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U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

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JEFFREY DUNCAN
DEMOCRATIC STAFF DIRECTOR

December 19, 2012

The Honorable Doc Hastings
Chairman
Committee on Natural Resources
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Hastings:

This year, U.S. weather was almost apocalyptic: searing heat, ferocious fires, hurricanes, and severe storms left people injured, homeless and in some cases, dead. According to NOAA, July was the hottest month ever recorded in the lower 48 since recordkeeping began in 1895 and the heat claimed at least 100 lives. January through November was the warmest 11 months period for the continental United States with the U.S. temperature 3.3°F above average. The events of this year are proving to be less of an isolated occurrence but instead, the new normal in the face of climate change. In light of these events, we are writing to urge you to convene a series of hearings beginning early in the next Congress to examine the impacts of climate change on forest health, water supply, and species conservation – all matters within the jurisdiction of the Natural Resources Committee.

Yesterday, the Forest Service released a ten year assessment of the conditions of U.S. Forests and Rangelands. As part of this review, required by Congress, the Forest Service asserted that climate change is negatively impacting our forests by increasing the risk of wildfire. Furthermore, the agency found that climate change will increase future water demands and reduce water yields from our National Forest lands. National Forests are the single largest source of drinking water in the Nation, supplying water to over 66 million Americans. Disrupting the ability of these forests to provide vital water supplies to the American people represents a looming crisis that demands the attention of our Committee.

As the Forest Service report notes, “The result of the combination of increasing water demand and declining water yields is an increase in vulnerability of the U.S. water supply to shortage, especially in the larger Southwest and Great Plains.” The Forest Service report follows on another recent report presented to the American Geophysical Union¹ that predicted a doubling of burned areas from wildfires in the U.S. by 2050 due to warmer and drier conditions.

Similarly, the Department of the Interior recently released the Colorado River Basin Supply and Demand Study². The Colorado River and its tributaries provide water to about 40 million people for municipal use; supply water used to irrigate nearly 4 million acres of land, and also serves as the lifeblood for at least 22 Native American tribes, 7 National Wildlife Refuges, 4 National Recreation Areas, and 11 National Parks. Hydropower facilities along the Colorado River provide more than 4,200 megawatts of electrical generating capacity.

The Interior Department study found that the average imbalance in future supply and demand is projected to be greater than 3.2 million acre-feet by 2060 – the equivalent of the amount of water consumed by 13 million people annually. The climate change analysis showed the most variability in terms of range and reductions of flow in the basin, with an average of nine percent decrease in flow over the next 50 years. This scenario also projects that droughts will be longer and more intense. The study also estimates that the affected population could nearly double to approximately 76.5 million people by 2060, under a rapid population growth scenario—making the water impacts even more dire. The study indicates that targeted investments in water conservation, reuse, and augmentation projects can help to improve the reliability and sustainability of the Colorado River system to meet current and future water needs.

Finally, as global warming makes our climate hotter and drier, more frequent and intense wildfires are threatening the forest and grassland habitats of iconic endangered species such as the Mexican spotted owl and the greater sage-grouse, according to reports from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Similarly, less precipitation and lower water levels in our rivers is stunting the recovery of economically and ecologically important fish such as salmon, steelhead, and sturgeon. It is widely known that rising sea temperatures and ocean acidification have already caused significant damage to coral reefs, and as the Washington State Blue Ribbon Panel on Ocean Acidification reported in November, climate change is now impacting commercially valuable shellfish and finfish. A study by NOAA scientists published in September found that by the end of this century some ocean predators could be facing up to a 35 percent loss of habitat as ocean water of appropriate temperature moves northward.

¹ See: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/17/us-wildfires-burn-area_n_2315110.html?utm_hp_ref=green

² <http://www.usbr.gov/lc/region/programs/crbstudy/finalreport/index.html>

We believe that the Committee should hold a comprehensive series of oversight hearings to examine the impact of climate change and related extreme weather events on our water resources, our forests, our wildlife and our fisheries and oceans in the new Congress. We strongly urge you to convene such hearings and we look forward to working with you in planning such hearings in the New Year.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources



Grace F. Napolitano
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Water & Power



Gregorio Sablan
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans
and Insular Affairs



Raúl M. Grijalva
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on National Parks,
Forests and Public Lands