

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 26, 2018

Vicki Christiansen, Interim Chief
United States Forest Service
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20250-1111

Dear Chief Christiansen:

We are writing to thank you for your support of long-term stewardship contracts and particularly your support of a very successful project in Eastern Oregon. As you are well aware, we have seen exciting results with the 10-year stewardship contract on the Malheur National Forest in Grant and Harney counties, and opportunities for supplemental businesses that have developed in nearby communities to complement the traditional forest products industry. Your continued support, expressed outwardly, will be important to continuing this stewardship project, as well as allowing it to lay the basis for the new 20-year stewardship authority Congress enacted this year.

The economic gains in Grant County in recent years were only possible because of the social license earned by solid, science-based collaborative work and the stewardship requirements for reinvesting in forest restoration – all brought about by the community’s dedication to this stewardship project. Harvest levels have risen dramatically and responsibly, with no litigation on vegetation projects in more than 10 years. The 10-year stewardship contract in Grant County is an excellent example of what the long-term commitment means—it has driven job creation, helped the local real estate market and stabilized school enrollment. It has supported new biomass markets and driven millions of dollars in private investments into new facilities, making use of the smallest trees coming off the forest.

The success seen on the Malheur National Forest could serve as a template for the new 20-year stewardship authority that passed in the 2018 Omnibus Appropriations Bill. We encourage you to visit John Day and see the progress that has been made as a result of collaboration, partnerships and the 10-year stewardship contract. Examine it and see the potential of the new 20-year stewardship contracting authority to provide much needed certainty of supply, as well as the important restoration jobs for rural communities adjacent to our national forests.

Another theme we have heard from forest collaboratives and other stakeholders is the need for regular communication, transparency and opportunity to work toward agreement. As the Forest Service expands the use of long-term stewardship authorities, it will be important to have good communication and common understanding between the agency’s contracting staff, local industry and stakeholders. This should include frequent and transparent communication about all facets of stewardship contracts between Acquisition Management, the Regional Office and National Forest leadership on the ground. In small communities very often the industry leaders, the collaborative groups, and often the federal employees themselves interact on a regular basis.

In order to ensure success we must have a consistent and reasoned process that includes local and regional stakeholders and forest leaders. These measures of success in this rural frontier community can and should be replicated as new, long-term stewardship contracts move forward.

We also want to encourage your work to support and transform Forest Service culture in regards to "Best Value" contracting. We understand this is a shift from traditional contracting done through Acquisitions Management, yet the expansion of this tool should provide success and benefit to surrounding communities. What has been most encouraging on the Malheur is how the stewardship, with its community benefits emphasis has so clearly resulted in maintaining local infrastructure, improving the job market and job retention and improved the basic relationship between the federal government and stakeholders.

The success in Grant County has shown that rural communities are no longer in danger of losing skilled workers or the much-needed sawmills and other manufacturing facilities necessary to revitalize communities that have primarily natural resource-based economies. We hope that your agency will make every reasonable effort to award projects to industry partners operating and residing within the counties and employing local workers where the benefit can be seen so effectively.

Again, we very much appreciate your support for use of long-term stewardship contract authorities, and look forward to working with you to transform the agency culture, and responsibly restore and safeguard our national treasures.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator