

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary, Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Randy Moore
Chief, U.S. Forest Service
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

May 31st, 2023

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Chief Moore:

The Federal Advisory Committee for the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) met in Denver, Colorado on April 4-6, 2023, to review, evaluate and provide recommendations on four CFLRP proposals to the Secretary of Agriculture for final selection. We are pleased to report that the Committee came to consensus on a set of recommendations.

We reviewed and evaluated proposals that included sacred peaks, ancient trees, and treasured lands. All proposals included landscapes that evolved with and are adapted to fire. Past forest and grazing management, the systemic suppression of lightning ignitions, and criminalization of indigenous cultural burning have altered these landscapes so much that forests and communities which evolved for thousands of years with fires are now at risk of catastrophic impacts due to fire.

The criteria used to evaluate the proposals included the strength of the ecological case, likelihood of successful collaboration, potential to reduce risk of uncharacteristic wildfire, wood utilization strategies, local social and economic benefit, and strength of multi-party monitoring. Each committee member scored the proposals individually using these criteria in preparation for our meeting. During the meeting, we discussed our scoring alongside other important elements of successful CFLR projects, such as whether a forest previously had a CFLR project; representation and inclusion of diverse stakeholders; leveraged investments from partners; the balance of prescribed fire, beneficial wildfire, and mechanical treatments; Forest Service capacity; and overall likelihood of success.

The Committee unanimously recommend two of the four projects for CFLRP funding. Our ranking and discussion resulted in the Ouachita Mountains Forest and Community Health proposal being the top choice, with the Giant Sequoia Monument Restoration Collaborative second.

Funding Recommendations Region	State	CFLRP Proposal	Year 1 Request	Recommendation
8	Arkansas	Ouachita Mountains Forest and Community Health	\$685,000 (\$13.4M over 10 years)	Fund
5	California	Giant Sequoia Monument Restoration Collaborative	\$4,000,000 (\$40M total over 10 years)	Fund
4	Utah	Watershed and Timber Restoration	\$3,000,000 (\$30M over 10 years)	Do Not Fund
5	California	Restoring Resilience to the Tahoe-Central Sierra	\$4,000,000 (\$40M total over 10 years)	Do Not Fund

The Ouachita Mountains Forest and Community Health proposal had strong support from the Committee and was the only proposal that included contributions via public comment during our deliberations. There were well defined roles for non-federal partners and evidence of a collaborative processes in place, and proposal advocates demonstrated previous success with federal funds.

The Committee recommends the Giant Sequoia Monument Restoration Collaborative proposal for funding but expresses some reservations about the proposal. During deliberations, the Committee agreed that the purpose of the proposal – conservation and wildfire risk reduction for giant sequoia – is an important priority that deserves support. Although the proposal documented existing strong partnerships, partnership is not the same as true collaboration on land management. Consequently, the Committee expects that the Giant Sequoia Monument Restoration Collaborative will evolve existing partnerships into a collaborative governance structure that better meets the intent of the CFLR program. In addition, some members of the Committee expressed significant concerns with the use of accelerated environmental review and compliance processes, for example the emergency response NEPA authorities utilized in July, 2022 to expedite hazardous fuels reduction within several groves, and those proposed in the Save Our Sequoias Act (H.R. 2989). These actions are highly controversial with important sectors of the public and expose the project to increased public controversy, increasing the uncertainty that needed restoration actions will take place in a timely fashion. Therefore, the Forest Service is strongly encouraged to carry out this important work using traditional NEPA authorities to achieve the desired outcomes outlined in the proposal.

The Committee does not recommend CFLRP funding for the Watershed and Timber Restoration project in Region 4 or the Restoring Resilience to the Tahoe-Central Sierra in Region 5. We recognize that there is important restoration work to do on these landscapes, but we found that the project proposals and the responses provided to Committee questions need further refinement before these proposals warrant investment of CFLRP funds.

Since its enactment in 2009, CFLRP has a proven track record of success and bipartisan support. It has brought collaboration to our forests to increase forest health, mitigate wildfire risks, support rural economies, and elevate local and diverse stakeholder voices. This Committee fully supports ongoing investments in the CFLR Program and the maintenance of its strong reputation and track record of success. Committee members continue to be interested in supporting the Forest Service in both delivering on the promise of CFLRP and utilizing members' expertise on the wide range of topics that are required for collaboration-based success. The Committee is

dedicated to offering feedback to all the project proponents, with the expectation that the two projects that were not recommend for funding can improve their proposals and reapply, if they choose, in the future. We encourage the Forest Service to utilize the Committee members and engage us in an advisory role as needed.

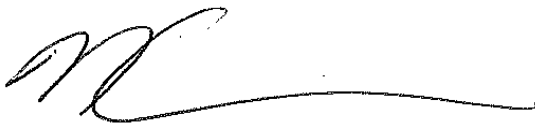
This Committee would also like to recognize the increasing need for investments in public-private partnerships that empower and stabilize ecological restoration and wildfire risk reduction-based wood utilization industries. Wood utilization economies are traditionally highly variable, often increasing implementation uncertainty. As communities rely more and more on private sector business models to reduce wildfire risks, investments and partnerships tasked with reducing economic variability and uncertainty are more important than ever.

Part of the Committee's charge permits us to offer reflections and recommendations regarding the CFLR Program more generally. As Congress considers reauthorizing and continuing to fund CFLRP, we recommend that they consider making CFLRP dollars explicitly available for collaborative capacity, including facilitation, in addition to the current purpose of funding implementation and monitoring of CFLR projects. We do not recommend extending funding to planning of CFLR projects. Strong collaborative governance and facilitation are essential to the development of shared vision social license, a foundational component of quality landscape restoration projects. And conversely, the lack of collaborative capacity is often a principal reason that collaborative efforts fail to take root. We also highlight the continued need to fund monitoring and adaptive management of CFLR projects and recommend that Congress provide additional funding for these important aspects of collaborative, landscape-scale forest restoration. We also recommend that CFLRP Committee funding recommendations have a time limit, perhaps 2-3 years. If appropriated funds are insufficient to fund Committee recommended recommend projects within this time frame, the project leads should be invited to update their materials and re-apply during future funding windows.

In closing, we want to thank USFS staff Lindsay Buchanan, Bryce Esch, Megan Lowell, and designated federal official Chuck Oliver for their hard work in organizing and standing up the Committee, and their dedication to the Program's success. Facilitators Kendell Lott and Natalie Hall did a fantastic job managing the meetings and providing notes.

Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have questions or need additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Neil Chapman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Neil Chapman
Committee Chair