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September 13, 2012

Senator Max Baucus
511 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Management of federal forest lands to mitigate wildfire

Dear Senator Baucus:

The Montana Legislative Environmental Quality Council (EQC) is writing to urge you to support more aggressive timber management on federal forest lands in order to better mitigate wildfire and hopefully relieve our citizens from the smoky skies that have plagued Montana in 2012.

According to the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, state-operated air quality monitors are expected to record more than 175 days this year in which smoke from wildfires significantly impacts public health and welfare. These exceptionally smoky days are unhealthy for all Montanans, especially those with heart and respiratory problems, the elderly, and children. Citizens are advised to stay indoors and avoid outdoor exertion. That's no way to spend our short and special summer season in Montana.

While wildfires don't just burn on federal lands, we all need to do our part to be good neighbors and undertake land management practices that help mitigate the intensity and duration of fire. A lack of timber harvest on the national forests in recent years, combined with booming insect infestations, has contributed to heavy tree mortality, leaving these federal lands vulnerable to extreme fire behavior.

State timber resources in Montana are actively managed and harvested, resulting in improved forest health and greatly reduced mortality rates in the face of insect infestations and wildfires, especially when compared with neighboring federal lands. Montana's private landowners have aggressively implemented fire mitigation tactics in their timber stands to reduce the potential for catastrophic wildfires. Federal land managers can draw on these effective examples as well as those in other countries, such as New Zealand, where fire breaks are built into timber management practices.

Increased timber harvest on our federal lands would not only improve the health of our forests and help mitigate wildfire and air quality problems in the future, it would also create and keep jobs in our communities and boost local, state, and national economies.

Senator, the EQC asks you to do everything in your power to support more aggressive timber management on our federal forest lands in order to better protect our natural resources and boost our economy.

We eagerly await your reply on this matter. Please let me know if I or the EQC staff can be of assistance.

Sincerely,

Senator Jim Keane, Chairman

Encl.