United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 24, 2014

The Honorable Thomas Tidwell
Chief
U.S. Forest Service
201 14th Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Chief Tidwell:

We write to express our concern about the decreasing number of forest acres available for treatment in eastern Arizona, and request your assistance in making more acres available for Arizona's wood-products industry to continue thinning in that part of the state.

We have been fortunate to witness a successful 10-year partnership between the Forest Service and the timber industry to thin thousands of acres of overgrown forest. These landscape-scale treatment projects have prompted the private wood-products industry to return to Arizona and invest over $130 million in saw mills, wood pellet plants, and biomass facilities. We expect to see even greater progress with the start of the Four Forest Restoration Initiative (4FRI).

As private industry continues to make a comeback, our fire-prone communities will become safer at a faster pace and lower cost than the federal government could accomplish on its own. For example, in the aftermath of the 2002 Rodeo-Chediski Fire, the White Mountain Stewardship Contract (WMSC) was issued as the first large-scale long-term forest stewardship contract in the nation. The goal of the WMSC was to reestablish the wood-products industry in the White Mountains and thin 150,000 acres as a way to protect forest communities from future threat of catastrophic wildfires. By most accounts, it has been a success; the WMSC treatment areas are largely credited with saving several towns during the massive Wallow Fire in 2011, the largest wildfire in Arizona history.

However, the pending exhaustion of acres pre-approved for thinning under the National Environmental Policy Act ("NPEA-ready acres") poses a significant threat to thinning activity across Arizona's eastern forests. Without addressing this projected gap in available acres, the industry that has developed in that part of the state could face significant obstacles. Such a setback would not only have an outsized impact on local economies, it could call into question the long-term viability of the stewardship contracting model on a national level.

We believe that the Forest Service has a responsibility to ensure the success of the stewardship contract model by making the success of the White Mountain and 4FRI programs a national priority. The Forest Service is in a position to use timber contracts—at no cost to the federal government—to bridge the gap in NEPA-ready acres and keep the momentum going in Arizona's eastern forests until the next phase of 4FRI projects are ready to move forward. To that end, we request that you make use of all available tools to expedite, streamline, and increase the pace and scale of forest restoration.

We appreciate your continued dedication to the success of these proactive forest management programs. In this fiscal climate, prioritizing these programs will ensure that communities throughout the West are less vulnerable to fire, while reducing the skyrocketing cost to taxpayers associated with fire suppression and post-fire recovery. We are sure that you agree that we cannot afford to let federal inaction hinder the prospect for continued forest restoration driven by private investment.

As always, we ask that this matter be handled in strict accordance with all applicable agency rules, regulations, and ethical guidelines.

Sincerely,

JEFF FLAKE
United States Senator

JOHN MCCAIN
United States Senator