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October 5, 2012

The Honorable Jeff Bingaman
U.S. Senate
703 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
U.S. Senate
709 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Bingaman and Ranking Member Murkowski:

The 2012 fire season has wreaked havoc on our nation's public forestland. Waldo Canyon was Colorado's most destructive wildfire ever, and Whitewater-Baldy was New Mexico's largest ever. Across the country, and especially in the West, another 48,000 or so wildfires have burned across 8.7 million acres, and 26 large wildfires in the western states are still going strong: Table Mountain and Wenatchee Complexes in Washington State, Pole Creek and Hood River in Oregon, and Idaho's Halstead and Mustang Complex fires.

These fires have burned enormous quantities of woody biomass and released huge amounts of energy and smoke that cloud the western skies and pollute the air hundreds of miles downwind, cancelling family vacations and athletic events alike. The increasing average size of our nation's wildfires indicates that a more effective management strategy is needed, and as Congress requested in the FLAME Act of 2009, a cohesive strategy will be completed early next year. From that we can develop more effective policies, but action is needed now.

There is widespread agreement that management activities to restore more resilient conditions on our forests and rangelands is needed, and at larger scales than in the past. Two strategies that promise to improve the situation are a commitment to active forest stewardship and, as suggested by the Western Governors' Association, support for new markets that use biomass from fuel hazard reduction and other restoration and stewardship activities as an energy resource.

The 2011 Wallow Fire in Arizona demonstrated the value of fuels reduction activities in modifying subsequent wildfire behavior. Targeted removal of small, dead, and/or diseased trees enabled the efforts of firefighters that resulted in saving two communities that otherwise may have been overwhelmed by the fire. There are dozens of other examples of fuel treatments modifying wildfire behavior favorably. It is a situation of pay-me-now for restoration treatments or pay-me-more-later for fire suppression.

Restoration-based fuel treatments have proven their value time and again, but the underlying question is why they are not more widely deployed. The reason is a combination of the high cost of forest stewardship activities and the low value of the trees that are fire hazards. Although sawmills can use larger trees to make lumber and other wood products, the majority of the hazardous materials consist of small trees unsuitable for such products. Effective development of wood bioenergy markets has to overcome this barrier. One way is to remove small material along with sawtimber-sized trees, but in much of the Interior West, this is not a feasible approach. But in rural locations with high fossil fuel costs, fuel reduction thinnings can be converted to chips, pellets or cordwood for heating buildings by employing biomass thermal technologies. With modern wood-burning equipment, 70-90% of the energy stored in wood can be captured.

Today there are very few state and almost no federal incentives supporting biomass to heat buildings. Other renewable energy technologies enjoy incentives in the form of 30% tax credits for installation of equipment to use the energy from geothermal hot springs or capture solar energy for conversion to electricity or heat for buildings. This lack of parity among renewables is inhibiting the ability of advanced biomass thermal technologies to put woody biomass— which can be thought of as stored solar energy—to work as a homegrown renewable energy resource that is quite literally going up in smoke across the western states.

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Instead of using biomass to create air pollution, we could be using it as an energy resource. In an August 22 press release accompanying California's 2012 Bioenergy Action Plan, CAL FIRE Chief Ken Pimlott observed: "Wildfire is an increasing threat in many parts of California, costing hundreds of millions of dollars per year in fire suppression and property losses, not to mention impacts on public health and safety. One of the most important and cost-effective ways to reduce forest fire hazards is to generate energy from forest biomass collected to reduce dangerous fuel loads. Using forest biomass to generate energy protects health, safety and property while providing jobs, income and local energy supplies."

Congress has two immediate opportunities on the table to promote efficient biomass heating: the Community Wood Energy Program (CWEP) and Senate Bill 3352. While CWEP would support biomass heating projects at public facilities, S. 3352 provides incentives for the most efficient equipment in commercial and industrial energy sites. BTEC asks that you consider pledging your support for funding of CWEP in the FY2013 Interior Appropriations bill, and joining five other senators who have already signed on as co-sponsors of Sen. Bingaman's S. 3352.

BTEC urges the ongoing management of our nation's forests through appropriate treatments that will reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. These efforts benefit the forest, communities near forests, and our nation's energy independence. Using wood for heating creates markets for waste wood and provides solutions that our rural communities and our nation so desperately need: economic vitality and energy security.

Sincerely,



Joseph Seymour
Executive Director
Biomass Thermal Energy Council

CC: Senator Max Baucus
Senator Mark Begich
Senator Michael Bennet
Senator Barbara Boxer
Senator Maria Cantwell
Senator Mike Crapo
Senator Michael Enzi
Senator Dianne Feinstein
Senator Orrin Hatch
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