



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE FORESTERS

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**Written Testimony of the National Association of State Foresters (NASF)
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Submitted to the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Forestry and Horticulture
Hearing on “Promoting Forest Health and Resiliency Through
Improved Active Management”
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The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) is pleased to provide written testimony to the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Forestry and Horticulture for this important hearing on *Promoting Forest Health and Resiliency Through Improved Active Management*. Thank you, Chairman LaMalfa, Ranking Member Salinas, and members of the subcommittee for holding this hearing today and for the opportunity to testify on behalf of NASF.

Established in 1920, the National Association of State Foresters is a non-profit organization composed of the directors of forestry agencies in the 50 states, five U.S. territories, three nations in compacts of free association with the U.S., and the District of Columbia. State Forestry Agencies have been tasked with implementing national forest policy priorities for over a century, underpinned by direction and authorities provided by the House and Senate Agriculture Committee to achieve the necessary scale and coordination that is otherwise out of reach. Since the 2008 Farm Bill, this role has been supported by State Forest Action Plans, guiding State Forestry Agencies in active management and protection of state and private forests, which encompass nearly two-thirds of all forests nationwide. State Foresters provide technical assistance to private landowners and directly manage 76 million acres of state-owned forestland that supply critical timber for domestic uses. In addition, State Foresters and their agencies work to improve the health, resilience, and productivity of federal lands through partnerships such as Shared Stewardship Agreements and Farm Bill authorities such as Good Neighbor Authority and cross-boundary hazardous fuel reduction projects.

In collaboration with local governments and federal agencies, State Foresters also work to advance resilient landscapes and fire-adapted communities and provide safe, effective wildfire response on 1.5 billion acres, a large portion of which is in the wildland-urban interface. NASF – the only nonfederal partner serving on the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group at the National Interagency Fire Center – is a critical part of the national interagency coordination that provides response on federal lands and manages the nation’s largest, most complex fires. Collectively, State Forestry Agencies and local fire departments respond to 80 percent of fires nationwide and in 2024 over a third of state and local dispatches through the National Interagency Fire Center were deployed to battle fires on federal lands.

As State Forester and Director of the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire & State Lands, my agency is responsible for forest health, responding to wildland fires and managing sovereign lands in Utah. In Utah the approach to fighting wildfire is an interagency model through coordinated efforts with State, Federal and local partners. This collaborative framework, referred to as the Cooperative Wildfire System, helps fund large fires throughout the state but also focuses on prevention, preparedness and mitigation efforts in exchange for that ability to delegate.

Meaningful, landscape-scale active forest management is spurred and strengthened by federal investment provided through the Farm Bill and conveyed through the USDA Forest Service's State, Private, and Tribal Forestry mission area, with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency also playing significant partnership roles. We thank the Committee for their work in the *Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2024* to capture a number of State Forester priorities to bring these tools and resources to bear and offer the following perspectives and priorities as the Committee works towards a 2025 Farm Bill.

Cooperative Federal Land Management through State Forestry Agencies

State Forestry Agencies provide boots-on-the-ground capacity to get the work done quickly and effectively by leveraging a wide range of investments made through the Forest Service and other federal partners. Thanks to the support under the first Trump Administration, over 30 states took the initiative to formalize their commitments to greater partnership and collaboration through Shared Stewardship Agreements with the Forest Service and other agencies. State Forestry Agencies have played a vital role in ensuring the success of the collaborative shared stewardship framework by coordinating key partners and facilitating active management across all ownerships including federal lands.

Utah is on our second Shared Stewardship agreement, the first being signed in 2019 and the second in 2022. Utah has had great success in this area bringing partners and stakeholders to focus on the right work, in the right place at the right scale. A total of \$30 million has been invested in this program in active forest management actions which include work in critical watersheds that are at high risk for wildfires.

With the President's March 2025 Executive Order 14225 *Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production* and the Forest Service *National Active Management Strategy*, there has been renewed emphasis on the role of states in assisting with addressing the pressing challenges facing our federal forests, namely reducing catastrophic wildfire risk and revitalizing rural economies. NASF supports the Trump Administration's bold and proactive approach to forest management and affirms our continued commitment to partnering across jurisdictions. Through Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) and other authorities, State Forestry Agencies are able to support the

Forest Service in carrying out critical active management treatments to meet domestic timber production goals, support industry partners, and reduce wildfire risk across forested landscapes.

Utah has taken a proactive approach with the Forest Service engaging in conversations around a renewed Shared Stewardship agreement or other supported model where we partner together in land management. Utah values the partnerships we have built in the state and we support carrying out critical management objectives together to meet increased acreage targets, production goals, the ability to better serve our industry partners and reduce the wildfire risk in our rural communities revitalizing these communities for our future generations.

GNA has been proven time and again as an effective tool for states and the Forest Service to increase the pace and scale of improvements to forests and watersheds, reducing wildfire risks, supporting cross-boundary projects and coordination, and providing job opportunities for rural communities. GNA has been utilized by over two-thirds of the nation's State Forestry Agencies since its enactment in the 2014 Farm Bill. In this time, 13 state forestry agencies in the western United States have reported a cumulative 170 agreements with the Forest Service, completing over 66,000 acres of fuels and forest health projects and 291 timber sales across almost 98,000 acres. These timber sales have generated over 840 million board feet of timber and a combined net value in excess of \$80 million.

However, the ability for GNA meet the current needs on federal lands is dependent on four critical levers: sustained funding for the Forest Service's State, Private, and Tribal Forestry programs, integrated State and Federal planning for activities, treatments, and long-term goals, dedicated and predictable funding for state GNA projects, and state discretion and operational autonomy under GNA to act effectively on needed active forest management activities. State staff with GNA responsibilities are frequently supported by a broad range of federal funding including State, Private, and Tribal Forestry programs, and a recent survey of NASF membership indicated that on average State Forestry Agencies would lose 20 percent of their workforce capacity if the programs were defunded, with individual agency losses as high as 80 percent.

Additionally, the role of dedicated and predictable funding for State Forestry Agencies to perform GNA cannot be understated, especially as not all states and National Forest System lands have robust timber markets and/or marketable timber that can sustain a state GNA program. Given the Forest Service's request for states to contribute to Congress and the Administration's goal of increasing timber harvest and mitigating wildfire risk, additional federal funds will be required to bolster state GNA programs and projects. As further strides are made between State Forestry Agencies and the Forest Service on new Shared Stewardship Agreements and an increased utilization of GNA – including the final implementation of the flexibilities provided by the EXPLORE Act – we look forward to working with the Committee on any

statutory amendments for the 2025 Farm Bill to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of existing authorities.

In addition to GNA, NASF acknowledges and thanks the Committee for a number of reauthorizations and expansions of cross-boundary and federal forest management authorities in the *Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2024*, including:

- *Reauthorization of Cross-boundary Hazardous Fuel Reduction Projects (Section 8202)* - The threat posed by wildland fire requires a comprehensive all-lands approach to proactive forest management and prevent the spread of wildfire between jurisdictions. First championed by then-Senator Ted Stevens in Fiscal Year 2002, cross-boundary hazardous fuels reduction funding is allocated by Congressional direction to facilitate coordinated fuels reduction on private lands in proximity to National Forest System lands. This critical funding has provided flexibility for the Forest Service to use the money where it provides the most benefit for community protection. With inconsistent national distribution of this capacity under the Fiscal Year 2025 Continuing Resolution, we look forward to working with the Committee to reauthorize this authority in the 2025 Farm Bill.
- *Amending the Definition of At-Risk Community (Section 8201)* - The Healthy Forest Restoration Act contains a problematic definition for “at-risk community” which is restricted to wildland urban interface communities only within the vicinity of Federal lands. This language has long been viewed as a problem by NASF because it excludes communities that have been identified as “at risk” by state wildfire risk assessments and other collaboratively developed tools used by federal and state agencies, such as the Pacific Northwest Quantitative Wildfire Risk Assessment and the Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal.
- *National Forest System Management Authorities (Sections 8402, 8403, 8404, and 8411)* - NASF is grateful for the Committee’s inclusion of the “Cottonwood Fix” – clarifying the criteria under which federal land managers are not required to re-initiate Endangered Species Act consultation – and the reauthorization and expansion of categorical exclusions for wildfire resilience projects, fuel breaks, and insect and disease projects. These provisions can meaningfully increase the pace and scale of cross-boundary forest management and wildfire mitigation work.
- *Joint Chiefs’ Landscape Restoration Partnership Program (Section 8420)* - NASF appreciates the Committee extending the authorization for the Joint Chiefs’ Program which – through bringing to bear resources and expertise of the Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service – has improved the health and resilience of forest landscapes across National Forest System lands and state, Tribal, and private land.

Sustaining Active Management of State and Private Forests through the Farm Bill

Since the turn of the 20th century, Congress has recognized and reinforced the need for partnership between the federal government and states for the benefit of actively managing all of America's forests – private, state, and federal. Only a few years after the Forest Service was created, Congress created the nexus between the Forest Service and State Forestry Agencies with the Weeks Act of 1911 and the Clarke-McNary Act of 1924, authorizing technical and financial assistance to states for wildfire control and post-fire reforestation. Subsequent legislative milestones in the form of the Cooperative Forest Management Act of 1950, the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1978, the 1990 Farm Bill, and every Farm Bill since have further provided Congressional direction and authorities to the Forest Service and its role as a key partner to State Forestry Agencies in the active management of state and private forest lands.

Forested lands in Utah are one of the state's most valuable natural resources. They provide scenic beauty, wildlife habitat, clean air and supply timber products. Most of the forested lands in the state are held by private landowners or by the Forest Service. Each of the Division's six area offices employs a forester who works with landowners and to provide assistance to those wishing to utilize, improve or conserve their forested lands, this includes reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire. This is made possible through Congressional direction, authorities and funding. It plays an important role in the work we do in Utah and creates direct results on the ground cross-boundary benefiting communities and future generations to come.

NASF is grateful for the Committee's work in the *Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2024* to capture a number of State Foresters' key national priorities to sustain the active management of state and private forestlands – or two-thirds of all forests nationwide – including:

- *State Forest Action Plan Implementation Capacity (Section 8101)* - Mandated by the 2008 Farm Bill, State Forest Action Plans offer practical and comprehensive roadmaps for investing federal, state, local, and private resources where they can be most effective in achieving national conservation goals. Collectively, State Forest Action Plans make up one strategic plan for America's forests. States have consistently advocated for funding flexibility – that is the ability for each state to receive funds that allow for the use of all the authorities of the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act. By eliminating the color of money associated with several different federal programs, State Forestry Agencies will be able to more effectively utilize the resources needed to implement the forest management goals of their individual State Forest Action Plans, while bringing state, non-profit, and philanthropic support that states are uniquely able to unlock.
- *Supporting Reforestation through the Forest Service's Reforestation, Nurseries and Genetic Resources (RNGR) Program (Section 8305)* - First created in 2001, the Forest Service's

RNGR Program provides assistance to States, tribes and other partners in native plant seed and seedling production, focusing on adequate supplies of seedlings for conservation and reforestation, propagation and planting methods, cost-effective production and planting techniques, and - ultimately - tree planting to address forest resilience, land reclamation, and land rehabilitation after extreme fire events or other natural disasters impacting forests. However, because the program has been governed through Memorandums of Understanding between agency deputy areas rather than as a standalone program, the significant national reforestation demands on federal, state, and private lands, and an estimated \$160 million in unmet infrastructure needs at state and tribal nurseries that serve all landownerships, codifying and resourcing the RNGR Program is critical. We greatly appreciate the Committee's work on including this provision and ask for the addition of a critical pay-for mechanism – identified funding from the Forest Service's Reforestation Trust Fund – that is important for ensuring the permanent nursery infrastructure program does not redirect funds from other programs necessary for executing national forestry priorities.

- *Bolstering the Emergency Forest Restoration Program (Section 8708)* - The Emergency Forest Restoration Program – administered by the Farm Service Agency with technical expertise from the Forest Service – was codified in the 2008 Farm Bill and has proven to be woefully inadequate and too cumbersome for most landowners to benefit from. NASF applauds the work of the Committee to allow for impacted private forest landowners to receive 75 percent of cost of payment up front, as opposed to a program design based on reimbursement. Timely and ecologically proper timber salvage and reforestation helps ensure our nation's private forestlands continue to provide public benefits like clean air and water, recreational opportunities, rural economic stimulus and more.

NASF also looks forward to working with the Committee to address two further priorities as it considers a 2025 Farm Bill:

- *Utilizing the Conservation Reserve Program* - In the face of increasing conversion of farm and forestland to other uses like commercial and residential development and the more recent proliferation of solar farms – especially in the Southeastern United States – the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a critical incentive for keeping forests as forests. CRP-trees acres under contract have declined precipitously in the past decade and to reverse this trend, changes to current policy are needed. These include allowing more re-enrollment opportunities for stands of trees of all species on the condition they are being actively managed to maintain healthy stand conditions, financial support of mid-contract management through thinning and prescribed fire, and allowing for the eventuality of harvesting stands at maturity as part of sustainable forest management. CRP-tree contracts are a high priority for states in many parts of the country, especially the pine belt in the South. These policy needs would allow for states to retain discretion on setting their own priorities for CRP.

- *Modernizing Eligibility for the Forest Service's Volunteer Fire Assistance Program* - The Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) Program provides financial capacity to volunteer fire departments (VFDs) protecting small, rural communities. State and locals respond to 80 percent of wildland fires nationwide and with expansion of the wildland-urban interface, the frequency and complexity of fire has necessitated improved collaboration with volunteer organizations. However, the program's statutory eligibility requirements are over 40 years old and do not acknowledge the reduced volunteerism, population growth in areas served by existing VFDs, and some challenges in VFDs meeting the match requirements. NASF is aligned with the National Volunteer Fire Council and the International Association of Fire Chiefs in proposing changing the qualifying community population threshold from 10,000 to 15,000 or less, changing the percent volunteer firefighting personnel threshold from 80 percent to 70 percent or more, and allowing for Secretarial discretion on waiving match requirement for VFDs, similar to other fire and forestry programs.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today and provide testimony on behalf of NASF. We appreciate the ongoing work of this Subcommittee to provide federal and state forest managers, as well as private landowners, with tools that increase the pace and scale of active forest management, cross-boundary work, and rapid and effective response to insects, disease and wildland fire. We look forward to working with the Subcommittee, the Full Committee, and our federal partners to provide the collective insights of the nation's State Foresters in a final 2025 Farm Bill.

I look forward to answering any questions the Subcommittee may have.