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*Statement regarding H.R. 3211 Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership Program:*

The Fort Collins Conservation District's (FCCD) Healthy Forest Initiative began in 2016 after Larimer County's devastating 2012 High Park Fire to address upper watershed resource concerns including forest health, water quality, and wildlife habitat. The Healthy Forest Initiative's primary goal is to plan and manage the implementation of ecology-based forest restoration practices on private land in northern Larimer County, Colorado. In partnership with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), FCCD delivers and administers Farm Bill programs, specifically the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). FCCD provides assistance to our landowner cooperators by managing logging contracts, acquiring additional funding, engaging partners, and linking together communities to achieve larger treatment footprints in forest restoration efforts.

*A History of Success*

FCCD's Healthy Forest Initiative would not be possible without the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership Program. In 2019, NRCS, the United States Forest Service (USFS), and over fifteen other partners were awarded \$11.6M over three years for the Northern Front Range Collaborative Watershed Resilience Joint Chiefs Project. This project has been the northern Front Range's primary source of project implementation funding for the last three years and has successfully bolstered collaborative relationships to restore thousands of acres of overgrown forest; build community protection and resilience; reduce water quality impacts from fire; and protect values at-risk including water infrastructure, recreational areas, wildlife habitat, and homes.

During this three-year award period, the Fort Collins NRCS Field Office's conservation districts obligated over \$4.5M in Joint Chiefs EQIP funds and used those funds as leverage to secure an additional \$1.2M in partner funds for restoration on over 2,300 acres of forested land. USFS has invested \$7.2M for 7,600 acres of Hazardous Fuels Treatment, 9 miles of Streambank improvement, 3,400 acres of Wildlife Habitat Improvement, and over 1,300 acres of noxious weed treatment. Other partners have pledged an estimated \$2.2M toward accomplishing complimentary work. This program has allowed the pace and scale of forest restoration activities in northern Colorado to increase significantly since 2019.



The effects of the 2020 Cameron Peak Fire on the Shambhala Mountain Center in Red Feather Lakes, CO provide an excellent example of the power of this collaborative, cross-jurisdictional, landscape-scale approach. In 2018, FCCD completed a 118-acre forest restoration treatment at Shambhala in the areas surrounding their primary infrastructure. The goals of the project were to improve forest health, reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire, and improve wildlife habitat. The treatment was designed to tie into the over 4,000 acres of on-going prescribed burning efforts by USFS at their nearby Pingree Hill project area. The buffer of reduced fuel-loading created by these two projects helped protect Glacier View Meadows, a community with over 1,000 homes in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). Firefighters identified the completed treatments as instrumental in their efforts to halt the advancing fire front before it reached communities like Glacier View.

### *Ecological Benefits*

FCCD encourages and supports the passage of this bill for its intent to invest in forested ecosystems. The Joint Chiefs program supports improved biodiversity, wildlife habitat, water quality, and management prescriptions that adapt to current climate change models. Overgrown forests and resulting high-severity fires have drastically reduced habitat quality and quantity along the Front Range of Colorado. A proactive approach to forest management and stewardship would allow managers to build diversity and resilience into forested ecosystems, thereby improving habitat for critical big- and small-game as well as other species of concern.

Water quality and quantity are quickly becoming one of the greatest priorities for conservation in the American West, especially in light of predicted future climate regimes. Proactive vegetation management in the upper watersheds of frequent-fire forests provides a significant benefit to not only ecosystems, but also municipalities, and communities. By reducing the risk of widespread high-severity wildfire through initiatives such as the Joint Chiefs partnership, we can conserve these natural resources in a proactive manner that saves taxpayer dollars.

This proposed bill's long-term funding would enable forest restoration work to continue in a more strategic manner and at a pace and scale that addresses the issues at hand. Though each agencies' stewardship projects contribute to an overall ecological benefit, an increased budget and sense of stability in the community will lead to larger interconnected treatments that address resource concerns at a landscape scale. An interconnected "ribbon" of work will have magnifying effects on the impact of each treatment, benefiting whole ecosystems more than the scattershot approaches of the past.

### *Community and Social Benefits*

The social benefits of the Joint Chiefs program are as important as the economic and ecological impacts. The cross-jurisdictional approach employed for these projects increases state and local partner engagement as well as private landowner buy-in. Education and outreach efforts within WUI communities are critical to the success of these programs. With increased funding, we can expect local support to increase commensurately. Community engagement is critical to furthering efforts towards community resilience. Preparedness and awareness of wildfire risk are essential for protection of lives and property. With more population moving into the WUI, this need is only growing.

As well as strengthening communities, previous Joint Chiefs efforts have stimulated the local economy. Healthy forests attract hunting, fishing, and tourism—valuable aspects of many economies in the mountain west. Additionally, consistent funding through forest stewardship contracts as a result of Joint Chiefs projects have encouraged local logging contractors to expand their capacities, both in equipment and personnel. A diverse contractor base is critical to the continuation of these fuel reduction and habitat-improvement efforts. As an added benefit to increased contractor availability, fuel reduction projects have fostered an influx of wood products, helping keep resources and capital in the local economy.

### *Final Thoughts*

With wildfire seasons expanding to nearly year-round in the western United States, our forests have suffered a loss of diversity, habitat, and resiliency. Forests provide ecosystem services that have far-reaching benefits - positively impacting ecosystem function, community resilience, and economic health. Throughout the west, wildfires are outpacing current adaptive forest management, highlighting the need for proactive and aggressive stewardship rather than a reactive approach. Previous successes within the existing Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership Program have demonstrated the value of the program as well as the necessity of expanding the program's resources. An investment into this program can help offset wildfire suppression and repair costs while simultaneously building capacity to boost the pace and scale of proactive forest stewardship.