

**Written Public Testimony of the National Association of State Foresters
Submitted to the House Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Concerning FY 2016 USDA Forest Service Appropriations**

March 18, 2015

The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) appreciates the opportunity to submit written public testimony to the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies regarding our fiscal year (FY) 2016 appropriations recommendations. Our priorities focus primarily on appropriations for the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) State and Private Forestry (S&PF) programs.

State foresters deliver technical and financial assistance, along with forest health, water and wildfire protection for more than two-thirds of the nation's 751 million acres of forests. The Forest Service S&PF mission area provides vital support to deliver these services, which contribute to the socioeconomic and environmental health of rural and urban areas. The comprehensive process for delivering these services is articulated in each State's Forest Resource Assessment and Strategy (Forest Action Plan), authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill and continued in the Agriculture Act of 2014. S&PF programs provide a significant return on the federal investment by leveraging the boots-on-the-ground and financial resources of state agencies to deliver assistance to forest landowners, tribes, and communities. As federal and state governments continue to face financial challenges, state foresters, in partnership with the S&PF mission area of the Forest Service, are best positioned to maximize effectiveness of available resources by focusing work on priority forest issues where resources are needed most.

Your support of the following programs is critical to helping states address the many and varied challenges outlined in Forest Action Plans.

Wildland Fire and Forest Fuels

Wildland Fire Funding: A relatively light fire season in several geographic areas meant that no transfers from non-fire programs to fire suppression were required in FY 2014 at the Forest Service or the Department of the Interior. Nonetheless, the Forest Service was still forced to prepare for transfers, which meant stopping ongoing work in the field and halting new contracts. These actions frustrate and delay on-the-ground management that is critical to the prevention and mitigation of future wildfire. **We ask for your continued support of the long-term solution to stop future transfers through the bi-partisan Wildfire Disaster Funding Act.**

State Fire Assistance: More people living in fire-prone landscapes, high fuel loads, drought, and unhealthy landscapes are among the factors that led most state foresters to identify wildland fire as a priority issue in their Forest Action Plans. We now grapple with increasingly expensive and complex wildland fires - fires that frequently threaten human life and property. In 2014, more than 63,600 wildland fires burned nearly 3.6 million acres.¹ State and local agencies respond to the majority of wildfires across the country; in 2014 state and local agencies were responsible for responding to 50,799 (80%) of 63,612 reported wildfires across all jurisdictions.²

¹ National Interagency Fire Center, Historical Wildland Fire Summaries, pg. 9. Last accessed Feb. 24, 2015 at http://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/intelligence/2014_Statsum/2014Stats&Summ.html.

² *Id.*

State Fire Assistance (SFA) is the fundamental federal mechanism for assisting states and local fire departments in responding to wildland fires and in conducting management activities that mitigate fire risk on non-federal lands. SFA also helps train and equip local first responders who are often first to arrive at a wildland fire incident and who play a crucial role in keeping fires and their costs as small as possible. A small investment of SFA funds supports state forestry agencies in accessing and repurposing equipment from the Federal Excess Personal Property and the Firefighter Property programs. Between 2008 and 2012 these two programs have delivered more than \$150 million annually in equipment for use by state and local first responders.

The FY 2016 Forest Service Budget Justification highlights a successful wildfire mitigation project in Colorado where a \$300,000 investment before the Waldo Canyon fire helped protect the community and avoid more than \$77 million in additional losses from that destructive wildfire. By directing resources to actions that help reduce the number of large wildland fires—including prevention education, preparedness activities, and fuels mitigation—the SFA program directly addresses concerns over rising wildland fire suppression costs while also reducing wildland fire risk to communities.

In FY 2014, SFA directly funded hazardous fuel treatments on 111,002 acres (with another 120,241 acres treated with leveraged funding) and provided assistance to communities around the country, supporting 3,117 risk assessment and fire management planning projects and 9,972 prevention and education programs.³ ***NASF supports funding the State Fire Assistance program at \$86 million in FY 2016.***

Forest Pests and Invasive Plants

Also among the greatest threats identified in the Forest Action Plans are native and non-native pests and diseases. These pests and diseases have the potential to displace native trees, shrubs and other vegetation types in forests; the Forest Service estimates that hundreds of native and nonnative insects and diseases damage the nation's forests each year. The growing number of damaging pests and diseases are often introduced and spread by way of wooden shipping materials, movement of firewood, and through various types of recreation. In 2010, approximately 6.4 million acres suffered mortality from insects and diseases⁴ and there is an estimated 81.3 million acres at risk of attack by insects and disease over the next 15 years.⁵ These losses threaten clean and abundant water availability, wildlife habitat, clean air, and other environmental services. Further, extensive areas of high insect or disease mortality can set the stage for large-scale, catastrophic wildfire.

The Cooperative Forest Health Management program supports activities related to prevention, monitoring, suppression, and eradication of insects, diseases, and plants through provision of technical and financial assistance to states and territories to maintain healthy, productive forest ecosystems on non-federal forest lands. The Cooperative Forest Health Management program plays a critical part in protecting communities already facing outbreaks and in preventing exposure of more forests and trees to the devastating and costly effects of exotic and invasive

³ USDA Forest Service FY 2016 Budget Justification at pg. 270.

⁴ Man, Gary. 2011. Major Forest Insect and Disease Conditions in the United States: 2010 Update. Last accessed on March, 5, 2015 at: http://www.fs.fed.us/foresthealth/publications/ConditionsReport_2011.pdf

⁵ Tkacz, Bory, et al. 2014. NIDRM 2012 Report Files: Executive Summary. Last accessed on March, 5, 2015 at: http://www.fs.fed.us/foresthealth/technology/pdfs/2012_RiskMap_Exec_summary.pdf

pests and pathogens. *NASF supports funding the Forest Health—Cooperative Lands Program at \$48 million in FY 2016.*

Assisting Landowners and Maintaining Working Forest Landscapes – Forest Stewardship Program

Working forest landscapes are a key part of the rural landscape, providing an estimated 900,000 jobs, clean water, wood products, and other essential services to millions of Americans. Private forests make up two-thirds of all the forestland in the United States and support an average of eight jobs per 1,000 acres.⁶ However, The Forest Service estimates that 57 million acres of private forests in the U.S. are at risk of conversion to urban development over the next two decades. Programs like the Forest Stewardship Program and Forest Legacy Program are key tools identified in the Forest Action Plans for keeping working forests intact and for providing a full suite of benefits to society.

The Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) is the most extensive family forest-owner assistance program in the country. Management assistance is delivered in cooperation with state forestry agencies through technical assistance services and the development and implementation of Forest Stewardship Plans. The program works to ensure that private landowners have the best information to help them manage their land for wildlife, recreation, aesthetics, timber production, and many other goals. In FY 2014, nearly 26 million acres of private forest lands across the nation were managed under Forest Stewardship Plans, and FSP supported direct outreach to roughly 424,000 landowners.⁷ The technical assistance provided through FSP is a gateway to other effective USDA, state, and private sector programs designed to help keep working forests intact. For instance, the FSP enables landowners to participate in USDA programs including the Forest Legacy Program and Environmental Quality Incentives Program. *NASF supports funding the Forest Stewardship Program at \$29 million in FY 2016.*

Urban and Community Forest Management Challenges

Urban forests are important to achieving energy savings, improved air quality, neighborhood stability, aesthetic value, reduced noise, and improved quality of life in municipalities and communities around the country. Urban trees and forests provide a wide array of social, economic, and environmental benefits to people living in urban areas; today, more than 83 percent of the Nation's population lives in urban areas.⁸ Yet, urban and community forests face serious threats, such as development and urbanization, invasive pests and diseases, and fire in the wildland urban interface (WUI).

Since its expansion under the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1990 (CFAA), the Forest Service's Urban and Community Forestry (U&CF) program has provided technical and financial assistance to promote stewardship of urban forests in communities of all sizes across the country. The program is delivered in close partnership with state foresters and leverages existing local efforts that have helped thousands of communities and towns manage, maintain, and improve their tree cover and green spaces. In FY 2014, the U&CF program delivered technical, financial, educational, and research assistance to 7,100 communities across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories and affiliated Pacific Island nations. *NASF supports funding the Urban and Community Forestry program at \$31 million in FY 2016.*

⁶ Forest2Market. *The Economic Impact of Privately-Owned Forests*. 2009.

⁷ USDA Forest Service FY 2016 Budget Justification at pg. 103.

⁸ *Id.* At 119.

Importance of Forest Inventory Data in Monitoring Forest Issues

The Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program, managed by Forest Service, Forest and Rangeland Research, is the only comprehensive inventory system in the United States for assessing the health and sustainability of the nation's forests across all ownerships. FIA provides essential data related to forest species composition, forest growth rates, and forest health data, and it delivers baseline inventory estimates used in Forest Action Plans. Further, this data is used by academics, researchers, industry, and others to understand forest trends and support investments in forest products facilities that provide jobs and products to society. The program provides unbiased information used in monitoring of wildlife habitat, wildfire risk, insect and disease threats, invasive species spread, and response to priorities identified in the Forest Action Plans.

As the key partner in FIA program delivery via State contribution of matching funds, state foresters look forward to carefully reviewing the FIA Strategic Plan – called for in the 2014 Farm Bill – and to working with the Forest Service to improve efficiency in delivery of the program to meet the needs of the diverse user groups for FIA data. ***NASF supports funding the Forest Inventory and Analysis program at \$83 million in FY 2016 and \$220 million for other Research and Development programs.*** NASF supports an increased investment in FIA with the understanding that it will, at minimum, return to pre-FY 2014 re-measurement cycles.

Landscape Scale Restoration

State foresters look forward to working with members of the Subcommittee and the Forest Service to make sure that, through the Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) program, we prioritize funds and resources to maximize return on investments to conserve, protect, and enhance our nation's forests. The LSR line item codifies the competitive allocation of Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act (CFAA) funds which began under direction from the 2008 Farm Bill – but state foresters believe that LSR can and should do more.

In the FY 2012 Consolidated Appropriations Act Conference Report, the Subcommittee directed the Forest Service to develop a process allowing state foresters flexibility, with appropriate accountability, to reallocate a percentage of authorizations for CFAA programs to address state priorities consistent with Forest Action Plans. NASF has worked closely with the Forest Service to explore how states could utilize funding flexibility to meet their own unique and changing needs; however issues around the need to request reprogramming of funds has been a barrier to implementing funding flexibility. State foresters believe that LSR provides an opportunity to demonstrate the value of providing states flexibility to meet unique needs through the allocation of their CFAA funds. Such a model would include continued funding for the competitive allocation of CFAA funds with the addition of an allocation to states to enhance implementation of each Forest Action Plan.

NASF supports funding the Landscape Scale Restoration program at \$23.5 million in FY 2016. NASF would also like to work with the Subcommittee to direct that a portion of LSR funds be made available to state forestry agencies, based on overall percentage of CFAA funds received, to further implement State Forest Action Plans.

NASF appreciates the opportunity to share our FY 2016 appropriations recommendations for the USDA Forest Service with the Subcommittee.