



Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment
CLEAN AIR, CLEAN ENERGY, CLEAN FUTURE



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**Over 60 Groups Debunk Sham Plan to “Save” Great Salt Lake by Logging Public Forests
We Need Improved Media Discussions on US Forests**

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A new [letter](#) released today, with over 60 signatories, including dozens of environmental groups, directly challenges and debunks the U.S. government’s assertion that logging our forests will save them, combat the impacts of the climate crisis, or suppress wildfires. This letter highlights the mounting scientific consensus that logging, under euphemisms like “thinning”, is not the path forward and urges reporters to ensure that media coverage related to forests and logging tells the full story, which currently most articles fail to do. A large and growing body of science finds that “thinning,” commercial logging, and burning forest debris in the US often increases overall wildfire severity, increases hazardous air pollution, and utterly fails as a strategy to address Western drought conditions, or to protect homes from wildfires.

Signatories of today’s letter were spurred to action when [recent news coverage](#) related to the shrinking of the Great Salt Lake in Utah covered *unchallenged* the push by some Utah lawmakers to “save” the lake by [diverting funds from increased sales tax](#) to log Utah forests. Citizens throughout the West are also alarmed at the air pollution created by government contractors burning tens of thousands of forest debris “slash piles.”

Dr. Brian Moench, of Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment, noted. “What the US Forest Service is doing is wrong on so many levels. Deforestation is just as destructive when it occurs in Utah or California, as when it occurs in the Amazon. The Forest Service’s thinning and burning campaign is climate malpractice and public health malpractice. Forestry experts are now warning it’s also forestry and wildfire management malpractice.”

Stories which imply that killing and removing trees will save the Great Salt Lake are simply emblematic of the larger problem: politicians and government agencies at the state and federal level, including the United States Forest Service, whose budgets are padded with money for logging, are pushing increased logging as the universal answer, while media outlets fail to cover independent research that debunks this assertion. Because forests are vital to all life on Earth, they purify the air we breathe, filter the water we drink, prevent erosion, provide habitat, bring rain to the interior states, protect communities from the impacts of the climate crisis and globally reduce Earth’s temperature by about [0.5 degrees C](#). It is incumbent upon the media to vigorously question whether employing chainsaws to remove trees does far more harm than good.

Dr. Chad Hanson, an Ecologist with the John Muir Project of Earth Island Institute, said, “Full and honest coverage of these issues is the only protection we have against bad policy which will put us further behind in our fight against climate change, biodiversity loss and protecting communities.”

[To read the full letter click here.](#)

To Whom It May Concern:

Please consider doing a story on what we believe is a serious policy mistake by the US Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) with regional, national, and global implications. Below are the most important details.

As you are likely aware, the pressing issue of the disappearing Great Salt Lake has been the focus of numerous national articles in the last several months. Most recently a report written by Utah academics forecast that without a change in public policy to allow much more inflow, the lake will be essentially gone in five years.

Shortly after that [report](#) was released, a group of Utah lawmakers issued a press release calling for "saving" the Great Salt Lake by logging Utah forests.

Although thinning forests to release more water in western streams has been proposed and dismissed before, newer research indicates that increased flow is not even a consistent end result, and the opposite may occur. If increased flow does occur, it is minor and mainly happens in the form of increased flooding that damages communities and [does not increase actual water storage](#).

But this proposal is only a new rationale for an even more aggressive version of a misguided strategy that the USFS has already been engaged in for several years, but much more earnestly in the last two; "thinning" national forests under the guise of suppressing high intensity wildfires. Research funded by non-USFS, non-timber industry sources indicates that assumption is wrong, and both the USFS and Utah's "chain saw caucus" are ignoring the role of forests on environmental dynamics on a much broader scale. In fact, what the USFS is doing as official policy is unquestionably malpractice for the climate, public health, the broader terrestrial water cycle of the West, and for mitigation/control of intense wildfires and forest health. It is also largely ineffective in protecting forest homes from wildfire.

1. Wildfire mitigation

Claims that our forests are tinderboxes because they are massively "overgrown and unhealthy" and "fuel reduction treatments" i.e. logging, are the cure, is largely a myth promoted by the timber industry, politicians, and their allies in the USFS. The myth has been debunked by numerous independent experts, both in this country and abroad. For example, the most widely cited forest ecologist in the world, [Dr. David Lindenmayer](#), author of 48 books on forests, says, "[logged forests always burn at greater severity than intact forests.](#)" The climate crisis has become [the main driver](#) of Western forests' new fire vulnerability. Fire frequency and intensity are directly related to drought, temperature, and wind, not tree density or "excessive fuels." In fact, dense tree stands act as wind breaks, retain moisture, and decrease forest temperatures.

2. Forest health

Logging damages remaining trees, and does not "restore" forest health. Through underground mazes of roots, fungi, and bacteria called "mycorrhizal networks," trees share resources like water and nutrients, helping each other survive stresses. Forest thinning disrupts these mycorrhizal networks leaving remaining trees more vulnerable to disease, pest attack, and drought, [shortening their life span](#).

Logging requires road building and skid trails leaving lasting ecosystem damage: soil compaction, surface erosion, increased stream sedimentation, degraded water quality and aquatic habitat, reduced biodiversity, spread of invasive vegetation, and suppression of forest regeneration. Over 85% of forest

fires are human caused, and roads invariably increase human presence in the forest, meaning ultimately more fires.

3. Climate consequences

It is beyond dispute that killing trees not only releases carbon into the atmosphere, but also sacrifices a critical pathway for carbon absorption long into the future. Due to decades of logging, American forests now have far less biomass than they would have if managed by mother nature. Deforestation is a key accelerant of the climate crisis.

Forest trees provide the same benefits as urban trees, such as stabilizing local climate by [transferring heat](#) from land surfaces to higher in the atmosphere and buffering temperature extremes. On a global scale, forests reduce earth's temperature about [0.5 degrees C](#). Trees release water vapor and biogenic volatile organic compounds (BVOCs) which [promotes cloud formation](#), and [contributes further](#) to cooling and formation of condensation nuclei, more cloud formation, and ultimately precipitation.

4. Public health consequences

The climate crisis was called the greatest threat to global public health by [more than 200 medical journals](#) in 2021. Beyond destroying forest carbon absorption, burning the logged biomass releases all that pollution and carbon into the atmosphere immediately. Our hope for avoiding climate catastrophe rests on the carbon equation of the next decade, not decades from now when trees cut down could be replaced with regrowth. There is no research to support the rationale that forest thinning improves the carbon equation on any relevant time frame.

Moreover, burning "slash piles" of thinned trees and branches, as the USFS and BLM are doing throughout the West, is unquestionably public health malpractice. For multiple reasons wood smoke is the most toxic type of air pollution the average person ever inhales, whether it comes from a fireplace, a wildfire, or a prescribed burn.

The EPA calculates that, nationwide, almost as much total PM2.5 is generated by prescribed burns as from wildfires. There is no research to support the assumption that landscape scale prescribed burns reduce the total amount of biomass smoke pollution the public is subjected to. In fact, most research shows the opposite for two reasons. 1. Prescribed burns are largely ineffective in stopping high intensity wildland fires and therefore prescribed burns only add more pollution to the public's exposure. 2. Low intensity burns, like prescribed burns, produce [three to four times](#) the particulate pollution, and [more dioxins](#), than an equal amount of biomass burned at high intensity.

Live trees are pollution sponges whether in a forest or urban setting. They [sequester particulate pollution](#), absorb ozone, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, and ultrafine particulate pollution through the [same stomata](#) they absorb CO2.

5. Net water loss

Because prescribed burns are done during late fall and early spring, when snow pack is still in the Western mountains, the black carbon from prescribed burn smoke lands on snow pack reducing its albedo, warming the snow, [accelerating snow pack loss](#) in the West, and accentuating the impact of our already crippling drought. The solar energy absorption of black carbon nanoparticles, is the [second largest](#) contributor to the climate crisis after CO2. Intact forests play an enormous role in global and

regional terrestrial water cycles. Cutting down trees on a large scale for any reason reduces the ability trees have to augment precipitation in the West.

6. Waste of taxpayer money to protect homes from wildfires

Pruning vegetation within 100 yards of homes is helpful, but logging miles away from homes does little to nothing to protect them. There are much less expensive and more effective ways of protecting structures from wildfires, most of which are caused by flaming embers traveling long distances on the wind ahead of the fires. Individual “home hardening” is what state and federal governments should be spending money on, not massive forest thinning on a landscape scale.

This is one of the most important environmental stories in North America with global implications, and it has been largely ignored by the media. We hope you can see the value of doing a story on the issue.

Signed,

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