



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

OCT 11 2010

The Honorable Jon Tester
United States Senate
724 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Tester:

The Obama Administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) have laid out a vision for forests in the United States that emphasizes the importance of restoring our forests to conserve water; to ensure our forests are resilient in the face of insects, disease and climate change; and to provide for vibrant local economies. Over the last several months, your staff has worked closely with the Forest Service to refine legislation to manage and restore forests on three National Forests in Montana that, if enacted and adequately funded, would not only be consistent with our vision, but would provide significant benefits, including a full suite of restoration activities for the people, economy, and forests of your state.

When I visited Montana with you last winter, I was impressed by the challenges facing Montana's forests as a result of the mountain pine beetle epidemic and by the need to maintain forestry jobs and infrastructure in order to restore our forests. I was also greatly impressed with the partnership among former adversaries—environmentalists, members of the forest industry, recreationists, county commissioners, and others—who have joined forces to address the threats facing Montana's forests, to support local communities, and to promote the designation of new wilderness areas in Montana for the first time in 27 years.

With a limited number of legislative days remaining in this Congress, I know you are considering a number of approaches to enacting legislation that would codify the work of this partnership into a region-specific pilot project. No matter which approach is taken, I understand the legislation would establish performance standards for 70,000 acres of mechanical treatment on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest and 30,000 acres on the Kootenai National Forest over the next 15 years. I believe these goals are ambitious, but sustainable and achievable. As with any new program or pilot, providing sufficient funding will be critical to allowing the Forest Service to prepare and implement mechanical treatments using stewardship contracts, timber sales contracts, and other means. Since there are many high-priority programs throughout the National Forest System, we cannot shift funding from other regions to fund these treatments. Thus, I support the inclusion of language in this proposed legislation that states it will not impact funds from other regions.

The Honorable Jon Tester

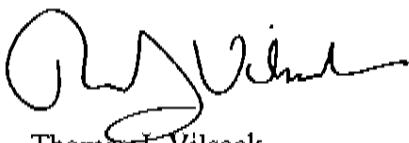
Page 2

Our nation's forests are changing due to forest health issues, effects of climate change, and other influences. These changes require that we develop and implement proactive measures for land management. Further, USDA and Congress must work together to help industries explore viable wood power generation and other biomass facilities so that we can maintain viable wood markets for the future. Markets for woody biomass could be critical in financing treatments in areas with beetle-killed timber. Since timber impacted by beetles will deteriorate over time, I believe an ambitious ramp up to perform mechanical treatment would be beneficial. I also believe legislation needs to allow for an evaluation of the treatments in light of the development of wood markets and the continuing budgetary requirements after 5 years to ensure that the purposes and vision of the bill can be successfully implemented.

As the Administration expressed in testimony on S. 1470, we have reservations about legislating specific treatment levels and other aspects of our forest plans. However, the holistic package of mechanical treatments, wilderness designations, and job creation, along with the collaborative approach and hard work of the stakeholders in Montana, and your work directly with the Forest Service, ensure that this legislation can serve as a model for similar efforts elsewhere.

Let me conclude by thanking you for your leadership in forest management issues and I, my staff at USDA, and Chief Tidwell stand ready to assist you in moving this legislation forward.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tom Vilsack", written in a cursive style.

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary