

June 8, 2021

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Majority Leader Schumer, Minority Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leader McCarthy:

Healthy forests are a major portion of America's natural infrastructure, filtering air and water, providing recreation opportunities and fish and wildlife habitat, creating jobs, and serving as a top natural climate solution. Nature-based solutions can increase the resilience of our nation's infrastructure while providing economic, environmental, and social benefits to communities, including reducing risks from a changing climate and increasingly frequent extreme weather and wildfire events.

As Congress moves forward with infrastructure legislation, the undersigned organizations recommend recognizing forests as integral natural infrastructure in need of significant investments, including for wildfire resilience and forest roads.

Investing in Wildfire Resilience. Restoring America's forests, watersheds, and rangeland – upgrading our natural infrastructure – is an opportunity to build climate resilience and create or sustain millions of good-paying jobs. There are approximately 51 million acres across all forest ownerships in need of highest priority wildfire resilience activities in order to protect communities and watersheds from wildfire. Addressing the ever-increasing threat of wildfires represents a critical down payment toward efforts to reduce the impacts of catastrophic wildfires, while contributing to economic recovery and addressing climate change. Chief Christiansen has told Congress that a paradigm shift is needed to address imminent wildfire threats. This requires a surge in investment in forest restoration and community resilience, new strategies for workforce and program deployment, cooperation across ownership boundaries, and support through continued maintenance of resilience investments over time to reduce risks across Federal, State, local, and private lands. We recommend a \$50 billion to \$60 billion investment over ten years in forest infrastructure for the highest priority work to reduce wildfire risks and community adaptation.

Investing in Forest Roads. The National Forest System (NFS) includes an extensive roads network of more than 370,000 miles that supports the NFS' multiple use mandate. With 159,000 miles of trails, hundreds of thousands of culverts, and more than 13,000 bridges to maintain, the USFS infrastructure challenge is only growing. Less than 20% of roads through national forests are fully maintained to planned safety and environmental standards. The 65,000 miles of USFS passenger roads alone need \$3.2 billion in repairs. The roads system needs investments to ensure it provides the appropriate and safe level of access for recreation, resource management, and public safety, while minimizing environmental harm. A comprehensive transportation platform should include provisions addressing roads in national forests, including:

Federal Land Transportation Program. The Department of Transportation’s Federal Lands Transportation Program (FLTP) supports transportation infrastructure on federal lands. However, while the current transportation bill under consideration in Congress calls for a major boost in funding for American road infrastructure, it does not include adequate funding for forest roads. In FY20, the USFS received \$19 million from the FLTP to support 65,500 miles of passenger NFS roads. Meanwhile, the National Park Service (NPS) received \$300 million for 13,500 miles of NPS roads. This underinvestment in NFS road infrastructure not only limits recreational and commercial activity on our national forests but also impacts wildlife recovery, delays wildfire response, limits drinking water supplies, and hinders forest management. We recommend substantial investments in NFS roads through the Federal Lands Transportation Program closer to the investments made for NPS roads.

Legacy Roads and Trails Program. The Forest Service’s Legacy Roads and Trail Remediation Program (LRT) targets roads contributing to water quality problems in streams and other bodies of water that support species recovery and community water sources. The program facilitates stakeholder collaboration, effective planning, and smart spending on national forests by prioritizing roads located near streams or wetlands or on sensitive soils that need to be relocated, decommissioned, or updated to reduce their impacts on ecosystems. By remediating roads and trails, removing barriers to fish passage, and decommissioning old roads, LRT improves the overall health of forest roads and their ecosystems. We recommend codifying the Legacy Roads and Trails program to continue protecting habitat, improving water quality, and creating jobs.

We look forward to working with Congress in gaining increased investments in forest infrastructure to protect communities, municipal water supplies, and fish and wildlife habitat, while providing natural climate solutions, and delivering jobs across the country.

Sincerely,

American Forest Foundation
American Forest Resource Council
American Forests
Associated Oregon Loggers
Boone and Crockett Club
Federal Forest Resource Coalition
Mule Deer Foundation
National Association of Forest Service Retirees
National Association of State Foresters
National Wildlife Federation
Ruffed Grouse Society and American Woodcock Society
The Nature Conservancy

Cc: House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works
House Committee on Agriculture
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
House Committee on Natural Resources
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources