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Senator Dianne Feinstein

of California

Senator Feinstein Raises Concerns that Revisions to Sierra Nevada Framework Threaten California's Old Growth Forests

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Washington, DC – U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) today expressed concerns that revisions to the Sierra Nevada Framework threaten California's old growth forests, which provide needed habitat for the California spotted owl, and do not provide adequate funding to protect mountain communities from fire.

Specifically, Senator Feinstein expressed disappointment that the revisions only call for:

- 50 percent canopy cover in one quarter of California's 4 million acres of old growth forest. Senator Feinstein believes that California's old growth forests should have at least 50 percent canopy cover to help preserve habitat for the California spotted owl.
- 50 percent funding for hazardous fuels reduction projects in and around mountain communities. The original framework and draft revisions called for 75 percent funding, and many communities in the Sierra need this level of funding to help protect against catastrophic fire.

In addition, Senator Feinstein raised concerns about two controversial provisions for old growth forests in the revisions, which allow trees up to 30 inches in diameter to be harvested and canopy cover to be reduced by up to 30 percent, compared to existing levels.

In a letter to Pacific Southwest Regional Forester Jack Blackwell, Senator Feinstein wrote:

"I am writing to express my concern about the revisions to the Sierra Nevada Framework you announced last week. Your plan may threaten our remaining old growth forests, which provide needed habitat for the California spotted owl.

Many owl experts agree that keeping the forest canopy at least 50% closed is important for the species' habitat. Following our conversation in San Francisco two weeks ago, I was hopeful that your plan might require that timber projects leave a minimum of 50% canopy cover in all old growth areas, with at most limited exceptions. I was disappointed to see that you did not adopt this provision.

I know that you changed part of your plan in response to my request, and I greatly appreciate this effort on your part. In particular, I understand that you adopted the 50% canopy cover standard with limited exceptions within the home range core areas for the California spotted owl, about 1 million acres in total.

I am very disappointed, however, that these protections apply to just one-quarter of the 4 million acres of old forest in the Sierra Mountains. Without provisions for the majority of old forest, your plan may threaten the very existence of old growth reserves. Consider a major scientific study of the Sierras in the 1990's, the basis for the Framework, which states:

We conclude that the objective of maintaining high-quality LS/OG [late successional/ old growth] forests needs to be explicitly recognized as an important element of a conservation strategy for late successional forest ecosystems in the Sierra Nevada.

Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project: Final Report to Congress, 1996.

Your plan also includes two other controversial provisions for old growth forests: trees up to 30 inches in diameter can be harvested, and canopy cover can be reduced by up to 30% as compared to existing levels. I ask whether you can reduce brush and other flammable material without disturbing old growth forests as much as your plan now permits.

The forest legislation I co-sponsored last year includes a provision protective of old growth. Treatments of old growth stands under the Act must either maintain or contribute to the restoration of pre-fire suppression old growth conditions, and must retain the large trees contributing to old growth structure. I ask how your plan will comply with this provision.

I am also concerned about the funding allocations in your plan. Both the original Framework and your draft revisions to it proposed expending 75% of available funds on the highest priority of protecting communities.

There are parts of the Sierras, such as the Lake Tahoe area, where substantial work needs to be done in the backcountry. I question, however, why your current plan devotes only 50% of funds throughout the State to the top priority of community protection.

I request as well that you consider joining with the State of California and community groups such as the Quincy Library Group in trying out different approaches to forest thinning in coordination with the State and communities.

As always, I appreciate your consideration of my comments on the future of the Sierras, a subject of great importance both to me personally, and to my State. I deeply hope that we can preserve the beauty and wildlife of our mountains while reducing the threat they face from catastrophic fire.”

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