

The Forest Service's climate change failure

The agency faces historic costs due to climate change. So why is it opening up land for coal mining?

By TED ZUKOSKI, POLITICO 05/11/16

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From the Paris climate agreement to recent proposals to limit pollution from oil and gas wells, President Barack Obama has made combating climate change a focal point of his final year in office. But at least one agency within his administration is actively pushing policies that undercut these efforts.

The U.S. Forest Service is tasked with protecting 190 million acres of land throughout the country, including high alpine meadows, towering spruce and stately ponderosa pines. It has a clear legal mandate to protect forest resources, as well as to “protect

and, where appropriate, improve the quality of soil, water, and air resources.” So it might come as surprise to learn that instead of working to limit greenhouse gas pollution, it’s pursuing policies that actually exacerbate climate change — notably the impending approval of a huge coal mining expansion in remote Colorado wildlands.

There’s no question climate change threatens forests, watersheds and wildlife: It dries woodlands, weakens trees so they are more susceptible to insects and disease, and lengthens the fire season. The fire season in the United States and elsewhere is starting earlier and lasting longer, and fires are burning with more intensity. Those fires can damage ecosystems and drain agency budgets; last year, the Forest Service spent more than half of its budget on firefighting, [compared with just 16 percent in 1995](#).

The cause is no secret: As The New York Times put it [in a recent report](#): “A leading culprit is climate change. Drier winters mean less moisture on the land, and warmer springs are pulling the moisture into the air more

quickly, turning shrub, brush and grass into kindling.” This conclusion has been [documented in scientific literature for at least a decade](#). The Forest Service’s boss, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, knows the source of this problem as well. “We take our job to protect the public [from fire] seriously, and recently, the job has become increasingly difficult due to the effects of climate change, chronic droughts and a constrained budget environment in Washington,” he [told the Times](#) last month.

Climate change is also making insect outbreaks last longer. In Colorado, millions of acres of spruce and pine trees have been killed by beetles. Such outbreaks are typically halted only by a week or two of bitter cold temperatures. But with climate change bringing warmer winters to the West, those cold snaps rarely happen and the beetles munch on. This has further damaged trees in Colorado and stretched the Forest Service’s resources. And once these trees die, the forest may not recover. A Forest Service [study completed in February](#) predicted that iconic aspen and spruce forests would virtually disappear across large

swaths of southwest Colorado forests in less than 45 years as landscapes dry out.

The loss of wildlife, water and recreation that these forests protect will have economic and fiscal impacts on local communities and states. Touring forests in the fall when bright green aspen leaves turn gold and orange [is big business](#). The loss of these forests will also consume much more of the Forest Service's budget. The agency is committed to spending [tens of millions of dollars](#) over the next decade logging the forests to try to stem the impacts to spruce and aspen decline.

Given the significant threat climate change poses to the agency's budget and the nation's trees, the Forest Service should be doing all it can to reduce its own contribution to climate change. But instead, as soon as this month, the agency intends to rubber-stamp a plan [to open 20,000 acres of roadless Colorado forest to road-building](#), a move designed to pave the way for mining 170 million tons of coal there.

The Service's decision will light the fuse to a huge carbon bomb; when burned, this coal will cause 130 million additional tons of CO₂ emissions — as much as running a large coal-fired power plant nonstop for over a decade. This despite [the agency's own data](#) that show burning that coal will cause billions of dollars in damage to the world's economy and environment.

The Service defends this move by saying that 300 mining jobs and local royalties and tax revenue may be lost if the coal stays in the ground. But the proposal will benefit only a single mine (owned by the bankrupt Arch Coal Inc.) that has tens of millions of tons of coal already under lease — enough to keep the mine open for another decade. In other words, those mining jobs aren't actually risk in the short term, and in the long term, there's time to help these individuals and communities transition to jobs in a clean energy economy.

Even if the Service is not primarily tasked with regulating greenhouse gas emissions or enforcing an energy policy, the agency does have a duty to protect forests and

so a profound interest in reducing greenhouse gas pollution. Opening Colorado's roadless forest to coal mining is just one of several recent decisions that the Forest Service has made that undercuts the agency's interests, making its job of managing the nation's forest more difficult and more costly. Last month, the agency opened the door to [oil and gas fracking on 18,000 acres of national forest in Ohio](#). The agency has also rejected proposals to stop coal mining on Forest Service-managed grasslands in Wyoming and refuses to take any action to require the capture of methane — a greenhouse gas on steroids — emitted from coal mines on its lands.

All of these actions run counter to Obama's bold rhetoric and leadership initiatives on climate. In vetoing the Keystone XL pipeline last November, Obama [explicitly acknowledged](#) that "we're going to have to keep some fossil fuels in the ground" to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. Unfortunately, the Forest Service hasn't gotten the memo.

It's time the Forest Service crafted a sustainable plan to combat climate change by reining in its own contribution to the problem. It can start by rejecting the proposal to open Colorado's roadless forest to coal mining.