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## **Wildland Firefighters and Native Youth Voice Support for '*Juliana v. US*'**

Press Statement by Timothy Ingalsbee and Michael Beasley, FUSEE Members. June 4, 2019

Fire is a vital process in the Earth's natural carbon cycle, and wildland fire has historically shaped many landscapes in the western U.S. However, human-caused climate change is increasing wildfire activity in forest, shrub, and grassland ecosystems around the world. The hotter, drier weather, frequent high wind events, and prolonged droughts of our warming world make fires ignite easier, spread faster, and burn more intensely.

In places where people have built flammable homes in naturally fire-prone places, wildfires in our altered climate are overwhelming firefighters' always-tenuous ability to contain and control fire spread, causing a rising toll of death and destruction of people and property that are unprepared for fire. Recent urban conflagrations in California have now made wildfire the dominant specter of climate change in the west. The best available science justifies urgent action now to change federal policies and practices in order to mitigate the effects of ongoing climate change on forests and fires.

Political schemes to increase logging, grazing, or firefighting as means of protecting communities or forests from wildfire offer false solutions with likely tragic consequences. These retrograde policy proposals will worsen the climate crisis through reducing forests' natural capacity to sequester and store carbon, and rural homes and communities will continue to be incinerated from uncontrollable wildfires igniting urban conflagrations.

Counter-intuitively, *more fire* rather than less fire is needed in order to increase long-term forest carbon storage. More frequent fire reduces the accumulation of dead, downed woody debris and understory brush, recycles their biomass into soil nutrients, and keeps carbon in big trees and organic soil. Charred logs and snags can also hold carbon for very long periods. More frequent burning actually creates more resilient and stable forest ecosystems, and through their ability to pull carbon out of the atmosphere and bank it in the soil, forests help stabilize the climate among myriad other ecological benefits. Indeed, forests are vital for stabilizing climate, and fire is vital for sustaining forests.

Americans need to distinguish fires burning in remote wildlands that are ecologically essential and inevitable, from fires burning in rural/suburban areas that are absolutely unacceptable and avoidable. Suppression crews and resources should be concentrated on protecting homes and communities rather than aggressively fighting fires in remote, uninhabited wildlands.

Historically, Native Americans' cultural burning practices provided an important source of fire in western landscapes. Native peoples used fire to enrich habitats providing food, fiber, medicine, and religious ceremonies, and to protect villages from unwanted wildfires. Native peoples survived prolonged droughts and warm/dry periods by wisely working with fire, not making warfare on wildfire. Their example from the past offers a hopeful model for the future.

Indigenous peoples' traditional ecological knowledge in combination with contemporary fire ecology science offers a potential path forward to managing forests and wildland fire in ways that may help rural communities and forest ecosystems adapt to ongoing climate change. Federal fire scientists and managers should collaborate with traditional Native fire practitioners to develop a new fire philosophy and set of practices for Ecological Fire Management that will restore native biodiversity, forest resiliency, ecosystem integrity, and climate stability.

The youth-led constitutional climate lawsuit '*Juliana v. US*' offers the best means of compelling urgent action and fundamental change in federal policies to eliminate fossil fuel burning, protect public forests from commercial logging, and restore indigenous cultural resource burning with ecological fire management. The effects of these changes will be to improve safety for firefighters and the public, decrease taxpayer costs for futile fire suppression actions, prevent urban fire disasters, and avoid the environmental damage and ecological degradation caused by aggressive firefighting.

FUSEE strongly endorses the efforts by youth to secure their legal rights to a stable climate and a healthy atmosphere for present and future generations of all species.