



## Our National Forests Can Help Us or They Can Burn Us — Again

If children learn not to touch a hot stove by getting burned, 2020 should have been America's "hot stove" moment.

Drought, heat and severe winds combined with overstocked and under-managed forests to create historic fire storms that kicked off on Labor Day weekend. They didn't go out until the winter snows and rains came, months later.

When all was said and done, over 4.9 million acres of national forest had burned catastrophically. Foresters who warned that our overstocked forests were primed for such an event took no satisfaction in seeing their predictions come true.

Heading into 2021, America faces crises that must be addressed: We must sequester and store more carbon so there is less of it in the atmosphere to reduce the odds of future firestorm events. We are also facing a housing affordability crisis; Freddie Mac estimated in 2020 that 29 states face housing shortages of between 2.5 and 3.3 million units. Home building has picked up since the Great Recession but not enough to keep up with housing demand. Homebuilders say that increased lumber costs are leading to reduced housing starts, which is the last thing an undersupplied housing market needs.

By better managing our national forests, we can take steps to meet both of these crises. The National Forest System has over 80 million acres of land at "moderate to high-risk" of disastrous fire. Because they are overstocked, our national forests are particularly vulnerable to threats like drought and insect and disease outbreaks. Prior to the 2020 fire season, the National Forest System had a documented reforestation backlog of over 7.4 million acres.

More active management of our national forests, including timber harvest, can help address both crises. National forest timber must be processed in U.S. mills, which will help create jobs at home while meeting domestic demand for housing. Lumber and composite building products can help build new housing units that could help us store literally gigatons of carbon.

By salvaging some of the acres that burned in 2020, and more actively thinning others, our national forests can help create carbon friendly housing solutions while clearing the way for new forests to begin taking carbon out of the atmosphere and storing it in new, growing forests. All of this work would take place outside of wilderness areas, where timber harvest is prohibited. Massive new lands set aside do nothing to protect these areas from uncontrolled wildfire. Failure to act will just leave the national forests vulnerable to another season of uncontrolled wildfires. These fires damage habitat, harm watersheds and release millions of tons of carbon into the atmosphere.

We've also got to invest in reforestation. The reforestation needs created by the 2020 fire season already exceed our capacity to produce seedlings and get them planted. Congress must step up — not only to support management but to provide seedling sources to allow reforestation.

The national forests can't meet all of America's timber demand. But as public resources, the public should expect them to be managed to help meet our needs, not make our crises worse. If we invest a bit in forest management and take steps to increase management outside of protected areas our national forests can help meet our needs for more housing while helping address our climate concerns.

Or we can reach for the hot stove — again.

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