

Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments ● Ashfield Affiliates ● Bark ● Battle Creek Alliance ● Biofuelwatch ● Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project ● California Chaparral Institute ● Cascadia Wildlands ● Center for Biological Diversity ● Climate Hawks Vote ● Concerned Citizens of Franklin County (Massachusetts) ● Conservation Congress ● Christians Caring for Creation ● Deer Creek Valley Natural Resources Conservation Association ● Dogwood Alliance ● Earth Action, Inc. ● Eco Advocates NW ● ecoAmerica ● EFCWest ● Elders Climate Action ● Elders Climate Action - Massachusetts Chapter ● Environmental Caucus of Democratic Party of Oregon ● Environmental Protection Information Center ● Franciscan Action Network ● Friends of Mohawk Trail State Forest ● Friends of the Clearwater ● Friends of the Earth United States ● Friends of the Pelham Hills ● Friends of the Wild Swan ● Global Environmental Options ● Gray Dove ● Green Team, Unitarian Universalist Society of Greater Springfield ● Greenpeace USA ● Illinois Valley Section Sierra Club ● John Muir Project of Earth Island Institute ● Klamath Forest Alliance ● Leverett Climate Action Group ● Los Padres ForestWatch ● Mass Forest Rescue ● Massachusetts Forest Watch ● Natural Resources Law ● NTS Group, CEA, City of Boulder Energy Tech Team ● Old-Growth Forest Network ● Oregon PSR ● Partnership for Policy Integrity ● People Demanding Action ● People's Justice Council ● Pivot Point ● Rachel Carson Council ● RESTORE: The North Woods ● Save Our Sky Blue Waters ● Sequoia ForestKeeper® ● Shagbark ● Social Justice Commission (Episcopal Diocese of Western Mass.) ● Solar Store of Greenfield ● South Congregational Church ● Southeast Faith Leaders Network ● Southern Oregon Climate Action Now ● Standing Trees Vermont ● Sunrise Beaverton ● Sustainable Sharon Coalition ● Swan View Coalition, Inc. ● The Enviro Show ● The Imani Group Inc ● Umpqua Watersheds ● Unitarian Society of Northampton and Amherst ● Unitarian Society of Northampton and Florence Climate Action Group ● University of Oregon Climate Justice League ● Upper Valley Affinity Group (Vermont) ● Vermonters for a Clean Environment ● Wendall State Forest Alliance ● Wild Nature Institute ● Willamette Riverkeeper ● Williams Community Forest Project ● WSFA ● Yellowstone to Uintas Connection ●

November 18, 2020

RE: Oppose S. 4603 *The Forest Health and Biomass Energy Act of 2020*

Dear Senators,

We the undersigned conservation, climate, environmental justice, and faith-based organizations and individuals urge you to oppose S. 4603, "The Forest Health and Biomass Energy Act of 2020" (Senator McSally, R-AZ). This bill, based upon a list of findings that are disconnected from the scientific record, would utilize taxpayer dollars to exacerbate the climate crisis, harm biodiversity, and pollute communities while not only failing to stop weather-driven wildfires but often making them burn more intensely.

At its core, S. 4603 is simply a logging bill that attempts to further subsidize the cutting of trees from National Forest lands for the purpose of incinerating those trees, or parts of trees, to produce energy. Here is why this is a bad idea.

First, weather-driven fires, a term which describes every large fire we have experienced in the West, not just this year, but historically too, are overwhelmingly a product of high temperatures, low humidity, drought, and extreme winds--not forest density or the presence of dead trees ("snags").

Far from reducing the effects or spread of wildfire, this bill would allow small and medium-sized live trees and dead trees of any size to be cut for free, essentially anywhere in our National Forests, reducing tree canopy and therefore moisture in our forests, eliminating the buffering effect standing trees have on windspeeds and spreading easily ignitable invasive grasses throughout these areas. All of these effects would increase, not decrease wildfire activity.

Second, the extreme weather events we are experiencing today (which are driving wildfires) are being exacerbated by climate change. Standing trees, dead or alive, store and sequester vast amounts of carbon. Logging is an inherently climate polluting activity. This is because about 70% of the carbon in trees that are logged ends up in the atmosphere almost immediately. This goes up to 100% when trees are incinerated as biomass. Further, logging equipment, such as chainsaws, trucks, bulldozers, and feller bunchers all spew carbon dioxide and other pollutants into the atmosphere while the act of logging itself damages forest ecosystems, disrupting soil carbon storage as well as long-term ecosystem productivity. This is a double whammy for climate change impacts, because not only is stored carbon rapidly released into the atmosphere but the ability of our forests to sequester carbon is immediately reduced with lasting and cumulative impacts.

Third, burning trees for energy emits more greenhouse gases and toxic pollutants than burning coal for equal energy produced. A typical 50 MW biomass power plant emits a ton of carbon dioxide per minute. In addition to the climate change impacts, the co-pollutants emitted, such as particulates, nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, lead, mercury, and others, impact the health of communities where such biomass facilities are disproportionately located-- low-income areas and communities of color - making biomass energy production a significant environmental justice issue. Further subsidizing this industry, which would not exist absent a handout of taxpayer dollars coupled with ratepayer increases, would funnel more federal money into increasing pollution impacts to communities throughout the West.

Fourth, incentivizing logging means incentivizing the removal of habitat, further disrupting our native ecosystems and harming plant and animal species. Fire is a natural part of these ecosystems, and even today, the great majority of areas in wildland fires burn at low and moderate intensity, with a smaller portion (usually 5-30%) of any given fire burning at high intensity. Yet study after study has shown that areas that burn at high-intensity (and are not post-fire logged) contain levels of biodiversity akin to those found in old-growth forests. Logging is not a natural process and the more it occurs on the landscape the greater harm it generates.

S. 4603 would prop up a destructive industry and further commodify our National Forests at the expense of any other use or ecosystem benefit while intensifying wildfires that increasingly intersect with communities and worsening the climate crisis. We need new ideas and better policies if we are going to gain ground on climate change and protect the disenfranchised and our ecosystems. If you are seeking legislation to support which would help communities be prepared for wildfires, we urge you to support S. 2882 The Wildfire Defense Act, introduced by Vice-President Elect, Senator Kamala Harris. This bill is focused on what we can actually control - how to protect homes from burning down - rather than pretending we can reduce extreme weather events by removing trees from our forest ecosystems.

Sincerely,

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