholders and the agencies, administrative objections and litigation remain a too frequent outcome. One result is that community collaborative efforts become fatigued, and future opportunities are lost. Another outcome is that USFS restoration projects often go through exhaustive, time-consuming analysis, driving up costs and preventing the agency from scaling up management to meet the scope of the problem.
24. Today, the costs associated with planning and implementing a management project on National Forest lands are significantly more than those of the private sector. This cost, along with the time associated with drafting, analyzing, incorporating public involvement, and responding to appeals and/or litigation at the project level, lead many federal managers to focus their limited staff, funds and time on projects with the least likelihood to be challenged. This approach does not adequately address the larger socioeconomic and ecological needs of our National Forests and dependent communities.
25. Rangeland livestock operations were established decades ago, with many operations using forage on private, state and federal lands. These family-based operations are important contributors to the customs, cultures and rural economies of the West.
26. These operations also maintain open spaces and important habitat conditions (e.g., year-round water sources) benefiting wildlife and recreation. Water rights, which are granted by the states for livestock grazing, will not benefit other uses if the agricultural operation ceases to maintain the beneficial use.
27. Ranching operations that are responsibly managed provide valuable, active management of public lands including responsible grazing, maintenance of fences and other infrastructure, managing fuel loads, engaging in wildland fire monitoring and suppression, and cooperative management of noxious and invasive weeds.
28. Federal land management agencies' actions in recent years have resulted in reductions or removal of domestic livestock from federal lands.
29. The USFS and BLM have permanently closed, left vacant without reissuing a grazing permit, and converted into forage reserves or "grass banks" some grazing allotments in recent years. In many instances, the allotments are technically available based upon forage availability, but permits are not issued for reasons including unmaintained rangeland improvements and uncompleted National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documentation by USFS or BLM.
30. The USFS and BLM continue to receive pressure to close domestic sheep grazing allotments due to concerns about disease in bighorn sheep.

31. Restrictions and closures can have negative economic impacts on ranchers and ranch dependent communities. Ranchers who have used the same federal grazing allotments for generations may be abruptly forced to find new forage for their livestock when allotments are restricted or closed.
32. Restrictions and temporary closures, when implemented to mitigate natural events like drought, wildfires and wildlife impacts, should be factored into ongoing, regular reviews and renewals of individual livestock allotments, individual livestock operators' use of the allotments or the total amount of grazing allotments available for ranchers.
33. Inconsistent interpretation of operational policies across the West by local and regional federal land managers compounds difficulties in managing livestock grazing on public lands. For example, federal policy on acceptable types of supplemental feed, feed placement, and watering of livestock is interpreted without regard for localized rangeland conditions or the economics of local ranching operations. Failure to adapt policies to local conditions affects the ability of livestock grazing permittees to properly manage their livestock herds while achieving permit standards, goals, and objectives.
34. USDA launched a Shared Stewardship Strategy in 2018 to work collaboratively with states to set priorities and co-manage risk across broad landscapes. Through the strategy, USDA coordinates with states to set priorities and increase the scope and scale of critical forest treatments that support communities and improve forest conditions. To date, fourteen Western states have entered into individual Shared Stewardship agreements with USDA to identify landscape-scale priorities and build capacity to improve forest conditions.
35. In December 2018, the Western Governors' Association (WGA) and USDA signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to establish a framework to allow the USFS and WGA to work collaboratively to accomplish mutual goals, further common interests, and effectively respond to the increasing suite of challenges facing western landscapes. Under this agreement, WGA and USDA have pursued several collaborative campaigns to improve the management and restoration of western forests and rangelands.
36. In 1908, when Congress created the NFS, it also passed the National Forest Revenue Act, which directs the USFS to share 25 percent of gross revenues with local governments. Then in 1976, Congress passed "Payments in Lieu of Taxes" (PILT) legislation providing federal payments to local governments regardless of gross revenues that result from timber harvest and other forest management activities. After revenues from the sale of timber dropped substantially, Congress passed the Secure Rural Schools and Self Determination Act (SRS) in 2000, allowing counties to choose between a payment based on historical average and the 25 percent revenue share. SRS has expired several times, and PILT has been subject to funding uncertainty as well.
37. The 2014 Farm Bill provided the Forest Service with several new tools to accelerate forest restoration. Among them were Good Neighbor Authority (GNA), which allows USFS to enter into agreements with state forestry agencies to implement this critically important management work on national forests when USFS is unable to do the work alone. Since GNA was first authorized, 32 states have initiated more than 130 GNA projects. In the 2018 Farm Bill, GNA authorities were expanded to allow tribes and counties to enter into GNA agreements. The 2014 and 2018 Farm Bills also gave USFS and BLM Stewardship Contracting Authority (SCA), which allows communities, the private sector, and others to

enter into long-term contracts to meet land management objectives. SCA allows forest products to be exchanged for ecological restoration services, which may include thinning and brush removal.

38. In the Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement Act of 2009 (FLAME Act), Congress directed DOI and USDA to develop a national cohesive wildland fire management strategy to comprehensively address wildland fire management across all lands in the United States. The National Strategy explores four broad challenges: 1) managing vegetation and fuels; 2) protecting homes, communities, and other values at risk; 3) managing human-caused ignitions; and 4) effectively and efficiently responding to wildfire.
39. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018 contained a new “fire borrowing fix,” a comprehensive remedy to budgeting for wildfire costs at DOI and USFS. The fix provides a new funding structure from Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 through FY 2027. Beginning in FY 2020, \$2.25 billion of new budget authority is available to USDA and the DOI. The budget authority increases by \$100 million each year, ending at \$2.95 billion in new budget authority by FY 2027. For the duration of the eight-year fix, the fire suppression account will be funded at the President’s FY 2015 Budget request - \$1.011 billion. If funding in the cap is used, the Secretary of Agriculture must submit a report to Congress documenting aspects of the fire season that led to the expenditures.
40. Several federal programs assist state and local fire and land managers in their efforts to manage western lands. Among these are:
  - State Fire Assistance (SFA): The SFA program assists states and local fire departments in responding to wildland fires and conducting management activities that mitigate fire risk on non-federal lands. The program also helps train and equip state first responders, who are the first to arrive at a wildfire (on any land ownership) 80 percent of the time. The program also assists communities in risk assessments and completing fire management planning projects.
  - Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) programs: The VFA program provides support to rural communities and is critical to ensuring adequate capacity to respond to wildfires, reducing the risk to communities, people, homes and property, and firefighters.
  - Hazard Mitigation Assistance Grants (HMAGs), administered through the Federal Emergency Management Agency, provide funding for eligible mitigation measures that reduce disaster losses. These grants include the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program, which support states, local communities, tribes and territories as they undertake hazard mitigation projects, reducing the risks they face from disasters and natural hazards.

## **B. GOVERNORS’ POLICY STATEMENT**

1. Western Governors support sound forest and rangeland management policies that maintain and promote ecologic, economic, and social balance and sustainability.
2. Western Governors support the creation of mechanisms to support and enhance cross-boundary collaborative work. To this end, Western Governors have established the

Working Lands Roundtable (WLR) as a platform for collaborative work on cross-jurisdictional, cross-boundary natural resource issues. The WLR allows Western Governors to draw on the expertise of a wide range of resource management experts, landowners, and conservation professionals to devise strategies that enhance the resiliency of western working landscapes and the communities they support.

3. Western Governors point to the WGA-USDA Shared Stewardship MOU as an example of an effective framework to establish shared state-federal priorities for forest and rangeland management, and encourage the development of similar MOUs with other Executive Branch agencies for other areas of natural resource management.
4. Effective forest and rangeland management is only possible through collaboration between federal, state, local, and tribal land management agencies. These agencies should strive to find new ways to collaborate on forest and rangeland management projects, as well as to explore ways to improve state-federal coordination on existing management projects. State funds can be directed to targeted federal projects to augment capacity, expedite project approvals and implementation, and add key state project priorities (including socioeconomic elements) to the federal program of work. State and local governments, municipalities, water utilities and corporate partners should be encouraged to collaborate on, and co-invest in, forest and rangeland restoration – including the support of collaborative groups – across ownership boundaries in key water supply source watersheds.
5. Federal, state, local, and tribal land managers should work to support effective collaboration on federal projects and all-lands initiatives. Federal agencies should look to local communities as a source of strength, knowledge, and support during the planning and implementation of forest and rangeland management projects, and should be encouraged to work with local communities while planning forest and rangeland management projects.
6. Local fire protective associations play a critical role in wildfire response and mitigation, and state and federal agencies should look for ways to further incorporate these groups into regional wildfire dispatch and coordination centers.
7. Western Governors support cost-share grants to local governments and local and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to enable their participation in federal project planning and implementation. Federal agencies should facilitate the participation of local governments in federal decision making by dedicating staff to develop and provide technical assistance and enhance communications across local, tribal, state and federal partners. Congress and the Administration should support critically important programs that enable state and local wildfire protection, such as the SFA and VFA programs, as well as the Emergency Management Assistance Compact and the All Hazards National Mutual Aid System. Western communities are encouraged to take advantage of federal pre-fire mitigation programs, such as BRIC and HMAG. Federal agencies are encouraged to work with western states to ensure that communities' access to these grants is as efficient and streamlined as possible.
8. The USFS should continue to support states' efforts to operate within the Shared Stewardship Strategy, and federal agencies should continue to provide support to states as they implement projects undertaken as part of the Shared Stewardship Strategy and state-level Shared Stewardship agreements. Implementation of these projects could benefit from



enhanced governance and transparency around federal funding, as well as the use of block grants to states through USFS State and Private Forestry for project implementation. States are often the conveners of collaborative interagency forest and rangeland management efforts. Federal agencies should provide funding and support to states for cost incurred during this convening role.

9. It is important to retain citizens' rights to question governmental decisions through administrative and legal means. Western Governors believe there may be an opportunity to further streamline appeals and litigation associated with National Forest decision making in association with other changes designed to incentivize collaboration and provide more certainty as to outcomes.
10. Effective forest and rangeland management requires a network of forest and rangeland infrastructure to manage, maintain, and restore western forests and rangelands. Federal and state agencies should strive to find ways to support and expand critical forest and rangeland management infrastructure, including mills, biomass facilities, and roads. Also critical is the workforce, including the rural workforce, needed to support and operate forest and rangeland management infrastructure.
11. Western Governors support the expansion of stream restoration projects in forest and rangelands, including repair or removal of culverts and other barriers to fish passage. Federal and state agencies should strive to find ways to support and expand cost-effective means of supplying restoration projects, such as with large woody material from adjacent overstocked forests, which in turn supports the rural workforce needed to implement large-scale watershed and stream restoration efforts.
12. A thriving wood-based product market is essential to support critical forest management infrastructure. Western Governors support the expansion of wood-based product markets, and encourage USFS to develop and help fund new technologies and wood-based markets for some non-traditional products. USDA's Forest Products Laboratory is a hub for research and innovation. Supporting innovative technologies, such as cross-laminated timber and biofuels to replace diesel or jet fuel, would help bolster woody biomass utilization. Western Governors encourage the application of their knowledge and experience in a practical way in the West so that some of the federally funded infrastructure that develops from such efforts could first be demonstrated on private lands. Federal land managers should work to ensure that wood product producers have increased certainty of supply, as well as a broader suite of outlets, in addition to traditional sawmills and existing biomass facilities. Governors should work with USDA to explore mechanisms to expand low-interest loans in the forest products and woody biomass sectors to help develop rural businesses around sustainable industry. States can also work with USFS and other federal land managers to establish more long-term stewardship agreements to ensure a long-term feedstock supply.
13. Authorities granted to the USFS in the 2018 Farm Bill, including GNA and SCA, are powerful tools to boost forest and rangeland management, promote collaboration, and limit the effects of administrative objections and litigation. Western Governors encourage federal agencies to fully implement the tools provided in the 2018 Farm Bill and encourage all state and federal land managers to continue to expand the use of these tools in other areas of land management. Federal agencies should expand the use of GNA agreements and other 2018 Farm Bill tools to achieve all-lands restoration objectives across federal, state, local government and privately-owned lands. Federal agencies should use GNA authority and

program income to support additional stewardship objectives such as invasive species management and rangeland conifer encroachment. Where programmatic agreements are already in place, federal agencies should use GNA agreements to address priority restoration needs.

14. Western Governors believe clear, coordinated and consistent application of federal vegetation management practices is integral to maintaining the health of western forests, preventing dangerous and damaging wildfires, and maintaining grid reliability. The Governors support effective and efficient cross-jurisdictional coordination that enables utilities to undertake necessary vegetation management actions on federal transmission rights-of-way. Effective implementation by BLM and USFS of the FY 2018 Consolidated Appropriations Act's sections related to vegetation management, in consultation with states and utilities, would make progress towards improving vegetation management in the West. Special attention should be paid to the law's direction to USFS to pair the Wildfire Hazard Potential index and map with spatial data for use at the community level, as well as its language encouraging USFS and BLM to develop training programs on vegetation management decisions relating to electrical transmission and distribution systems. Electrical utilities and state and federal land managers should examine ways to further utilize GNA and SCA to improve vegetation management in the West.
15. Western Governors believe it is possible to reform the USFS business model in a manner that reduces project planning costs, sources funds from non-federal partners and recognizes that the agency no longer generates large revenues from commodity programs. Federal agencies can accomplish this by:
  - Striving to identify business practice barriers to cross-boundary projects;
  - Developing training on state and federal contracting procedures and administration for all partners to improve implementation of cross-boundary projects;
  - Utilize Service First authorities, which allow multiple agencies to partner to share resources, procurement procedures and other authorities;
  - Streamlining and consolidating agency processes with partners; and
  - Establishing multi-agency pilot projects, which can suggest models for subsequent formal agreements.
16. Western Governors support efforts to improve the effectiveness of NEPA in a forest and rangeland management context. Federal agencies should engage with Governors and states in early, meaningful, and substantive consultation throughout the NEPA process. Western Governors support allowing federal agencies to analyze only the action and no-action alternatives when a project is collaboratively developed, unless a third alternative is proposed during scoping and meets the purpose and need of the project. Western Governors also support rewarding successful implementation of collaborative projects through funding, retained-receipt authority, or other capacity to pursue subsequent projects.
17. State and federal agencies should look to expand the use of prescribed fire and should look for ways to reduce the statutory and regulatory barriers to its expanded use on western

forests and rangelands. State and federal air quality specialists should work together to identify reforms that reduce barriers to prescribed fire and reduce overall health impacts from smoke, improve interagency use of smoke management best practices, and examine liability protection for fire managers and compensation for private property owners negatively affected by escaped prescribed burns. Land managers across the West should strive to increase workforce capacity for prescribed fire activities, as well as science-based vegetation management activities, oversight and planning. State and federal agencies should work to identify ways to increase the cultural acceptance of the use of prescribed fire in the West. Traditional Native American cultural burning and tribal practices are an important part of forest management in the West and may be incorporated more effectively into federal and state planning management processes.

18. Western Governors support efforts to improve a broad range of pre-fire mitigation practices. State and federal agencies should work to develop tools to support mechanical hazardous fuels reduction, especially the removal of underbrush and understory, which are economically unviable in many instances. Expanding the use of spatially complex restoration treatment would help create more resilient forest through greater forest structural heterogeneity. Thinning and spatially complex treatments both address wildfire and post-fire erosion risks, but spatially complex restoration also provides habitat and biodiversity benefits that thinning does not. Invasive species, including invasive annual grasses, can be one of the greatest drivers of wildfire on western rangelands. Land managers should work to further integrate invasive species data and management practices into hazard fuels management and planning.
19. Efforts should be made by state, federal, local, and tribal agencies to modernize the wildland fire service and adapt it for the West's increasingly long and intense fire seasons. Federal agencies should examine their reliance on 1039 seasonal staff, shift a higher percentage of wildland fire staff from seasonal to permanent and permanent subject to furlough positions, evaluate policies related to the use of Administratively Determined emergency firefighters, and authorize hazard pay for federal firefighters performing prescribed fire operations. Incident command teams are valuable resources in the region, and efforts should be made to ensure that these resources have adequate access to training and preparedness activities and are, as necessary, utilized for prescribed fires in a manner similar to suppression fires.
20. Western Governors support improvements to interagency communication, fire response capability, and coordination, including the sharing of firefighting resources. Fire management activities should support fire prevention, rapid response capabilities, full suppression strategies and management of wildfire for resource benefits. Agencies and stakeholders should continue to seek opportunities, including revisions to forest plans, to enhance safety and reduce costs in suppression decisions while protecting communities. Incentives should be created for local governments to take voluntary actions to support the creation and expansion of fire-adapted and smoke-ready communities and resilience, including the promotion of education, fuels management projects and improved integration of community wildfire protection plans with land use decisions when compatible with local goals. Additional analyses should be provided to help communities evaluate the full costs of suppression associated with development in the wildland urban interface.
21. Western Governors support increased attention to the challenges posed in post-wildfire landscapes and wildfire-affected communities. Restoration of forests and rangelands is an overlooked and underfunded aspect of land management activity. Cross-boundary and

cross-jurisdictional collaboration is crucial to properly managing restoration efforts. Western Governors also encourage better awareness of post-wildfire restoration funding opportunities available to wildfire-affected communities and more sophisticated coordination of restoration activities to achieve restoration objectives.

22. The West's forests and rangelands are changing: historical fire suppression patterns have altered the composition of western forests, invasive species have moved across western rangelands, and changing patterns of industry, recreation, and land-ownership have shifted the way Westerners interact with and manage forests and rangelands. Federal agencies, including the USFS and BLM, must work to build agency cultures that can adapt quickly and responsively to these changes. Climate change can accelerate many of these changes by increasing the frequency and severity of fire, altering hydrologic patterns, and expanding the potential range of invasive species, and can pose a threat to the ecosystem services derived from forests and rangelands, such as watersheds, recreation, ranching, and agriculture. Federal agencies must be prepared to adapt to changing patterns in revenue generation, increased need for restoration activities, and a changing workforce. Increasing the pace and scale of restoration work like prescribed fire, fuels reduction, and active management can help reduce the effects of climate change. Western Governors support the creation and expansion of assistance to landowners for carbon sequestration and conservation activities on private forests and rangelands.
23. Federal agencies need to ensure adequate monitoring, assessment, and analysis of federal forests and rangelands, including data on wildlife, water, soil, and forage. Federal agencies should strive to further improve the collection of socioeconomic data related to forest and rangeland management decisions, and to further incorporate that data into management decisions. The Administration should provide federal funding to develop detailed state rangeland action plans addressing invasive species, wildlife and fish habitat, and water quality and quantity as a complement to State Forest Plans. These rangeland plans should include resource analyses of soil health, water, plants, animals and productive capacities to inform management decision-making. The Administration should target funding from USFS, BLM, the Natural Resources Conservation Service and state sources to address cross-boundary management goals (and support monitoring and assessment frameworks) in priority areas. Projects using this targeted funding should be consistent with State Forest Action Plans, wildlife action plans, community wildfire protection plans, and projects in other priority areas determined by federal, state, local and tribal partners based on the best available science.
24. Western Governors urge Congress and the Administration to support the research needed for responsible and effective forest and rangeland management in the West. Investments in widespread spatial imaging and data analytics, LiDAR or hyperspectral imaging, would improve predictive analytics and planning tools for fire and forest health. Federal agencies conducting research should also work to ensure that public research projects are focused on research that supports on the ground management needs. Western Governors urge Congress and the Administration to support USFS Research Stations, which play a key role in forest and rangeland management in the West.
25. The outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in 2020 posed a significant challenge to those working to manage the West's forests and rangelands, particularly wildland firefighters. State, federal, and local wildland fire managers should be encouraged to learn from the pandemic response and, as appropriate, implement effective new management principles

developed during that pandemic into permanent practice. Efforts should be made to ensure that emergency response personnel are prepared for similar situations in the future, as well as other potential risks.

26. Western Governors support the continued responsible use of federal lands for grazing and increased funding for grazing management, monitoring, and permit condition compliance.
27. We support sound, science-based management decisions for federal lands – including adaptive management – and believe these decisions should be based upon flexible policies that take into account local ecological conditions and state planning decisions for fish and wildlife and other human needs.
28. Federal and state land managers should identify opportunities to improve flexibility and integration of grazing management and targeted grazing as tools to achieve restoration and land management goals, including fish and wildlife habitat improvements, drought and wildfire mitigation and resilience, water quality and watershed health, soil health management, promotion of perennial plant health, and control of invasive species such as cheatgrass. They should also promote grazing allotment flexibility on federal lands, within USFS and BLM permitting systems and across ownership boundaries, to respond to changing rangeland conditions and environmental considerations.
29. Livestock grazing on federal lands is compatible with recreation and wildlife management and fulfills the multiple use and sustained yield mission of both the USFS and BLM. Policies, analyses, or planning decisions that lead to closing allotments must be based on science, documented threats and causal factors consistent with state policies and programs as well as federal multiple use missions.
30. Decisions to reduce or suspend grazing should only be made assisted by an appropriate quantitative assessment of long- and short-term trends in rangeland conditions on specific allotments, risk of spread of invasive weeds, diseases to wildlife, or other documented fish or wildlife impacts. If, after consultation with the state, the federal agency decides to reduce, suspend, close, or modify an allotment due to documented harmful wildlife impacts, an alternative allotment, properly authorized pursuant to NEPA, if a suitable alternative allotment exists, must be made available to the displaced operator prior to adjustment of the original allotment. In order to fully implement this policy, the BLM and USFS must have alternative allotments properly authorized under relevant planning documents. This ensures that suspensions or modification of grazing permits will not result in a net loss of Animal Unit Months and that appropriate alternative allotments are available.
31. Grazing permit renewal decisions should be assisted by current site-specific, quantitative data. Federal agencies should engage in meaningful consultation, coordination and cooperation with livestock grazing permittees, state and local governments, tribes, and stakeholders, prior to initiation and throughout the entire permit renewal process.
32. Federal land management agencies' decisions to reduce or close allotments should only be based upon completion of a full and complete administrative review and analysis, including a complete review under the provisions of NEPA. The decision process must include opportunities for states, livestock grazing permittees and other stakeholders to provide input. Allotments should not be closed due to a pending NEPA review without allowing

authorized use of the allotment pending a final decision, or the use of an equivalent amount of forage at reasonably equivalent cost to compliant operators.

33. Federal rangeland specialists should have an understanding of the economics and management of ranching operations dependent upon federal lands, and should receive the necessary training to comprehensively monitor rangelands, conduct objective analysis, and write sound environmental documents.
34. Clear directives and accountability throughout all levels of the USFS and BLM should be required so that interpretation and implementation is practical and predictable from office to office and individual to individual, and informed by an understanding of localized rangeland and ecological conditions, and economic health of ranch operations.
35. Federal land management agencies must give interested state agencies an opportunity to fully participate in or provide input to grazing permit actions – prior to their initiation – including: generalized review of livestock operations on federal lands; any assessment of grazing conditions as part of a federal planning process; review of past compliance of the operator with grazing allotment conditions; and individual allotment reviews. Grazing permit decisions should not be finalized until after this opportunity for meaningful consultation with the states, local governments, and the affected permittees.
36. Governors possess primary decision-making authority for management of state resources. States also have knowledge and experience that are necessary for the development of effective plans. Accordingly, it is essential that Governors have a substantive role in federal agencies' planning processes and an opportunity to review new, revised, or amended federal land management plans for consistency with existing state plans. Federal agencies should:
  - Provide Governors with sufficient time for a full and complete state review, especially when federal plans affect multiple planning areas or resources.
  - Align the review of multiple plans affecting the same resource, especially for threatened or endangered species that have vast western ranges.
  - Afford Governors the discretion to determine which state plans should be reviewed against federal plans for consistency, including State Wildlife Action Plans, conservation district plans, county plans, and multi-state agreements.
  - Maintain Governors' right to appeal any rejection of recommendations resulting from a Governor's consistency review.
  - Create a database of federal forest and rangeland management projects, available to states and other collaborators, that includes planned, current, and past projects.
37. The federal government should honor its historic agreements with states and counties in the West to compensate them for state and local impacts associated with federal land use and federally owned, nontaxable lands within their borders, such as the PILT and SRS programs.

38. The federal government should be a responsible landowner and neighbor and should work diligently to improve the health of federal lands in the West. Federal actions or failures to act on federal lands affect adjacent state and privately-owned lands, as well as state-managed natural resources.
39. Congress and federal agencies should provide opportunities for expanded cooperation, particularly where states are working to help their federal partners to improve management of federal lands through the contribution of state expertise and resources.
40. Western Governors support efforts to examine rural communities' relationships with natural resources, such as forests, rangelands, croplands, wildlife, and source water, as well as the important role that rural communities play in the management of these resources. Policy makers in the West should be encouraged to identify barriers to growth and sustainability in western communities, including a lack of restoration infrastructure, disaster mitigation challenges, dependence upon a single natural resource, and issues related to local capacity, expertise, and funding, and identify best practices to help rural communities overcome these barriers.

**C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE**

1. The Governors direct WGA staff to work with congressional committees of jurisdiction, the Executive Branch, and other entities, where appropriate, to achieve the objectives of this resolution.
2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to consult with the Staff Advisory Council regarding its efforts to realize the objectives of this resolution and to keep the Governors apprised of its progress in this regard.

*This resolution will expire in December 2023. Western Governors enact new policy resolutions and amend existing resolutions on a semiannual basis. Please consult <http://www.westgov.org/resolutions> for the most current copy of a resolution and a list of all current WGA policy resolutions.*



## Policy Resolution 2021-04

### Species Conservation and the Endangered Species Act

#### A. **BACKGROUND**

##### *Species Conservation*

1. Through broad trustee, statutory and police powers, states have primary management authority over fish and wildlife. States also exercise sovereign authority over the administration of water rights within their borders.
2. Western Governors applaud the intent of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Since its enactment in 1973, the ESA has helped prevent the extinction and assisted the recovery of some threatened and endangered species, while providing ancillary benefits to other species.
3. Western states are proactively engaged in species conservation, including development of state and multi-state conservation plans to manage species at the local level and encouraging early voluntary measures taken by stakeholders and landowners with an aim to preclude the need for federal ESA regulation.
4. Through decades of work by staff and contractors, states have developed extensive science, expertise, and knowledge of species and habitats within their borders. The ESA requires that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service (collectively, the Services) use the best available science in making determinations about individual species' status for the purposes of the ESA. Biological information should be collected as thoroughly as possible, and should include scientific information and biological opinions from affected states.
5. Western states have a vested interest in the ESA. States are the primary recipients of economic benefits associated with healthy species and ecosystems. Tourism and recreation in wildlife-dependent communities help sustain rural economies and promote healthier communities throughout the West, and ESA compliance can benefit our states by maintaining and recovering iconic species that are a valued component of our western natural heritage. At the same time, species listings can affect western states' abilities to promote economic development, accommodate population growth, and maintain and expand infrastructure. In these circumstances, the economic costs of ESA compliance can fall heavily on western states and local communities.
6. The ESA is premised on a strong federal-state partnership. Such participation is largely optional under the current scheme and has been provided inconsistently. The role of states has also been limited by rigid internal federal processes and interagency jurisdictional disputes. This has prevented the sharing of scientific information and the consideration of state determined, science-based information.



7. Federal consultation with states in analyses and final decision making will result in more durable and implementable solutions, as well as better conservation outcomes. Given the effect ESA listing decisions have on vital state interests, states should be viewed as full partners in all ESA decisions, but particularly when reviewing and considering the challenges that could be faced by species in the future. States bring a wealth of observational knowledge and information about the current status of a species and its habitat that must be factored into any ESA analysis or decision beyond providing best available science. The full depth of state capabilities should be incorporated in any listing decision or critical habitat designation.
8. Species conservation on public lands is a critical element of threatened and endangered species recovery. Habitat for fish and wildlife often spans a patchwork of land ownership types, complicating state efforts to manage and conserve species under their management jurisdiction. This is particularly challenging in western states, where federal ownership constitutes a generally higher percentage of overall land. Public lands comprise over 46 percent of the land in the 11 contiguous western states and 61 percent of Alaska. Over 8,000 species, and over 450 species listed under the ESA, find habitat on these public lands.
9. Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act, also known as the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund, is a tool that provides grants to states and territories to participate in various voluntary conservation projects for candidate, proposed, and listed species on non-federal lands. Multiple Western Governors have entered into these agreements for both plant and animal species.
10. Helping the public appreciate natural resources and ecosystems has been a tool for states and the Services in achieving successful species recovery efforts. Programs such as the U.S. Forest Service's Conservation Education program help people of all ages understand the complexity and importance of species and ecosystem conservation.
11. Eighty-four percent of species listed under the ESA are "conservation reliant," meaning that due to human caused alterations to ecosystems, these species' recovery status can only be maintained through species-specific, long-term management activities even after outlined biological recovery goals have been met.
12. Invasive species have substantial negative effects on ecosystems, economies, and communities in the West. Studies have found that invasive species cost the U.S. more than \$120 billion every year, and the National Wildlife Federation estimates that 42 percent of threatened or endangered species are at risk due to invasive species.

### ***Wildlife Migration Corridors and Habitat***

13. Governors bear responsibility for managing state interests and authorities (including those regarding fish and wildlife) as well as safeguarding private property rights within state borders and overseeing state agencies charged with properly managing wildlife, habitat and related resources within their states.
14. Daily and seasonal fish and wildlife migration corridors and habitat are necessary to maintain healthy populations of numerous fish and wildlife species. Traditional wildlife

migratory routes and aquatic habitat connectivity, however, can be impeded, degraded or eliminated by land or resource development.

15. Several western states have adopted their own migration-specific policies and plans and are actively working to implement them in collaboration with governmental and non-governmental partners. Eleven Western states have adopted State Action Plans to identify big game habitat and migration priorities.
16. In western landscapes consisting of patchwork landownership patterns, private landowners play an invaluable role in conserving wildlife migration corridors and providing essential summer and winter range habitat. Multiple land ownerships across migration corridors complicate management efforts and necessitate the close collaboration of state agencies, federal agencies, private landowners and other stakeholders. Continued coordinated management, planning, funding, and project implementation across seasonal habitat and migration corridors is needed to ensure that wildlife populations remain strong for future generations.
17. Wildlife-vehicle collisions present a significant threat to public safety and wildlife populations. According to a recent State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Company report, it is estimated that there were over 1.9 million animal collision insurance claims in the U.S. between July 2018 and June 2019. When properly designed, wildlife crossing infrastructure (including fencing, overpasses, underpasses, motion sensors and other technology), has been shown to significantly reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions.
18. Following significant technical advances in wildlife movement tracking and analysis, western states are pursuing migration initiatives to research, identify, conserve and enhance essential migration corridors and habitat. Through implementation of Secretarial Order 3362, the Department of the Interior (DOI) is working to support western state efforts to conserve and improve priority western big game winter range and migration corridors.

## **B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT**

### ***Species Conservation***

1. Western Governors support all reasonable proactive management efforts to conserve species and the ecosystems upon which they depend to sustain populations of diverse wildlife and habitats, preclude the need to list a species under the ESA, and retain the West's wildlife legacy for future generations. Western Governors also support initiatives that engage stakeholders to develop incentives for early, voluntary conservation measures to address multiple threats to species while preserving and enhancing western working landscapes.
2. Western Governors believe states should be full partners in listing, critical habitat designations, recovery planning, recovery efforts, and delisting decisions. The Services, working with the states, should establish consistent criteria to assess modeling related to projected scientific information, such as climate change, possible genetic distinction between populations, and long-term population viability among other factors in their scientific review. In these circumstances, federal agencies should partner with states and management authorities with expertise over the given model to develop and utilize

mutually acceptable predictive techniques and consensus-based metrics that are grounded in science and measurable outcomes.

3. Western Governors support the use of best available science in ESA decisions. State agencies often have the best available science, expertise and other scientific and institutional resources such as mapping capabilities, biological inventories, biological management goals, state wildlife action plans and other important data. All listing, recovery and delisting decisions made by the federal government should recognize, consult, and employ these vast state resources and utilize objective, peer-reviewed scientific literature, and scientific observations. When making a listing decision for a species where state or multi-state conservation plans employing the best available science have been primarily used in the management of that species, upon review, consultation and endorsement, the Services should give careful consideration to those management activities. A review of the scientific and management provisions contained within listing, recovery and de-listing decisions by acknowledged independent experts is important to ensure the public that decisions are well-reasoned and scientifically based. Scientific and management review committees, as well as the scope and extent of the appropriate scientific and management review, should be agreed upon by the Services and the affected states. Federal agencies may delegate their responsibility to name these review committees and determine the scope of review to states in order to enhance state ownership of the committee's decision.
4. Western Governors believe that states need clear, concrete guidance from the Services about the requirements of state and multi-state conservation plans in meeting species and habitat conservation goals and objectives that would lead to stable or increasing populations, eliminate perceived threats to the species, and eliminate the need for listing.
5. The Services should acknowledge that variability in state approaches for conservation of species is acceptable, particularly for species with a wide geographic range, as long as established conservation goals and objectives are met. The Services should explore expanded use of detail positions and shared staff between state and federal agencies to increase interagency coordination and familiarity with processes. These types of well-rounded personnel can then more effectively serve as conveners and facilitators for multiagency actions.
6. Governors support legislative initiatives, court rulings, petitions or regulatory measures which allow local, state, federal and private conservation efforts adequate time to be implemented and demonstrate their efficacy. States can help local efforts achieve success by supporting them with tools for assessing and stabilizing priority habitats and species.
7. Western Governors believe funding and economic incentives for proactive, voluntary conservation efforts are essential. Such efforts may lead to more rapid conservation outcomes and even obviate the need to list a species in the first instance. Additional incentives for willing private landowners to participate in voluntary conservation efforts are likely to achieve more efficient and cost-effective results. Funded and incentivized activities should include:
  - Restoration of native habitat on public and private lands;
  - Amelioration of threats to species populations;

- Long-term management activities for conservation-reliant species;
  - Management of invasive species adversely affecting species and habitat;
  - Management of public lands in a way that supports multiple uses; and
  - Monitoring and enforcement to ensure species and habitat conservation goals and activities are being met.
8. Western Governors believe adequate post-listing funding of species management is necessary as state and federal agencies increasingly assume ESA management activities and embrace ecosystem and multi-species management strategies. Funding for ESA-related activities, especially recovery plans and recovery efforts, should be enhanced to address the growing list of threatened and endangered species. A broad range of programs, from the Farm Bill to the Water Resources Development Act, should be reviewed for opportunities to assist communities and landowners in their efforts to conserve listed species in a manner that respects water and property rights. The Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund authorized under ESA Section 6 should also be funded and managed as a block grant, with state discretion on spending priorities.
  9. Western Governors support funding for wildlife conservation education and recreation programs to help better connect people with their natural surroundings and experience wildlife in their natural habitat. Funding for educational and community-based programs such as conservation literacy and field observation competency can encourage younger generations to learn about fish and wildlife conservation early and obtain the skills to partake in efforts and activities themselves.

### ***Wildlife Migration Corridors and Habitat***

10. Western Governors believe that federal land management agencies should support state and tribal efforts to identify key wildlife migration corridors and habitat in the West and engage in early and substantive consultation with Governors prior to the promulgation of any policy pertaining to the management of wildlife corridors and habitat. Western Governors also encourage federal land management agencies to take proactive steps to ensure that management plans and projects are consistent with and supportive of state migration priorities, programs, and policies.
11. Western Governors urge federal land management agencies and non-governmental organizations – in coordination with state fish and wildlife agencies – to work with private landowners and local communities to identify monetary and non-monetary incentives to encourage voluntary corridor and habitat conservation efforts. Western Governors encourage dialogue among relevant partners in the West to identify collaborative solutions to wildlife corridor and habitat conservation across land ownerships.
12. Western Governors encourage DOI and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to maintain a financial investment in research and habitat improvement projects to conserve migration corridors through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation’s Improving Habitat Quality in Western Big Game and Migration Corridors Program.

13. Western Governors commend the considerable efforts already underway to increase coordination between state fish and wildlife agencies and state departments of transportation to integrate consideration of wildlife corridors and habitat connectivity into transportation infrastructure planning and development. The Governors also support development of best practices to expand state agency coordination.
14. Western Governors urge DOI and the U.S. Department of Transportation to cooperate in a similar manner on projects under their jurisdiction and support intra-state efforts when appropriate. The Governors also support proactive planning on public lands that seeks to direct future development actions including renewable energy, recreation, and other developments away from large tracts of intact wildlife habitat and connectivity corridors.
15. Western Governors believe that any federal efforts to identify, regulate, or conserve wildlife migration corridors through administrative or legislative action must rely upon coordination and consultation with states and should advance collaborative, locally driven initiatives to conserve key wildlife corridors and habitat. Governors further encourage Congress and the Administration to support collaborative and locally developed initiatives through financial and technical assistance.
16. Governors urge Congress to include funding and provisions in its next reauthorization of federal surface transportation programs for state-supported transportation infrastructure projects that support fish and wildlife crossings and habitat connectivity.

**C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE**

1. The Governors direct WGA staff to work with congressional committees of jurisdiction, the Executive Branch, and other entities, where appropriate, to achieve the objectives of this resolution.
2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to consult with the Staff Advisory Council regarding its efforts to realize the objectives of this resolution and to keep the Governors apprised of its progress in this regard.

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## Policy Resolution 2023-01

### Working Lands, Working Communities

#### A. BACKGROUND

1. Western states face a wide array of social, economic, and environmental challenges. More frequent and intense wildfires threaten rural and urban communities, invasive annual grasses are encroaching on America's grasslands, and persistent drought threatens the quality and quantity of water supplies.
2. The fabric of western communities is tightly interwoven with the working lands and ecosystems which they steward and rely upon for cultural, social and economic health. Rural communities have an interdependent relationship with natural resources and working lands: healthy communities can support effective land management practices and the responsible use of their natural resources for multiple purposes.
3. Western lands typically involve a complex array of ownerships, including federal, state, local and tribal governments and private landowners. Addressing land management challenges at scale requires the involvement of all these different land owners and a shared understanding of and participation in management processes, establishment of goals, and collaboratively work toward positive land management outcomes.
4. Land management involves a continuum of activities that respond to the natural cycle of western landscapes. Mitigation activity, which includes manual and mechanical treatments, prescribed fire, and invasive species treatments, is focused on creating healthy landscapes that provide quality habitat for fish and wildlife, maintain water quantity and quality attributes, and are resilient to wildfire. When a wildfire occurs, suppression activity attempts to limit environmental damage and protect human infrastructure and homes. After a wildfire, restoration activity, including salvage operations pursuant to a forest management plan, attempts to alleviate the wildfire's effect on the environment, prevent post-fire soil erosion and flooding, and reestablish landscapes.
5. Many western communities are experiencing devastating effects from ongoing drought, including increased feed prices, the need to reduce or eliminate existing agricultural products and livestock due to lack of available water, leading some producers to consider eliminating agricultural production entirely. Additional effects are being felt by local economies reliant on the recreational economies developed around large reservoirs in western states. Drought also contributes to the increased threat of more frequent and intense wildfire and degrades habitat quality for wildlife and fish. Without substantial assistance, rural economies in western states that rely heavily on agriculture and natural resources will take years to recover from the effects of this devastating drought.
6. The drought is having downstream effects on food security and fiber and energy production, both regionally and nationally. Those effects include low or dried up reservoirs, increased algal blooms, a decrease in hydroelectric power and the potential of shuttering hydroelectric dams because of low water levels. Some drought-affected communities are

already facing drinking water supply constraints, a situation that could become much more widespread with prolonged drought.

7. Data is a fundamental building block for land management planning, decision making, and accountability for outcomes. At present, data may be held by single agencies and may not be in a format accessible to other agencies, states, or the public.
8. Local capacity, including technical expertise, workforce, capital and manufacturing, affect the ability to conduct responsible management on surrounding lands and promote community adaptability and sustainability. Local land use collaboratives and coordinating capacity can have a significant role in land management processes.
9. Many western communities have suffered from the “boom and bust” economic cycles. Sustainable economic opportunities in multiple areas – from land management, extractive industries, and agriculture to recreation and tourism are critical to enabling communities that are healthy and economically resilient.
10. Economic priorities may shift in rural communities in response to market needs. Markets for products that support active management (such mass timber and woody biomass) may be underdeveloped, and environmental conditions may be altered by wildfire or other natural disasters. Adapting to changing economic, environmental, or technological conditions requires the development and use of tools and innovations for rural communities, including the expansion of markets to support management objectives.
11. Capacity constraints across multiple disciplines, from environmental processes and compliance to responsibly conducting land management activities requires a commitment to training, equipping and sustaining a workforce capable of achieving land management objectives. An aging workforce is also a concern in many rural communities. As workers in rural communities retire, additional workforce is needed to maintain the economic viability of these communities.

## **B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT**

### **Collaboration**

#### ***Planning***

1. The US Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) should consider developing regional and cross-boundary collaboratives to facilitate cooperation on ecosystem-level land management challenges. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) provides an opportunity for communities to engage in difficult conversations on land use, but communities should be engaged earlier, and at a broader level, to ensure full benefit of the NEPA process.
2. Local collaboratives can be too near-sighted, focusing solely on wildfire mitigation. Land management agencies should consider educational opportunities for collaborative members on broader ecosystem effects of forest and rangeland management (*e.g.*, wildlife habitat, water quality, invasives), which would assist communities seeking to improve overall ecosystem health and resilience.

3. Planning tools like the Shared Wildfire Risk Mitigation system (SWRM) are invaluable in helping communities understand management needs and the effects of land use and wildfire mitigation decisions. These tools help alleviate capacity issues for communities and promote better decision making. Western Governors encourage federal land managers to make SWRM and similar tools widely available to communities and decisionmakers.
4. Land managers should integrate small private landowners into ecosystem planning processes and responsible land management practices. Private industry has looked at US Department of Agriculture (USDA) climate smart credits as a mechanism to spur engagement, but additional methods of gaining small landowner participation and engagement should be explored, including greater participation in local collaboratives, increased partnerships with Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and involvement in shared stewardship agreement processes.
5. County governments have a positive influence on land use planning and resource management through the development of county plans. These county plans can be helpful in crafting state plans, ensuring local views are taken into consideration, and can be persuasive when collaborating with federal agencies on land use planning. State and federal land managers should take steps to ensure that these county resource management and other plans are integrated into their planning processes.
6. Land management agencies should be focused on outcome-based, rather than acre-based, metrics for success. While simply counting acres can provide useful information, agencies should examine how other performance metrics, including the shift of funding over time from suppression activity to mitigation and restoration activities, provides tangible evidence of the value of land management activities.
7. Land managers should prioritize post-wildfire water quality effects in mitigation planning and execution. Post-fire flooding can have a dramatic effect on infrastructure and water quality in downstream communities, and is the cause of many avoidable post-fire deaths in affected areas. Integrating water supply and quality considerations into mitigation work could significantly reduce the cost of post-fire restoration in burned areas.
8. Western Governors encourage land managers to incorporate the effects of drought into land use planning and community sustainability efforts. Drought, among other effects, has impacts on wildfire threat, wildlife and fish habitat, agricultural and ranching productivity, recreational opportunity, power generation, and drinking water availability, all of which threaten community sustainability. Mitigating these effects, to the extent feasible, is critical to ensuring the future vitality of many western communities.
9. Land managers should evaluate the use of area-wide plans under NEPA; this would allow planning for cross-boundary landscapes under a single NEPA process and produce multiple resource benefits.
10. States, tribes and counties can use Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) to facilitate management activities on federal lands. Federal agencies should take steps to ensure that various GNA projects integrate with each other to achieve desired outcomes and provide opportunities to increase collaboration and increase cross-boundary cooperation with these governmental units.



11. Congress should codify and direct funding to the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Program to facilitate continued partnership and investment between USFS and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to support restoration projects where federal and private land ownership and management goals intersect.
12. Western Governors recognize that prescribed fire is an important tool for fuels reduction and ecosystem resilience, but is underused in the West. Prescribed fire has overall air quality benefits, eliminates low- or no-value woody biomass in forest and rangeland environments, and contributes to soil health. Educating the public and creating social license to use the tool is critical; however, recent events have also shown that land managers must put greater effort into coordinating prescribed fire with other mitigation activities, updating models, tools and practices for safe burning, and putting a greater emphasis on post-burn preparation and monitoring to reduce the potential for escaped burns.
13. In many cases, different state, territorial and federal agencies manage the planning and authorization for prescribed fire, which can add delays to implementing prescribed burns, or cause managers to entirely miss opportunities to use the tool. Land managers should consider greater collaboration for prescribed fire activities to increase deployment. Traditional Native American cultural burning and tribal practices are an important part of forest management in the West and may be incorporated more effectively into federal and state planning management processes. Additionally, land managers should have adequate liability insurance to protect individuals and landowners affected by escaped prescribed fires.

### ***Funding and Capacity***

14. Financial support for local collaboratives is important to achieving community engagement, subject matter expertise, and long-term success. Federal agencies should examine structures to improve local collaborative capacity.
15. The transition from active wildfire suppression activity to post-wildfire community responsibilities can be abrupt at the community level. Wildfire affected communities, especially in resource-constrained communities, need subject matter expertise on post-fire restoration and risk management to guide them through recovery. Federal agencies should collaborate with states to designate and train post-fire coordinators to manage post-fire recovery. Establishing a post-fire master agreement would also improve the processes involving incident management and post-fire handoff to local authorities.
16. In many cases, wildfire affected communities must provide a funding match to access restoration programs and resources. Match requirements negatively affect resource-constrained communities' ability to access funds, especially in underserved communities that often lack the personnel or other capacity to administer these programs due to small annual operating budgets. This contributes to inadequate post-fire response, reduced landscape resilience, and suboptimal ecosystem recovery. Federal agencies should examine funding match requirements and consider reducing or eliminating these requirements when the public benefit outweighs the cost of the funding match.

17. Congress should extend the authorization for states to retain revenues from timber sales under GNA, which may then be used to “carry out authorized restoration services on Federal land under the good neighbor agreement;” and if excess funds are available, “to carry out authorized restoration services on Federal land within the State under other good neighbor agreements.” This authority is statutorily scheduled to terminate on October 1, 2023. Congress should also consider extending retained receipt authority to county governments and tribes.
18. Increase flexibility in the GNA program: 1) on road construction/reconstruction; 2) for recreation improvements and forest and rangeland restoration planning and implementation activities; and 3) to support better prioritization of GNA projects across larger geographies.

### ***Agency Cultural Issues***

19. Forestry and land management agencies, including the Department of the Interior (DOI) and USDA, have separated fire management from land management. Western Governors recognize there needs to be integration of these functions to ensure mitigation efforts produce wildfire-resilient landscapes and communities, suppression activities orient toward restoration needs, and restoration work addresses community needs and future landscape resilience.
20. Federal land management agencies should consider investing in facilitation capacity and training for agency personnel and partner organizations involved with collaboratives and wildfire-affected communities. Facilitation skills are an essential element in helping resolve conflict and achieving consensus on mitigation and restoration decisions.

### ***Data***

21. The federal government and states should consider collaboratively developing interagency data hubs to reduce overall operating costs, increase the shareability of data (*i.e.*, establishing data standards and formats that are useable and sharable), and facilitate public access to the data.
22. States, territories and federal agencies should consider establishing coordinators for data collection, transfer and assimilation to ensure that data is shareable and useable between platforms. Western Governors encourage agencies to consider standardizing and simplifying data collection protocols for federal agencies, states, counties and tribes which include robust landowner privacy standards and protections.
23. Federal agencies should incorporate socioeconomic data into the decision-making process. In places with complex economic foundations (agriculture, mining, oil and gas), an economic assessment is key to quantifying and understanding the implications of land use decisions.
24. Western Governors recognize that many local governments do not have the capacity or budget to keep datasets current. Federal agencies should consider implementing a model or framework to share resources to address these capacity and budget issues.

25. Federal, state, and territorial land managers should collaborate on developing integrated methods and processes for visitor data collection and analysis. This would help track where visitors are recreating, the activities they are participating in, and assist in placing tourism infrastructure and addressing other tourism infrastructure-related needs. It would also provide important data to inform needs to shift visitation from overused to less-trafficked areas, sustain tourism if federal land closures are needed, and improve recreational experiences for visitors.

## **Infrastructure**

26. Forest and rangeland management access and infrastructure in much of the West is woefully inadequate to address land management needs. Access is critical to perform management activities for wildfire mitigation, habitat improvement, water quality improvements, invasive species management, and post-fire restoration. Western Governors encourage federal agencies to ensure that appropriate access and infrastructure, in appropriate locations, exists to achieve land management objectives. Repairing and replacing range improvements, particularly fencing, in a timely manner should be a priority for federal land management agencies in wildfire-affected areas.
27. Western Governors encourage federal agencies to integrate infrastructure needs into planning processes and provide long-term, sustainable economic opportunities for communities. Federal agencies should also recognize that regulatory certainty is an important element of enabling infrastructure deployment. Consistency in permitting and policy is key to attracting and maintaining infrastructure investments.
28. Federal agencies should consider integration of permitting processes to establish single point permitting for its permittees. Streamlining permitting processes would provide benefits for land managers, project implementers, and the tourism and recreation industry.
29. Federal agencies should evaluate the use of regional recreation partnerships to address infrastructure and repair needs for tourism-related infrastructure. A GIS tool to identify trails and assess visitation effects would assist land managers in addressing trail degradation and the need for new trail development.
30. Western Governors recognize that additional nursery capacity is needed to address post-wildfire restoration needs. Federal agencies should examine the need for market incentives to encourage sustainable nursery markets and facilitate the development of additional nursery capacity.
31. Western Governors recognize that harvest cost is a significant issue for producers. Economies of scale have affected the packing industry, and in many cases small packing houses are booked months in advance due to lack of capacity. USDA should consider how communities can develop additional small packing capacity to ensure access for producers and improve national food security.
32. The supply chain for basic land management equipment, such as vehicles and chainsaws, is integral to implementing management plans authorized by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. The federal government should take steps to address equipment shortages as part of its implementation of the IJA.

## Markets

33. Predictable, long-term supply assurances are needed to attract private infrastructure investment and improve overall forest and rangeland management capacity. DOI and USDA should consider how its annual timber harvesting targets can ensure adequate long-term supply. USFS and BLM should modify GNA guidance to allow 20-year contracts, versus the current limit of 10 years, to provide additional supply stability.
34. Congress should expand GNA and Stewardship Contracting Authority (SCA) to other federal land managers, which is currently limited to USFS and BLM. Land and facilities owned by the National Park Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Reclamation, and US Army Corps of Engineers would also benefit from projects implemented under GNA and SCA.
35. Many mitigation projects have high treatment costs with low or little opportunity to recoup those costs. This requires a broader view of investments in wildfire mitigation. Western Governors encourage federal agencies to include cost metrics such as the avoided cost of uncharacteristic wildfire, smoke effects on populations, and benefits to water supply systems and downstream communities when assessing the merits of mitigation projects.
36. Different federal agencies use different strategies to achieve land management outcomes. For example, USFS strategy primarily relies on a “payments for product” model, while NRCS primarily uses a “payments for practice” strategy to achieve land management objectives. Agencies should consider lessons learned from these different strategies and how different payment models could be used to improve management outcomes.
37. Given the importance of the tourism economy, statewide strategic tourism plans, developed in collaboration with federal agencies, can improve coordination between tourism operators on federal lands.
38. A significant barrier to producer investments in soil health and restoration is the cost of equipment to test new practices. Federal agencies should consider incentives to purchase equipment, participate in new processes, or expand markets to encourage deploying new conservation practices.
39. Federal agencies should examine the grazing effects different ruminants have on ecosystems and encourage the targeted deployment of ruminants (*i.e.*, cattle, sheep and goats) to achieve specific land management outcomes.
40. Federal agencies should continue to explore strategies for the use of low or no value biomass, removal of which is needed to achieve wildfire mitigation needs, including market incentives for these materials. Biomass power at utility scale may present such an opportunity, but there is market failure to represent the true value of a bioenergy supply chain. Western Governors encourage DOI, USDA and the Department of Energy to continue research and development efforts to find viable markets for low and no value biomass.
41. Western Governors recognize that market interventions can affect land management decision making. Market incentives for one desired outcome may negatively affect overall ecosystem health and resilience. Federal agencies should take steps to eliminate counterproductive ecosystem outcomes that may arise from different market incentives.

Agencies should consider holistic approaches that incorporate ecosystem health, wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, water supply and quality and other factors.

42. Federal agencies should expand opportunities for existing USDA Rural Development, US Economic Development Administration (EDA) and Small Business Administration (SBA) programs and financing to support wood product business development and infrastructure.
43. USFS Research and Development, State and Private Forestry, and National Forest System should work collaboratively to support existing and emerging wood products technologies, including the work of the National Forest Products Laboratory, with the goal of expanding markets to maximize restoration activity. Research, development and deployment should be focused on commercially ready technologies with high potential to contribute to current and emerging restoration objectives. These efforts should be aligned with the work of industry partners, and actively pursue public-private partnerships to advance market growth, with the goal of providing sustainable economic development opportunities for rural communities.
44. Western Governors encourage federal agencies to identify initiatives to support markets that can achieve restoration goals and foster near-term opportunities for economic development in rural communities. These opportunities include advancing the use of mass timber in building construction through research and demonstration projects. Expanding utilization of low-value woody biomass for thermal, electric and liquid-fuel energy should also be a priority. Rural electric cooperatives, public utilities, community facility managers, and other partners should contribute to the research, testing and deployment of new and modified heat and electric generation projects and liquid-fuel facilities from hazardous fuels reduction, conifer removal and other forest and rangeland restoration efforts. Finally, agencies should explore opportunities to support new and diversified rangeland products, markets and processing infrastructure, such as mobile meat processing, renewable energy production, local and regional food hubs, and recreation.
45. Congress should pass legislation to promote forest and rangeland product markets and technologies, and expand funding for the Community Wood Energy Program. Western Governors support the use of program funds to create and incentivize state, federal and tribal partnerships in support of these objectives.

### **Workforce Development**

46. Capacity is a significant need in resource-constrained communities. These communities are often not able to invest in basic processes, including writing grant applications and conducting environmental analyses, needed to address landscape needs. Federal agencies should take steps to assist resource-constrained communities in developing these needed capacities.
47. Western Governors recognize that housing costs impede the ability to attract and retain workers in many rural areas. Forest and rangeland management work is inherently place based, making local housing affordability a high priority to retain a workforce capable of planning and executing land management activities. Housing and recruitment are significantly greater challenges in rural communities compared to urban areas. The federal government should focus attention on housing needs and assist communities seeking to attract and retain workforce.

48. Federal capacity to complete NEPA processes in a timely manner is a significant bottleneck to project implementation on federal lands. Western Governors recognize that the workforce responsible for NEPA processes is specialized and encourages federal land management agencies to bolster this capacity to ensure that management projects are implemented on a timely basis.
49. Federal agencies should consider how interagency shared positions can create regulatory efficiencies and promote greater collaboration between federal, state, territorial, local and tribal land managers pursuant to traditional understandings of jurisdictions.
50. Apprenticeship and internship programs can reduce costs associated with building expertise within a workforce. Western Governors recognize that four-year college degree programs are not needed for many forest and rangeland careers and that a focus on trades training provides better workforce outcomes. The federal government and employers should consider work experience and other non-traditional credentials in hiring and promotions and avoid credential creep to ensure adequate capacity for land management project implementation.
51. Western Governors recognize that federal agencies are struggling with recruitment and retention of a qualified workforce. Workforce that could be used for mitigation or restoration work may be deployed to fight wildland fire for a significant portion of the year. Within the wildland firefighting workforce, increased wildfire activity, low salaries, and mental fatigue contribute to workforce loss. Congress and federal agencies have taken steps to address these challenges, but the federal government should consider additional steps to recruit and retain an effective land management and wildland firefighting workforce.
52. Federal agencies should collaborate with states to explore the expanded use of youth, veterans, inmate crews and conservation corps to provide cost-effective capacity to support forest and rangeland restoration work across various land ownerships. Congress should enact legislation, such as the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps Act, to make it easier for young people and veterans to complete quality, cost-effective maintenance and improvement projects on public and tribal lands and waters across the country. The federal government, states, and territories should also examine standards on hiring persons with criminal backgrounds to promote employment opportunities for qualified applicants that present minimal risk for future criminal behavior.

**C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE**

1. The Governors direct WGA staff to work with Congressional committees of jurisdiction, the Executive Branch, and other entities, where appropriate, to achieve the objectives of this resolution.
2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to consult with the Staff Advisory Council regarding its efforts to realize the objectives of this resolution and to keep the Governors apprised of its progress in this regard.

*This resolution will expire in July 2025. Western Governors enact new policy resolutions and amend existing resolutions on a semiannual basis. Please consult <http://www.westgov.org/resolutions> for the most current copy of a resolution and a list of all current WGA policy resolutions.*