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Statement on the Bush Forest Fuel Reduction Plan

Land and Water Fund of the Rockies

There is broad consensus among all public lands stakeholders that forest fuels reduction is needed near communities to protect lives and homes. Conservationists also largely agree that some thinning followed by prescribed burning may be appropriate when lower elevation Ponderosa forests are overstocked with fuels. Any proposal from the Forest Service or the Bush Administration that emphasized these priority projects would have the support of conservationists, including the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies, a western environmental law and policy center active in the Interior West. Currently, however, two-thirds of the funds allocated by Congress for fuels reduction are spent by the Bush Forest Service outside of these priority areas, in the backcountry far from people's homes and outside the types of ecosystems most in need of restoration.

The Bush Plan, unveiled yesterday, rhetorically recognizes that communities in the "red zones" desperately need help, but does not propose a focused policy to assist them. Instead, it focuses on eliminating effective public involvement, rolling back environmental protections, and offering a one-size-fits-all approach, to be applied across all ecosystems. Bush's plan would:

- Legislatively curtail or eliminate administrative appeals and lawsuits that challenge illegal or ill-considered "fuels treatments and restoration" projects, even when the "thinning" label is applied to logging projects in old-growth forests where there is no need to control fire. This restriction would be applied nationwide, even in areas not subject to drought or excessive fires, such as the Northwestern rainforests.
- Legislatively authorize long-term contracts that allow timber companies to extract large-diameter trees—the most fire-resistant and most critical for many species of rare wildlife—as compensation for other thinning work. Because of the long-term nature of these contracts, the logging companies would have little incentive to focus on smaller trees and slash.
- Provide no additional funding for reducing fire threat near communities. The plan does not divert monies currently spent needlessly thinning backcountry forests—those that actually depend on hot fires—to fund projects where they are desperately needed.

The Bush Plan assumes that the Forest Service's thinning projects are crippled by "analysis paralysis," and proposes simplifying the process by gutting environmental protections. But these protections, widely supported by Americans, are in place for a reason. They require the Forest Service to consider the complex, interdependent ecosystems involved, and to protect critical wildlife, wild land, and water resources. When the Forest Service fails to conduct studies required by law on how thinning would affect wildlife, watersheds, and plant species, conservationists challenge such projects. The public would lose this important protection under the Bush Plan.

It is unfortunate that the Bush Administration has not chosen to build on the bipartisan consensus being forged in Congress by Representatives Mark Udall and Joel Hefley, or the plan proposed by the Western Governors Association, that would refocus thinning and other fuel reduction efforts near communities. If the Forest Service would concentrate in these areas, their proposals would fly through without appeal.

Westerners value our national forests as sources of recreation, clean water, and beauty. We can and must protect our forests our communities and homes from unnatural fire, while complying with safeguards that ensure that forest management is guided by sound science and public input. It is unfortunate that President Bush's plan fails to take such an approach. Public trust and our forests may suffer as a result.