

Written Statement for the Record of

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Before The

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Field Hearing to Review U.S. agriculture policy in Advance of the 2012 Farm Bill

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Good morning and welcome to Georgia. I am Robert Farris, the State Forester for Georgia. Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear here today to review U.S. Agriculture policy as you prepare for the 2012 Farm Bill.

Georgia has over 24 million acres of forestland, of which 92 percent is privately owned. Georgia has more privately-owned, commercially available forestland than any other state in the nation. By any measures you care to use, forestry is important to Georgia. In addition to its many environmental and social benefits, forestry has a \$28 billion economic impact on our state and provides more than 128,000 jobs for Georgia citizens. You will find similar statistics throughout the southern U.S., which is well-known as the "wood basket of the world."

I say all of this to emphasize that our forestlands are a strategic national resource, and the actions this Committee takes on the 2012 Farm Bill are of critical importance to Georgia, the South and our entire nation. I would like to take this opportunity to review what we see as growing challenges and opportunities to manage Georgia's forestry resource.

#### State Assessments and Strategies

The Forestry Title of the 2008 Farm Bill requires that state forestry agencies prepare comprehensive assessments and strategic plans as a condition of receiving federal funds pursuant to the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act. These plans must be completed and submitted to the U.S. Forest Service by June 18, 2010. These evaluations have been a significant undertaking, involving considerable collaboration with resource management agencies, organizations, and the public at large. The process has produced important findings and guidance about major issues, priorities and strategic guidance for state and federal programs, including regional and national perspectives on forest policy. During the

next five years, as states engage with the Forest Service and other partners to implement these plans, many factors will require consideration which may also influence development of 2012 Farm Bill:

- Numerous strategies will require significant long-term participation and expanded investment of Cooperative Forestry Assistance and Conservation Title programs, including forestry measures contained in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Conservation Stewardship Program.
- State plans have helped identify landscape-level initiatives that will require interagency cooperation and multi-program coordination to achieve objectives; depending upon the scope and scale of these projects, the 2012 Farm Bill may facilitate organization and implementation of these types of projects, particularly in cases of multi-state initiatives.
- The current set of Cooperative Forestry Assistance Programs may not be the best configuration of federal services and policies to efficiently assist states in meeting the challenges identified in the planning process; the 2012 Farm Bill may present opportunities to restructure those programs accordingly.

#### Budget and Appropriation Processes

The State Assessment and Strategies process, as well as funding challenges experienced by most states, have generated discussion about potential improved efficiencies in budget development, appropriations and grants administration. More flexibility is likely needed in the program funding allocation process for Cooperative Forestry Assistance. Emphasis should be placed on provisions that assure dependable levels of funding for federal programs as well as additional opportunities to participate in regional and national initiatives which may be identified through the State Assessment and Strategies process. Moreover, expanded flexibility is encouraged for state-specific priorities. Reallocating a portion of funding among Cooperative Forestry Assistance programs may more effectively address high priority forest resource issues. Such alternatives will require careful discussion among the U.S. Forest Service, National Association of State Foresters, and House and Senate Agriculture and Appropriation Committees. The 2012 Farm Bill may present opportunities to institutionalize some of these concepts.

#### Climate Mitigation and Adaptation

Congressional legislation to develop policies for the management of greenhouse gas emissions remains undefined. However, efforts continue to be made to quantify carbon sequestration and resolve climate change issues. The 2008 Farm Bill set an important stage for potential program development through the current USDA Office of Environmental Markets. As State Assessments and Strategies are completed, more will be known and understood about opportunities, but several concepts may generate additional attention in the 2012 Farm Bill:

- Certain Conservation Title Programs may need enhancement to better address forest adaptation strategies.
- As metrics for carbon storage become more reliable and accountable, specific payment programs may be appropriate in which landowner options to participate in marketplace activities are limited or not preferred.

- Debates about carbon mitigation policies notwithstanding, there is consistent agreement that afforestation and reforestation produce carbon sequestration benefits. Accordingly, initiatives to significantly expand tree planting may be an important consideration in the 2012 Farm Bill.
- A re-examination and revision of the Healthy Forest Reserve Program to address both climate mitigation and adaptation may be suggested.

### Water and our Forestlands

Water issues have often been considered a concern of the western United States. However, the recent escalation of the “Water Wars” between Georgia, Alabama and Florida along with federal court opinions clearly demonstrates that water quantity and quality are of ever-growing concern here in the south. Two out of every three drops of rain that fall in Georgia land on our forests, which filter the water and enhance water intake to our streams. The maintenance and proper management of our working forests play a large and critical role in the quality and quantity of our water.

The 2012 Farm Bill may provide opportunities to better recognize and support the role of our extremely effective Forest Water Quality Best Management Practices (BMPs). The recently completed Georgia Statewide Water Management Plan recognizes our BMPs as a model program that other land use practitioners should emulate. We have concerns about recent U.S. Corp of Engineers rulings and Congressional proposals to change the Clean Water Act and the potential adverse effects on silvicultural exemptions.

### Renewable Energy and Woody Biomass

Debates and discussions continue regarding the best combination of federal and state programs to manage woody biomass as a component of national renewable energy policy and a significant contributor to achieving energy independence. The 2008 Farm Bill's definition for renewable biomass assures reliable and sustainable supplies for meeting such objectives. Healthy and dependable forest product markets are essential for encouraging landowner investment in the establishment and expansion of forest cover, which is otherwise at risk in many areas throughout the South. With continued improvements in technology for the cost-effective utilization of woody biomass for thermal energy, generation of electricity and cellulosic-based fuels, it is more likely that forest resources and their associated multiple benefits will be enhanced. Our view is that one of best ways to conserve our forests and the many economic, environmental and social benefits they provide is to ensure that it remains economically viable for private forest landowners to keep their working forests working. The most effective and efficient way to accomplish this is to ensure that traditional forest markets are maintained and emerging markets are developed by creating forest policies and incentives that promote forest utilization, timber production and wood product research and development. The role of the 2012 Farm Bill in this regard is not certain, but measures to reaffirm and advance sustainable production of woody biomass would seem appropriate. The cooperative efforts between federal and state forestry agencies to implement the Forest Inventory Analysis Program and the Forest Stewardship Program are excellent examples of measures that reaffirm and advance forest sustainability.

### Forest Inventory and Analysis

The Forest Inventory and Analysis Program (FIA) of the U.S. Forest Service is a fundamental database for understanding the current and potential future condition of forest resources. The analytical and reporting services of FIA are routinely relied upon at multiple levels of forest resource assessment. With expanding attention to issues associated with climate, renewable energy, landscape level conservation and forest health, FIA will increasingly be expected to provide meaningful support to state forestry agencies and other forest resource managers. Potential 2012 Farm Bill considerations may include the following:

- Develop expanded and robust inventory and analysis services including remote sensing capabilities at statistical scales of resolution to support facility level supply/demand and impact assessments.
- Achieve inventory and analysis capabilities to assess ecosystem services, particularly carbon sequestration.
- Develop analytical measures to assist in understanding climate adaptation potential.

#### Status of 2008 Farm Bill Authorizations

The status of some forestry-related programs and authorities established in the 2008 Farm Bill remains uncertain or has not been fully implemented. The Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP) is intended to provide direct services and recovery capabilities for forestlands impacted by natural disasters. To date, no progress to implement provisions of that program has been made. However, we understand that following the recent tornado events in Mississippi, USDA expressed intentions to expedite administrative procedures necessary to implement EFRP. In any event, it would be unfortunate to experience future losses, such as potential damages from the upcoming 2010 hurricane season.

The Biomass Crop Assistance Program (BCAP) has experienced difficulties as it was preliminarily implemented under a Notice of Funding Availability. Forestry agencies including the National Association of State Foresters have filed extensive comments on the proposed rules, which we trust will resolve some of the problems and inefficiencies initially encountered. We understand as well that issues remain regarding disparities in authorized funding levels and expected program needs. In any event, it is our view that BCAP can generate increased investment and commitment to sustainable forest resource management through the requisite forest stewardship plans and technical assistance provisions of that program.

As part of the Forestry Title, the Forest Resource Coordination Committee (FRCC) was established to coordinate nonindustrial private forestry activities within USDA. Among its duties is the significant task of providing advice on allocation of funds, including those subject to competitive application. Thus far, the Committee has not been established and discussions about the findings and implications of the State Assessment and Strategies process may take place without the benefit of FRCC participation. Efforts by the House Agriculture Committee to encourage prompt establishment of the Committee would be appreciated.

We are very grateful for the tremendous work you are doing for American citizens. On behalf of the Georgia Forest Commission, thank you for your recognition of the strategic importance of our nation's forests. We appreciate your track record of working hard to do the right things to maintain our working forests, for taking time to hear from people across the country, appropriately addressing our challenges and for enabling legislation that capitalizes on emerging opportunities. The ongoing partnership between state and federal agencies, non-government organizations and private industry are critical to the successful conservation and utilization of our nation's forests.

Thank you for your time and commitment. I would be happy to address any questions.