



Fig. 1. James Hansen and Chad Hanson in Stanislaus Forest just west of Yosemite in June 2021, in an area “rescued” by the United States Forest Service following the 2013 Sierra Nevada Rim fire.

Fix Our Forests Fiasco

30 January 2026

James Hansen

The Senate is on the verge of taking up a bill with the Orwellian title “Fix Our Forests Act.” It is designed to do the opposite, as Dan Galpern and I describe in an op-ed published yesterday in the Boston Globe, which is copied below with permission of the Globe. The bill would result in swaths of the public’s national forests becoming “categorical exclusion” zones open to logging exempt from any environmental review. Thus, the bill would override the purposes for which national forests were set up, including “outdoor recreation, range...watershed, and wildlife and fish purposes.” This sin is rationalized under the pretense that the Act will reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health by “thinning” the forest. This is nonsense, as our op-ed discusses.

Here I draw attention to the harm their unconstrained logging causes for climate. Nature has the potential to be a big part of the climate solution, if we allow it to work (as discussed in our communication¹ in 2021). Fig. 1 is a photo of an area in which the Forest Service allowed logging post-fire, cutting down the “snags” (burned or scorched tree trunks). Logs containing useful lumber were hauled off and less desirable logs, branches and saplings were ground up for biofuel. Trees were planted, but few are growing. Planters replanted a few times, as there are a few trees of varying ages trying to get started. It is hard for trees to get started in an area compacted by heavy machinery and missing the nutrients that were hauled off for biofuels.

Fig. 2 shows an area burned by the same 2013 Sierra Nevada Rim Fire that was not yet clearcut. Natural tree regrowth was thriving and wildlife was abundant. The snags topple within decades and provide habitat for small scale forest life, as well as water holding capacity and nutrients for the soil. The area in Fig. 2 was slated to be cut like the area in Fig. 1, but it never happened. Perhaps the ruckus that Chad Hanson raised had an effect. Now, however, we are concerned with a much larger area in our national forests. For the sake of drawing down atmospheric CO₂ and the health of our national forests, the Fix Our Forests Act should be rejected.



Fig. 2. Hansen and Galpern in June 2021 in an area not then or yet logged -- regrowing on its own.

Boston Globe, Jan. 29, 2026

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OPINION

By James Hansen and Dan Galpern

A logging bill masquerading as wildfire protection

Despite its name, the Fix Our Forests Act would fast-track logging, weaken environmental safeguards, and do little to protect communities from wildfire or climate harm.

Congressional leaders face pressure from the logging industry to bring a deliberately misnamed “Fix Our Forests Act” to the Senate floor. They should resist. This bill is a Trojan horse, pretending to protect vulnerable communities from wildfire risk and improve forest health. It does neither. Instead, it heeds the command of President Trump’s [Executive Order 14225](#), which calls for the “immediate expansion” of US timber production from lands managed by the US Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management.

America is blessed with magnificent national forests that are a source of lumber and other resources. An adequate lumber supply is important for the US economy, but [most of that](#) is provided by private holdings. Timber production is just one of [a range of multiple uses](#) for national forests. Other uses include “outdoor recreation, range, ... watershed, and wildlife and fish purposes.” Any “yield” from our national forests must be pursued in a manner that maintains “the various renewable resources ... in perpetuity ... without impairment of the productivity of the land.”

For those ends, the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered Species Act require the USFS and the BLM to safeguard the public interest, including that of future generations, and to protect rare and endangered species. But the bill that the Senate is considering enables land managers to skirt these laws and fast-track otherwise questionable projects under the guise of wildfire risk reduction by vastly expanding allowable [“categorical exclusion” zones](#) that are exempt from review.

That would be a mistake. Mandated environmental review allows challenges to wrong-headed proposals. It also insulates conscientious officials from industry pressure, enabling them to do the right thing by considering the wider ramifications of forest-disturbing proposals.

The pretense of the legislation is that deep forest logging will reduce fire intensity, risk to downwind communities, and climate-damaging carbon emissions. But such “thinning” does not always reduce wildfire intensity. Indeed, [considerable evidence](#) establishes that the open conditions created by such logging may lead to [lower humidity, higher wind speed, higher temperature](#), abundant grass fuel, and increased fire intensity. Moreover, thinning may increase forest-derived carbon emissions “[by three to five times](#) relative to fire alone,” in part because only a fraction of the carbon in felled trees ends up stored as lumber.

Effective community protection requires planners and policy makers alike to understand “[the critical role of individual homeowners and local government](#).” In brief, [in a warming world](#) government at every level needs to help communities become far more [ignition-resistant](#). Updated building codes, neighborhood assessments of fire vulnerability, [home-hardening modifications](#), [defensible space pruning](#), and local government empowerment are all needed, but the Fix Our Forests Act offers none of this.

As to combatting the climate crisis, US forest lands play an important role by storing considerable carbon; moreover, they retain [high potential, if left to mature, to sequester much more](#) (as old-growth forests and mature trees durably store more carbon).

Recently, the [International Court of Justice ruled](#) that, to address global climate change, every nation is obliged not only to constrain exploitation of their fossil fuel reserves but also to preserve their carbon-rich soils and forests. Congress owes it to our children and grandchildren to pay close attention here.

Many citizen-based community groups have noticed FOFA’s chicanery. More than 100 groups issued a [public analysis](#) of the measure’s extraordinary conveyance of discretion to the land agencies, enabling officials to approve logging and clear-cuts even in forests of high ecological value — and for a wide assortment of reasons. A few [groups](#) based in Washington, D.C., appear to have been [taken in](#) by FOFA’s sophistry, but they should take a closer look at the relevant wildland and urban fire science.

Congressional leaders should decline to bring FOFA up for a vote, but if the measure makes it to the Senate floor, senators should read its content in light of that relevant science. They then can rise up to strike it down.

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¹ Hansen J. [Silent Forests](#), 11 June 2021