

# Federal Policy Platform of the Healthy Headwaters Alliance

May 2020



# Fire & Water - Healthy Forests, Healthy Water, Healthy People

## Policy Platform Of The Healthy Headwaters Alliance

### Federal Policy Opportunities

Over the past ten years, the **Healthy Headwaters Alliance**, an innovation network of diverse western water leaders, has implemented new and sustainable responses to impacts of a rapidly changing climate on water resources in the American West.

Through this broad-based network, leaders develop partnerships, identify new approaches for addressing climate impacts, share information quickly, and integrate communication strategies and tools to promote success.

This Healthy Headwaters Federal Policy Platform is the **third** such document issued by the Alliance in the past five years. Its focus is on federal policy changes, including recommendations for funding.

## I. THE AMERICAN WEST: HEALTHY FORESTS, HEALTHY WATER, HEALTHY PEOPLE

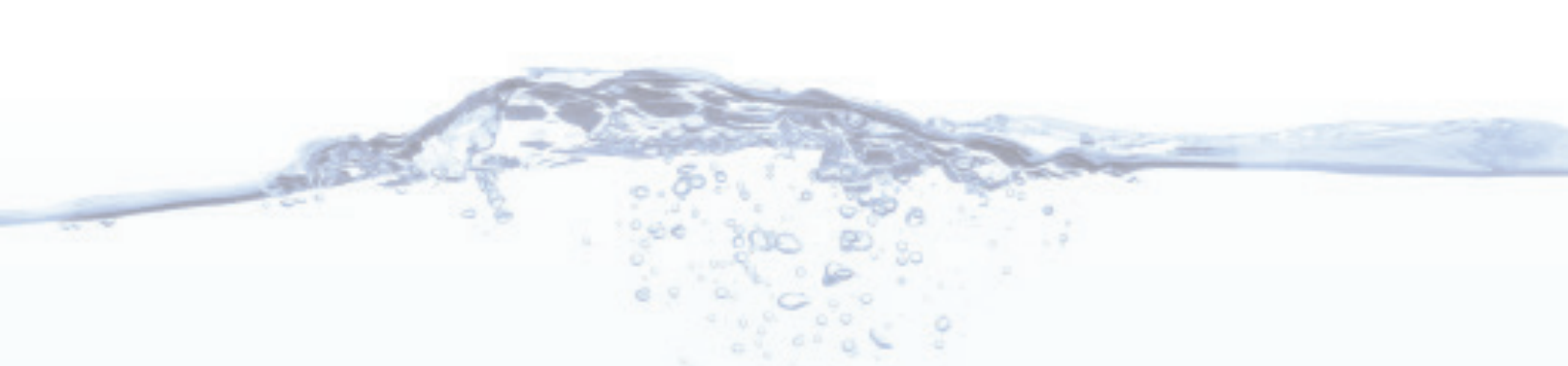
In the American West, water is the face of climate change. The rapidly changing climate is affecting all of us through too much water at the wrong time, too little water over a long period of time, or through an increasingly unhealthy water supply.

A critical aspect of this changing water supply story is the resilience of forested headwaters. All Westerners depend on natural watershed processes to filter pollutants, control erosion, regulate temperature, attenuate floods, and buffer human activities from drinking water resources.

The mountain watersheds that provide over 60% of the drinking, farming and industrial water in the American West are at great risk. Catastrophic wildfires, drought, floods, invasive species, and past forest management legacies are all exacerbated by the warming climate. These combined challenges threaten the ability of our forested headwaters to provide clean, reliable water to the millions of people who rely on it and threaten the many other public values they support – from fish and wildlife habitat to recreation.

Of all the threats to the West's headwaters, perhaps the most urgent is the uncharacteristic wildfires devastating entire landscapes in our National Forests and other public, tribal and private lands along with the resulting post-fire flooding and debris flows. Western wildfires have killed 160 people and cost more than \$40 billion in the past two years alone.

Increased degradation from catastrophic wildfires of the watersheds that provide downstream water supply calls for new strategies on how best to adapt our approaches to wildfire in a changing climate. We must engage in strategic, science-based forest restoration aimed at ensuring a healthier, more resilient forest landscape.



## II. POLICIES & MANAGEMENT – U.S. FOREST SERVICE

### A. Increase active, science-based watershed management and collaboration

In many parts of the American West, the U.S. Forest Service has been a partner in active management projects with regional partners. Effective partnerships result in increased buy-in from decision-makers, accelerates the science-based work on the ground and protects water supply and other public values for western communities. Examples of these partnerships between the Forest Service and water utilities, community leaders and NGOs can be found at [www.carpediemwest.org/news/](http://www.carpediemwest.org/news/).

### B. Update laws to improve water source security

The Organic Act of 1897 made “securing favorable conditions of water flows” a fundamental purpose of the national forests. It’s now time to update the National Forest Management Act and U.S. Forest Service watershed regulations and policies to provide a science-based framework for securing healthy watersheds and water sources (for drinking, farming and industry) against the threats of climate change. Working with the affected communities, the U.S. Forest Service should provide reasonable and realistic guidelines to define the characteristics of a healthy municipal watershed and identify actions that can be taken to ensure watershed and water supply protection.

### C. Shared stewardship agreements

In the past two years, the U.S. Forest Service has entered into “shared stewardship” agreements with, as of this writing, 14 states, including Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Oregon, and New Mexico, as well as with the Western Governors Association. The shared stewardship agreements commit the U.S. Forest Service and state forestry agencies to work together to prioritize and implement forest restoration activities on national forest lands; many agreements, though not all, highlight the importance of water resources.

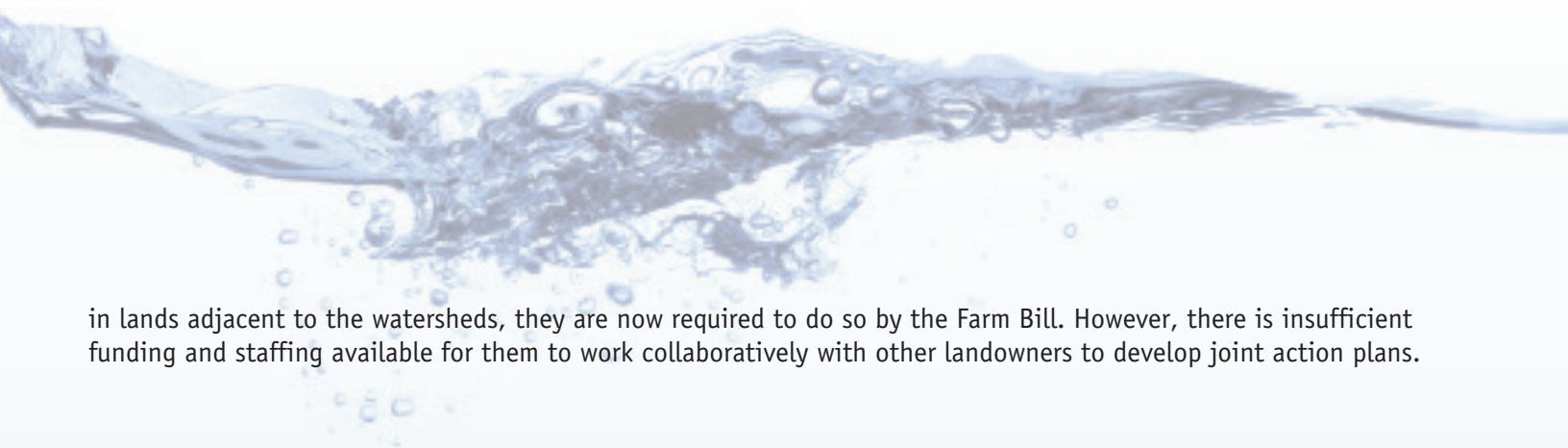
Missing from most of the decision-making tables for these shared stewardship agreements are affected water utilities and watershed-based not-for-profit organizations. As part of shared stewardship, the U.S. Forest Service should request the Governor of the specific state to include these stakeholders in forest health and water supply planning.

Montana has taken these agreements further to include the states’ nonprofit watershed council and to explicitly align Good Neighbor Agreements with local watershed restoration priorities.

### D. Engage all landowners in forest health & watershed protection

As codified in section 8405 of the 2018 Farm Bill, the US Forest Service’s Watershed Condition Framework sets restoration priorities, guides the implementation of projects, and monitors the results of restoration work on the 15,000 watersheds of the National Forest System nationwide.

While many Forest Supervisors do, as a matter of good land policy, engage other landowners (public, private and tribal)



in lands adjacent to the watersheds, they are now required to do so by the Farm Bill. However, there is insufficient funding and staffing available for them to work collaboratively with other landowners to develop joint action plans.

### **III. WATER-WISE FUNDING FOR THE US FOREST SERVICE PROGRAMS**

#### **A. Multi-year funding for the watershed condition framework - \$100M**

As part of the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress legislated the Watershed Condition Framework (WCF) but did not include authorization for funding. Congress should appropriate \$100 million in annual funding to support this program.

By providing dedicated, multi-year funding for the WCF, Forest Supervisors will be able to more effectively develop and implement action plans to protect and restore watersheds. In addition, dedicated federal funding may, in many communities, be matched by local funds such as public revenue measures.

#### **B. Partnership pilot programs - \$10M**

In 2018, Congress passed the Farm Bill, authorizing the Water Source Protection Program (Section 8404) and authorizing \$10 million annually for implementation. This funding needs to now be appropriated.

#### **C. Legacy roads & trails program authorization and funding – \$50M**

This program provides an important source of funding for reducing sediment runoff into watersheds by maintaining and removing roads on National Forest lands. Permanent authority and increased funding would help restore the health of key watersheds and make them more resilient to climate change.

### **IV. FEDERAL WILDFIRE FUNDING & WATERSHED POLICIES**

#### **A. Reinvest ‘fire fix’ savings back into agency programs - \$1B**

Congress took a major step toward stabilizing the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Interior’s budgets by enacting the Wildfire and Disaster Funding Adjustment Act in FY18. The legislation discontinued the irrational practice of “fire borrowing” and halted the downward spiral in agency funding for non-fire suppression programs, including watershed restoration and forest management.

This “fire funding fix” was an important corrective move, but still requires substantial reinvestments in comprehensive strategies to increase forest resilience, collaborative stewardship, research, and wildfire prevention and recovery programs. Congress needs to reinvest the “fire fix” savings back into agency programs to increase the pace and scale of restoration and reduce wildfire risk.



## **B. Prioritize watershed restoration under the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) - \$80M**

Revise the CFLRP original legislative intent to broaden the focus from primarily fire reduction activities to a more holistic watershed restoration approach. This would also allow for better incorporation of the Watershed Condition Framework process (see above) to set priorities and track progress. Congress should appropriate the full \$80 million authorized for the CFLRP as called for in the 2018 Farm Bill.

## **C. Incorporate climate change projections and climate adaptation strategies into fire suppression & restoration planning**

The U.S. Forest Service and other agencies have completed some mapping of places where the most destructive fires are projected to occur. By combining climate projection data with data from the Watershed Condition Framework and current drought forecasts provided by the USGS, the federal land management agencies can more proactively prioritize restoration and thinning, and develop science-based adaptation plans that will help guide, as an example, Burned Area Emergency Response actions. Climate adaptation strategies should be explicitly stated and connected to ongoing monitoring and adjustment to incorporate new information.

## **D. Engage the community with Burned Area Emergency Response policies**

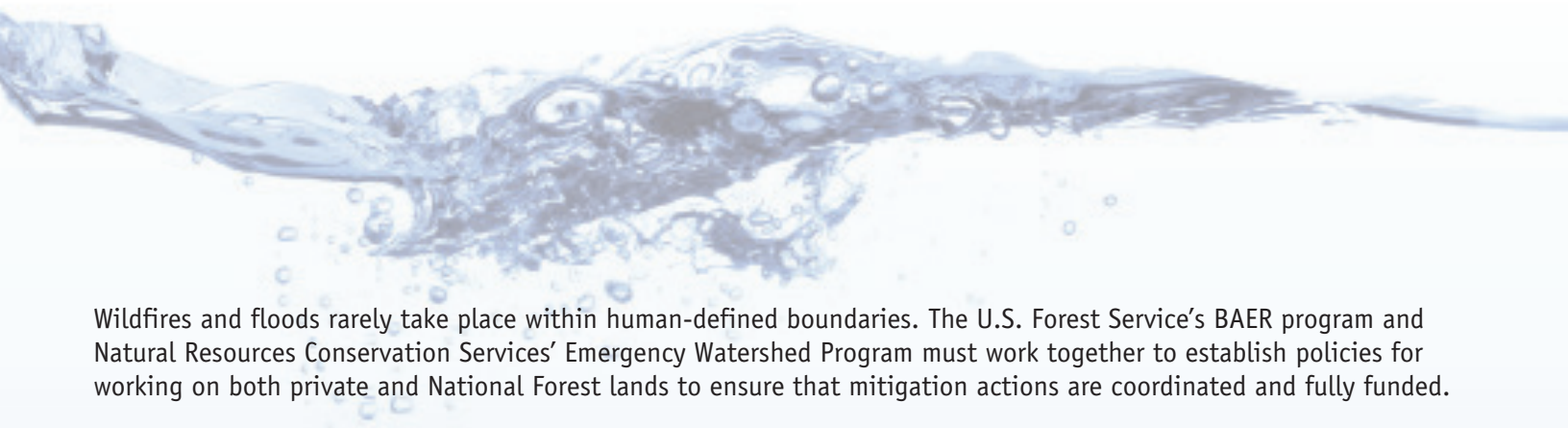
When a wildfire burns federal land, the land managers employ the Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) process to respond to imminent and unacceptable risks triggered by changed conditions caused by the fire.

The BAER process works under a very short time frame, including a 10-day assessment period. Forest Supervisors, using the Watershed Condition Framework for their forests' watersheds, should bring together local expertise from stakeholders including municipal utilities, engaged environmental groups, tribes and watershed associations to map out a plan ahead of time to advise BAER in the event of a wildfire. This community plan should be incorporated into the initial BAER plan and used by all incident teams. The plan must be updated to stay current and include possible impacts adjacent to or downstream from U.S. Forest Service lands, and should be updated to include water supply, places sacred to indigenous peoples, other utility infrastructure and communications towers to be part of the Wildfire Decision Support System.

## **E. Ensure that the post-wildfire watershed restoration is coordinated between agencies**

Currently, the U.S. Forest Service's BAER program (see above) and the Natural Resources Conservation Services' Emergency Watershed Program are separate programs, with the former working on National Forests lands and the latter focused on private lands even though these lands are adjacent.

As stated in the 2004 Farm Bill Act (Section 7CFR624) the Emergency Watershed Program authorizes work with local communities on private lands for post-disaster (floods and wildfires) mitigation.



Wildfires and floods rarely take place within human-defined boundaries. The U.S. Forest Service’s BAER program and Natural Resources Conservation Services’ Emergency Watershed Program must work together to establish policies for working on both private and National Forest lands to ensure that mitigation actions are coordinated and fully funded.

## **V. FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY – ACCELERATE POST-WILDFIRE & FLOODING FUNDING & PARTNER WITH THE USFS**

FEMA should work with the U.S. Forest Service to identify communities at risk and water supply from forests to provide funding for restoration and protection.

FEMA provides Hazard Mitigation Assistance (HMA) to communities to reduce or eliminate long-term risk to people and property from natural disasters.

FEMA has begun to recognize the value of investing in the conservation and stewardship of healthy landscapes for mitigating the impacts of floods (both inland and coastal), wildfires, and droughts, as reflected by recent policy updates in 2013 and 2016, and is also placing a greater emphasis on proactive investments before disasters occur by expanding the Pre-Disaster Mitigation budget.

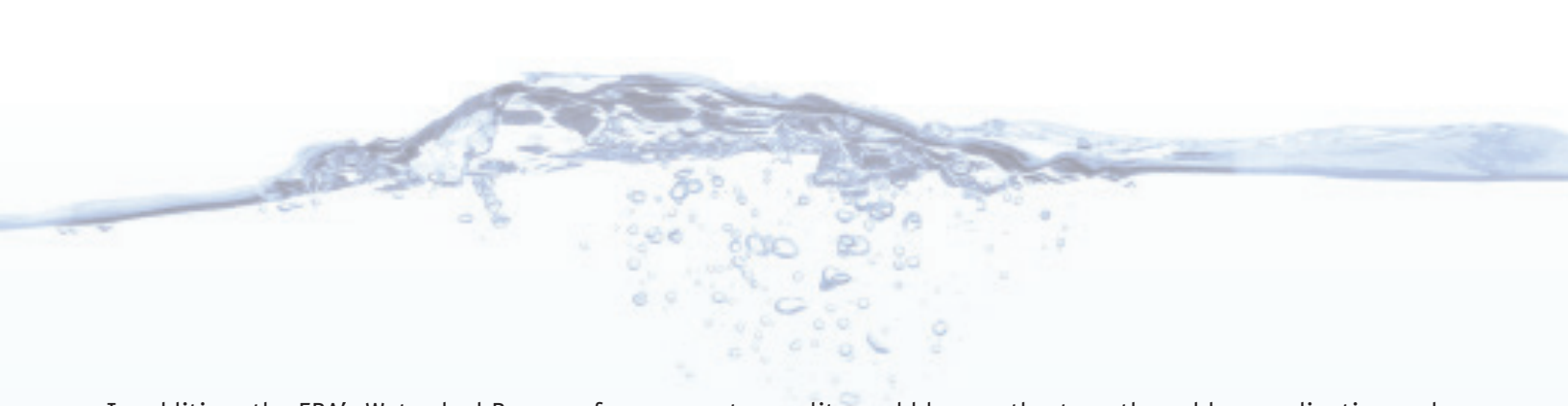
## **VI. NEPA “SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS” – UPDATE SCIENCE-BASED CRITERIA**

The U.S. Forest Service has authority to act prior to completing the National Environmental Policy Act process in order to mitigate the effects of catastrophic wildfires, either through approval of “special arrangements” by the Chief’s office or (in the case of environmentally “significant” actions) by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ).

As wildfires become more prevalent in the American West, and with downstream water quality at increased risk post-fire, science-based criteria should be developed to help guide U.S. Forest Service leadership and CEQ for effective assessment of requests. These criteria would be based on lessons learned from actual “mega-fire” events and should be explicitly linked to specific climate adaptation strategies to ensure long-term benefits and not just to address short-term problems.

## **VII. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY WATERSHED PROGRAM**

The EPA’s Watershed Program focuses on the instream, riparian, and floodplain areas. This program should also support and focus on the upland areas and landscape conditions as outlined in the EPA Integrated Assessments for Watershed Health that recognizes the inter-connectedness of the entire watershed.



In addition, the EPA's Watershed Program focus on water quality could be greatly strengthened by coordination and action around, for example, incorporating data and information from the U.S. Forest Service's BAER program and Watershed Condition Framework, along with NCRS' Emergency Watershed Program (see above.)

EPA's Healthy Watersheds Consortium Grants program should be expanded to provide more funding for watershed restoration projects in headwaters forests.

## **VIII. CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL – LOCAL WILDFIRE SMOKE IMPACTS**

Recent catastrophic wildfires in the American West and in British Columbia have brought high levels of unsafe, smoke-filled air to many cities, small and large.

Prescribed burning is an important watershed restoration activity that produces much smaller amounts of smoke but still engenders concern and even opposition in some communities.

The Centers for Disease Control, working with the U.S. Forest Service, should study this issue, and provide practical advice, resources and support for local health agencies on how they can best communicate with communities to increase support for prescribed burning.

Congress should establish a grants program, administered by the Centers for Diseases Control and the U.S. Forest Service, to provide funding for smaller municipalities with fewer public health resources to adopt proven actions to protect the vulnerable populations in their communities.

## **IX. PROVIDE MANDATE & FUNDING FOR CROSS-AGENCY PILOT PROJECTS**

Scientists currently estimate that water flow in the Colorado River Basin is reduced each year by approximately five-percent due to dust falling on snow on the western side of the Rocky Mountains. For context, the state of Nevada's total allocation from the Colorado River is four-percent.

Most of this dust falls on National Forest lands and the headwater rivers of the Basin. The source of most of the dust is Bureau of Land Management lands in Utah and the Navajo Nation. The Bureau of Reclamation, in turn, has to manage for decreased flows in the Basin.

Given the potential impacts of albedo on climate change, dusty snow has the attention of climatologists – and because snowpack feeds many of the West's major rivers, dust is problematic for water managers as well. Decreased albedo can lead to earlier snowmelt and runoff coming all at once rather than over time, which can overwhelm reservoir storage capacities and cause flooding.

Congress should direct these respective agencies to work with the Navajo Nation to develop a plan to mitigate dust impacts. The pilot program would provide a working template for other cross-agency planning and actions to address climate change impacts on water supply and forests.

Over the past ten years, Carpe Diem West has led the Healthy Headwaters Alliance, an innovation network of diverse western water leaders. Together, the Alliance has implemented new and sustainable responses to impacts of a rapidly changing climate on water resources.

Through this broad-based network, leaders develop partnerships, identify new approaches for addressing climate change impacts, share information quickly, and integrate communication strategies and tools to promote success.

In this time of a rapidly warming climate, it is imperative that watershed protection work be quickly scaled up and implemented based on scientifically sound principles that will lead to more resilient landscapes. This, in turn, requires innovative federal policy and significantly higher levels of federal investments.

To that end, in 2020, the Healthy Headwaters Alliance will come under the umbrella of the National Wildlife Federation. This respected national conservation organization will provide the expertise and capacity to take the Alliance's work to scale with national advocacy and communications and to connect the network with a diverse range of communities, interests, and partners throughout the western United States.

[www.carpediemwest.org](http://www.carpediemwest.org)

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