

Testimony of William Braford

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Regarding the Administration and Delivery of Conservation Programs

Before the House Agriculture Committee, Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Energy, and Research.

July 1, 2010

Chairman Holden, Ranking Member Goodlatte, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss my experiences with the administration and delivery of the USDA conservation programs, specifically focusing on delivery to America's over 10 million family forest owners.

My name is Bill Braford and I'm a consulting forester certified by the Society of American Foresters, an American Tree Farm System inspecting forester, and a tree and beef cattle farmer, based in Natural Bridge, Virginia. I've been a consulting forester for almost eight years now, having retired from the Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF) in 2002. At DOF, I served in numerous positions including as a service forester, a supervising forester, and as a forest water quality specialist, so I have extensive experience working with family forest owners.

In addition to this experience, I am one of only two consulting foresters in Virginia who are registered as Technical Service Providers through USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Today, I'd like to focus my testimony on three key areas that I think are of great importance to the delivery of the conservation programs to family forest owners:

- 1) The potential impact of conservation programs on family forest owners in Virginia and throughout the U.S.
- 2) Capacity for conservation program delivery to family forest owners in Virginia.
- 3) The NRCS Technical Service Provider program as it relates to forestry assistance

Potential Impact of Conservation Programs on Family Forests

The Commonwealth of Virginia is blessed with tremendous forest resources, over 63% of which are owned by roughly 373,000 families and individuals, not corporations or the federal or state government. Annually, Virginia's forests provide over \$27.5 billion in

economic benefits to the state, including \$23 billion from the forest products industry alone.

Many of the Commonwealth's family forest owners are just like farmers, some produce timber or other products, but most are interested in passing their land on in their family and having a place to hunt and fish and enjoy. Virginia family forest owners hold an average of 75 acres of forest.

Given the extensive family forest ownership in Virginia, there is great potential to utilize the USDA conservation programs to accomplish conservation goals and address the pressing challenges facing our forests.

As required in the 2008 Farm Bill's forestry title, the Virginia Department of Forestry just completed an assessment and strategy around the Commonwealth's forest resources—federal, state, and privately-owned.

The DOF identified a number of challenges for Virginia's forests in the coming years, including increasing wildfire threats, encroaching development placing pressure on forest owners to convert their forest to non-forest uses, sustainable management of forests as new markets emerge, and declines in reforestation rates.

Landowners that I work with are primarily interested in maintaining healthy forests that provide for future income along with other benefits such as wildlife habitat and just good shade to walk under on a hot summer day. Landowners in my area have stands of hardwoods that are nearing maturity and that are beginning to slow in growth. Landowners "east of the Blue Ridge Mountains" have both pine and hardwood forests. The pine component in eastern Virginia is mostly planted loblolly pine. The hardwoods develop naturally following timber harvests. The actual harvest of timber is forestry's primary tool for managing forests whether for wildlife, forest health or immediate income. Both long term and short term forest management planning are crucial in forest management. In 1975 I helped landowners in eastern Virginia reforest their cutover lands with the Forestry Incentives Program (FIP). These trees have been thinned once or twice and are now nearing maturity. Some have been harvested and replaced with younger trees. Conservation programs that provide some type of cost share have proven to be critical to offset the long term horizons in forestry investments. These programs need to be constant over time to maintain a good distribution of forest types and age classes. Healthy, growing forests are less vulnerable to insect and disease attacks.

As a forester with experience working in both the public and private sectors, I've seen the ebb and flow of conservation assistance for family forest owners and the challenges it presents to implementing these programs and helping landowners. I was excited to see the improvements this Committee made in the Farm Bill, to provide family forest

owners with access to the various conservation programs, just like farmers. This has great potential, given that farm bill program dollars are often more stable than relying on state program budgets.

In fact, mostly with the effort of DOF and the NRCS in the state, great progress has been made in implementing these programs. In the first year of implementation, the Farm Bill Conservation Programs provided roughly \$3.4 million in funding for forest projects in the state and enrolled 23,000 acres of forests in the Conservation Stewardship Program. Nationally, over \$143 million in EQIP funding alone, was spent on forestry practices.

Even with all this progress, I see a significant challenge ahead, in terms of delivery of these programs: the necessary capacity to truly serve family forest owners throughout the state does not exist in the federal or state government agencies.

Capacity for Conservation Program Delivery in Virginia and Nation-wide

As a consulting forester, I have learned how much landowners value the ability to have a resource professional walk with them on their property and help them achieve their vision for their forest. Federal, state and private sectors all have important roles in providing the infrastructure that delivers technical assistance to forest landowners.

Even as great progress has been made in implementing and delivering conservation programs to forest owners in the state, this progress is limited by the capacity in the federal and state agencies. The task of providing assistance to the over 300,000 forest owners in Virginia, let alone the over 10 million nation-wide, is daunting to say the least. Most of the assistance that's been delivered so far has come through the DOF, which is facing severe budget challenges.

Nationally, both the U.S. Forest Service and the National Association of State Foresters have expressed concern over the lack of capacity to fully serve America's family forest owners, so they can continue to provide the values and benefits we all gain from their forests.

In my view, the needed growth in capacity will have to come from non-governmental organizations and the private sector—through consulting foresters like myself. It will not come from larger agencies or more state and federal programs because of both limited funding and the political limits on the number of government personnel.

There are roughly 150 consulting foresters in Virginia, many of whom are interested in helping deliver the conservation programs to forest owners, if they are able to at least break even on this.

An additional challenge for delivery of conservation programs to forest owners is the current lack of outreach on the program opportunities to forest owners in Virginia. While NRCS, DOF, and Extension have done some outreach, they simply do not have the capacity to engage significant numbers and make them aware of the opportunities. Engaging the consulting forester community in a meaningful way on this enables a win-win for the consultant and the agencies.

Another challenge I see is the relative complication of these programs for forest owners. While the programs may also be complicated for farmers and ranchers, I think this issue is compounded by the fact that there are not many within the agencies that understand the programs and how they apply to forests, making it even more difficult for the landowner.

With my TSP certification, I have begun to talk with landowners about the program opportunities. At this point, only two owners have been interested in developing forest management plans, which are funded through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. These landowners were interested in developing a management plan because they wanted to get started on a plan to improve their forest. They also were very interested in getting started with a cost-share program, both to complete the plan and implement recommendations such as tree planting. I contracted with one of these landowners, to develop a management plan on about 15 acres of their forest. I was able to combine the initial visit with the field work which required about 5 hours. The parcels I examined were part of a subdivision of similar-sized wooded lots. The land was gently rolling with an oak-hickory forest type. The landowner specifically wanted a plan that would help improve wildlife habitat, maintain forest health, and improve the productive capacity of the forest.

The office process, completing all the required paperwork and details for the program, took me much more time than the field visit. Currently, I have had no additional request for forest management plans. I had anticipated additional work to justify my TSP processing time.

I did have an opportunity to sign up another landowner who was interested in managing his forest for timber, wildlife and recreation as well as qualifying for land use taxation. After suggesting the NRCS EQIP cost-share funding for the development of his forest management plan, we mutually decided that the process was too complex. I completed the plan for him with a bill for my time. He did not apply for cost share and I'm not aware of any practices he's completed to implement the plan.

The NRCS Technical Service Provider program as it relates to forestry assistance

One of the keys to successfully engaging the private sector in delivering conservation programs is the NRCS's Technical Service Provider (TSP) Program. It is my

understanding that this program was designed to engage the private sector, consulting foresters like me, in delivery of the conservation programs.

Well, I'm here today as one of only two consulting foresters in the Virginia that is a TSP—meaning landowners who wish to use a consultant to participate in the program, have only two foresters that they can engage. I may be efficient, but I certainly can't service the hundreds of thousands of landowners that could use some of the assistance under the programs. I also know the other consultant who is a TSP and I think he would face the same limitations.

The lack of consulting foresters that are participating in the TSP program is not for lack of interest. There are significant challenges with the Program that are evidenced by my experiences with becoming a TSP.

I've had experience with these kinds of programs in the past, and have seen them work successfully. For example, Virginia has utilized the US Forest Service's Forest Stewardship Program in the past to provide cost-share assistance to landowners who wanted forest stewardship plans written by consultant foresters. Consultant foresters and DOF provided the outreach. Many consulting foresters were trained to write stewardship plans and the direct contract funding seemed to work.

For training and qualification as a Technical Service Provider with NRCS, the process was much more involved. After a visit to the Farm Service Agency office, an address conflict and a few phone calls I successfully created and activated USDA eAuthentication account during November, 2009. Several times each week I logged onto the TechReg web site and navigated to the various resources pages including the USDA AgLearn site (usually in 2 hour sessions). I finally completed all of the online training in February, 2010. Some of the TSP orientation training was good.

Certified foresters (who already have extensive training and expertise) should not have to go through the forest management training. It was a good snow-covered winter to go through the process but I don't think I would have invested the time during a normal Virginia Winter. When I first signed up I was surprised to find out how little information there was about the Forest Management Plan 106 practice at the local NRCS offices. I fear that the outreach is not there because of the lack of TSP's and the TSP's are not there because of the lack of outreach (and the lack of potential for appropriate compensation).

Even as the TSP program faces significant challenges, I've heard from several national forester organizations that NRCS Chief Dave White has pledged his support and commitment to making the TSP program work for consultants, so TSPs become a viable option for landowners. He has instituted a streamlining team to improve the

certification process and make the TSP program more workable and he has established two more positions on the TSP staff to help improve this program.

In a survey of consulting foresters that have gone through the TSP process, it took an average of 48 hours over a 4 month period to complete certification with current computer access and requirements. One hundred percent of the respondents rated the process as difficult to very difficult. Remember, this is all non-billable time to a consultant. Most consultants agree that some orientation to the conservation program requirements is very appropriate and are willing to attend a day long workshop or similar orientation that is time efficient.

I think it would be very appropriate for NRCS to rely on the existing, very credible forester certification programs provided by organizations like the Society of American Foresters or the Association of Consulting Foresters for verifying a forester's qualifications. Currently, while NRCS has MOUs with these organizations, there is no streamlined process for foresters who are already proven to be exceptionally qualified foresters.

Another issue is the payment rates for TSPs. While it is technically correct that a resource professional can charge more than what is listed on the "Not-to-exceed rate" for services posted on the Internet-based TechReg website, this is impractical. In reality, the landowner who sees these rates feels that this is the maximum rate anyone should ever have to pay for such services, as stated by the government. We need to look for another way of expressing the cap on the maximum government contribution for services.

Payments funneled through the landowner as reimbursements make the landowner sometimes unable to fund the work. Contracting directly with NRCS would provide a more direct and responsive mechanism for participation by both the TSP and the landowner. We suggest that NRCS continue to explore expansion of bundling services through cooperative agreements and requests-for-proposals. Larger consulting firms might be attracted to provide technical assistance through such requests.

There have been other problematic issues with the TSP program as well throughout the country. In some cases, states encouraged foresters to become certified, which they did, only to decide later that they would not offer forestry practices, leaving the consultant hanging after investing time and resources.

While there are many challenges with the current TSP program, I don't believe they are insurmountable. Consulting foresters truly do want to help landowners accomplish conservation objectives on their land and manage their land sustainably and are willing to work hard alongside federal and state employees to make it happen.

In conclusion, I hope I've provided the Committee today with some valuable insights regarding the current delivery of the conservation programs to Virginia's family forest owners, based on my experiences and the experiences of others with whom I have spoken. The 2008 Farm Bill provided tremendous opportunities for improved conservation on family forest lands, in addition to agricultural lands. It's no surprise that this significant shift in direction of the programs has led to some bottlenecks and issues with respect to program delivery.

Successful implementation and delivery to family forest owners is possible, if improvements are made to engage the nation's consulting foresters, who stand ready and willing to assist in this important effort.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Committee on Agriculture

U. S. House of Representatives

Information Required From Non-governmental Witnesses

1. **Name:** William L. Braford
2. **Business Address:** P O Box 55, Natural Bridge Station, VA 24579
3. **Business Phone Number:** (540) 291-4701
4. **Organization you represent:** American Forest Foundation
5. **Occupational, employment, or work-related experience:** Service Forester, District Forester, Environmental Specialist-Water Quality (Virginia Department of Forestry 1973-2002); Private Forestry Consultant, Beef Cattle Farmer and Tree Farmer (2002 – present); Technical Service Provider – Forestry for NRCS (2/23/2010 – present)
6. **Special training, education or professional experience:** B.S. Forestry & Wildlife-Forest Management Option- Virginia Tech-1969; Society of American Foresters Certified Forester #921; American Tree Farm Qualified Inspector ID 42951; Virginia Sharp Logger #361; Current Board of Directors Member, Virginia Forestry Association
7. **If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list the capacity in which you are representing that organization, including any offices or elected positions you hold:**

Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Required Witness Disclosure Form

House Rules* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2007.

Name: WILLIAM L. BRAFORD
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1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2007, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do **NOT** require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:

Source: N/A Amount: _____
Source: N/A Amount: _____

2. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) the organization has received since October 1, 2007, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:

Source: _____ Amount: _____
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Please check here if this form is NOT applicable to you: _____

Signature: William L. Bradford

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