

**The Next Farm Bill: Forestry Initiatives
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Subcommittee on Conservation & Forestry
United States House of Representatives
Chairman Frank Lucas
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Thank you Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Fudge and Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the National Association of State Foresters (NASF). NASF represents our nation's state and territorial forestry organizations. There are some 750 million acres of forested land in the United States or about one-third of the continental US. Of those forested acres, approximately 40 percent are federal forests and the other 60 percent are state and private forests, the purview of our nation's State Foresters.

Here are some facts about state and private forests:

- State and private forests provide 90 percent of the nation's wood supply and critical benefits such as clean water and air, wildlife and fish habitat, recreation opportunities and more.
- Forest-based industry is consistently in the top ten manufacturing sectors in 45 of the 50 states and, in terms of total economic compensation, larger nationally than the motor vehicles and parts manufacturing industry.
- In 2016, 82 percent of the nation's wildfires occurred on state and private lands which accounted for about half of the forested acres burned.
- Unlike public lands, private forest lands are steadily being converted to other uses, fragmented, and developed – these landowners need access to markets and

technical and financial assistance to manage and maintain their forests for the public good.

- There are 136 million acres of urban and community forests in the U.S. that reduce energy costs, increase property values, mitigate storm water, enhance air quality, support jobs and more. The tree-trimming industry alone has revenue of \$17 billion annually. These forests are vital infrastructure that provide social, economic and environmental benefits to families and communities.

CALL TO ACTION: State Foresters believe that the Farm Bill is a unique opportunity to support rural America's economic backbone and improve the quality of life for all Americans by enhancing support for America's trees and forests. State Foresters recommend that the 2018 Farm Bill address these six priorities (please note that these are not listed in order of importance to State Foresters):

- 1) Provide support to State Foresters for updating state Forest Action Plans that collectively serve as a powerful strategic plan for the nation's forests. This should include federal agency direction making these all-lands plans a foundation and priority for driving public lands decision-making and resource allocation.
- 2) Provide federal and state forest managers with tools that increase the pace and on-the-ground results of active forest management, cross boundary work, and rapid and effective response to insects, disease and wildland fire. This includes but is not limited to expanded use of Good Neighbor Authority, the Insect and Disease Area Designations and categorical exclusions.
- 3) Support the development of new and expanded markets for forest products to provide all landowners, public and private, with more forest management options.
- 4) Strengthen forestry outreach, education, research and inventory programs that enhance the ability of State Foresters to assist private landowners and deliver federal and state programs serving all lands across the rural to urban spectrum. This

is fundamental in supporting trees and forests as America's green infrastructure. State Foresters support an initiative to reforest America to begin to address the emerging threat of forest loss from commercial and residential development as well as from the impacts of wildfire, insects and disease.

- 5) Include strong provisions for forests in conservation title programs that provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners, including reauthorization of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.
- 6) Provide for a comprehensive wildland fire funding fix. This is critically needed to address the increasing cost of wildfire suppression and the challenges this poses to the USDA Forest Service and the Department of the Interior capabilities. To the extent that the Farm Bill process can help facilitate a Congressional solution to this issue, NASF would support those efforts.

Strong partnerships between state forestry agencies and the federal agencies are critical to helping landowners manage their forests and to keeping the forests on the landscape that benefit all Americans. The following are Farm Bill programs of particular importance to State Foresters which have had significant positive impacts for America's forests.

Positive Impacts of Previous Farm Bills on America's Forests

Farm Bill authorizations have been instrumental in protecting and enhancing the ecological health of America's trees and forests and the economic health of rural America. State Foresters applaud the Committee for current and past efforts. The Forest Stewardship Program, which was first enacted in the 1990 Farm Bill, supports the states' field foresters who deliver technical assistance and stewardship plans to the nation's private forest owners. A forest owner with a forest stewardship plan is almost three times more likely to actively managing his or her land than a forest owner without a plan. This program produces significant quantifiable results in terms of actively managed forests and all of the ecological and economic benefits that ensue for rural America.

The Urban and Community Forestry program, also authorized in the 1990 Farm Bill, provides funding to care for the trees and forests closest to our nation's communities. Studies show direct linkages between trees and human health benefits, significant storm water treatment savings, absorption of pollutants, reduced crime rates, increased residential and commercial energy savings (heating and air conditioning), increased business activity and more. Investments in America's infrastructure needs to include support for the accompanying green infrastructure and encourage utilization of products from America's forests. Rebuilding America's green infrastructure starts with support for this program.

Recent Farm Bills have also been instrumental in elevating the role of forestry in conservation title programs. The financial and technical assistance provided through programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is invaluable in supporting small private landowners in their forest management objectives. State forestry agencies are proactively involved in working with the federal agencies in successfully implementing these programs. NASF appreciates the ongoing program support and attention in the Farm Bill that is responsible for significant on-the-ground results due to these partnerships.

Helping Lead the Forests in the Farm Bill Coalition

In generating ideas for your consideration in the 2018 Farm Bill, NASF is honored to be helping to lead the Forests in the Farm Bill (FIFB) coalition along with the American Forest Foundation, the National Wild Turkey Federation and The Nature Conservancy. The FIFB coalition includes almost 100 participating organizations who are working together to provide input on key provisions to help our nation's trees and forests and the American people who depend upon them.

Recent Farm Bill Provisions – Impacts and Possibilities

1) Broader Application of State Forest Action Plans

NASF thanks the Committee for including in the 2008 Farm Bill the direction for State Foresters to develop Statewide Forest Resource Assessments and Strategies, now known

as **state Forest Action Plans**. Together these publicly vetted plans *covering all ownership categories* provide foundational guidance for managing America’s forests. They have helped our state agencies focus limited resources on areas of greatest concern; e.g., an area where there is particularly high fire danger or threat of an insect outbreak. NASF would like to see these Forest Action Plans used as foundational documents in land management planning at all levels of government so that State Foresters can work with our federal and local partners to focus our limited resources on areas with the most critical challenges. State Foresters will be updating these plans, as required by federal law, and as such request the Committee authorize federal funding in order to assist State Foresters in this important process.

2) *Encouraging Improved Federal Forest management to support forest health and resilience across all-lands*

Without well-managed federal forests, active management of state and private forests will be difficult in parts of the nation, especially the West. Insects and disease know no boundaries, and neither do wildfires. Actively managed forest land can reduce deleterious impacts on both sides of a property line. Several Farm Bill authorities have significantly helped address the management challenges mounting on federal lands, and additional changes to these authorities would yield significant positive results.

- a. *Expanding Use of Good Neighbor Authority (GNA)*** that was permanently authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill, allowing States to act as “good neighbors” to the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to accomplish cross-boundary work. Today there are Good Neighbor agreements in 24 different states. A challenge that has emerged in the implementation of this authority is that the 2014 Farm Bill specifically excluded GNA projects with “construction, reconstruction, repair, or restoration of paved or permanent roads.” This significantly limits the use of this authority since most forest management projects require road repair such as culvert replacement. It should be remembered that any project which would be eligible for a GNA agreement with the State

Forester, would have been approved in a federal, publicly vetted National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. If states have marking crews and project administrators in place, it makes little sense to have the federal government expend funds to hire, train and transport additional field staff. Including an exception for road work limits the use of this authority in places where GNA could make significant improvements to the health and resilience of federal forests. This is simply good government.

- b. *Addressing Insect and Disease Infestations on federal forests*** is another important accomplishment of the 2014 Farm Bill. To date 36 governors have identified over 400 “treatment areas” in their states totaling over 55 million acres. In the Forest Service report to Congress for 2016 on implementation of this program, the agency identified 74 projects that had been completed using the streamlined planning authorities as provided. State Foresters are encouraged by this work and urge broader use made of this authority.

As an example, in Arkansas, the State Forestry Commission worked in partnership with the Ouachita National Forest to prepare the reasoning for the treatment areas based on National Insect and Disease Risk Maps (NIDRM), aerial reconnaissance and site visits by staff from both agencies, informing the Governor on his designation requests. Subsequently, through Categorical Exclusion (CE) authorities granted by the Farm Bill, the Ouachita National Forest in Arkansas has been able to treat almost 1,000 acres of priority insect-infested acres through eight individual projects, with another 2,000 acres planned in 2017. With strong partnerships and good communication, the Commission was successful with the authorities provided in the Farm Bill.

- c. *State Foresters would also like the Committee to consider a similar authority where there is significant wild fire threat.* NASF proposes that Governors would identify and map forested areas at the highest risk to wild fire, and that federal agencies be provided with similar streamlined planning authorities; e.g., categorical exclusions of up to 3,000 acres, to accomplish work in those areas identified on wildfire risk maps.

3) *Expanding Markets*

Without markets for wood products, the nation's forests will not be actively managed and the wildlife, watersheds, and rural Americans which depend on those forests will suffer. State Foresters are looking for opportunities to expand the use of biomass as a most basic source of renewable energy. State Foresters also support the Timber Innovation Act of 2016, which encourages additional use of wood products in building as well as research into additional market opportunities.

4) *Reforesting America*

As we look at the challenges facing the millions of private forest owners in this country, primary among these is the impending conversion of forest land, especially in the South, to residential and commercial development. The conversion and fragmentation of forestland associated with land development is a well-documented issue that defies one simple or programmatic solution. We do know that timely and targeted reforestation can be a helpful mitigating measure. In addition, assisting and encouraging local planning authorities to incorporate forest resource information in land use planning decisions could promote more favorable outcomes for forestland. Reforestation is also essential on landscapes and communities across the nation which have been impacted by fire and/or insects and disease, as well as in urban areas where trees provide critical green infrastructure and benefits. We need to look at programs to encourage the replanting of America's communities and forests and target those investments wisely as identified in state Forest Action Plans.

5) Reauthorize funding for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program

Thanks to the work of this committee, the 2014 Farm Bill created the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). This program has been used across the country to leverage state and local resources to support the needs of local forest landowners. In Virginia, an RCPP grant of \$1.3 million leveraged with matching funding from Virginia's Reforestation of Timberlands Program, has supported over 200 forest owners holding a total of 20,000 acres in improving the health, condition and habitat of their forested lands through dedicated Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding. The RCPP program enabled the Virginia Department of Forestry to look at the needs of the landowner base, and develop a program of work in partnership with NRCS that was tailored to successfully reaching the maximum number of landowners with federal assistance.

6) Pass a Wildfire Funding Fix

It will be challenging to address the management needs across America's private and public forests with a shrinking pool of available federal funding. In 1995 wildfire firefighting costs constituted 16 percent of the Forest Service budget. Today over 50 percent of the budget is consumed by fighting wildfires and the pool of funds available to support vital agency programs which can prevent some of the devastation and help America's forests is thus impacted. To the extent that the Farm Bill process can help facilitate a Congressional solution to this issue, **we ask Congress to please find a comprehensive wildfire funding solution quickly** for the USDA Forest Service and the Department of Interior. A comprehensive solution would address both late-season wildfire funding transfers and the erosion of agency budgets over time due to increasing wildfire suppression costs.

Conclusion

As we look to the challenges facing the millions of private forest owners in this country, we see many opportunities for this Farm Bill to assist in the stewardship of these lands. State and private forests provide many societal benefits including jobs and economic development, clean air and water, wildlife habitat for both game and non-game species and so much more.

In summary, State Foresters believe the Farm Bill is an opportunity to support rural America's economic backbone and improve the quality of life for all Americans by enhancing support for America's trees and forests. State Foresters are asking the Committee to focus on these five key areas:

- 1) Support State Foresters in updating state Forest Action Plans that collectively serve as a powerful strategic plan for the all of nation's trees and forests, including federal lands.
- 2) Increase the pace and on-the-ground results of active federal forest management, cross boundary work, and rapid and effective response to insects, disease and wildland fire.
- 3) Support the development of new and expanded markets for forest products.
- 4) Strengthen the ability of State Foresters to assist private landowners and deliver federal and state programs serving all lands across the rural to urban spectrum. Support a "Reforest America" initiative to begin to address forest conversion to development as well as the impacts of wild fire and insects and disease.
- 5) Include strong provisions for forests in conservation title programs that provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners, including reauthorization of funding for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.
- 6) To the extent that the Farm Bill process is able, facilitate a Congressional comprehensive wildfire funding solution

We look forward to working with the House Agriculture Committee, our partners with us here today and our federal partners, including the USDA Forest Service. Our common goal is the same: to support the health of America's trees and forests and the rural and urban communities which rely on them. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony. We look forward to working with you to provide the collective insights of the nation's State Foresters in developing the 2018 Farm Bill.