

Testimony of Alexandra Murdoch, Vice President of Policy, American Forests

Before the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies

House Committee on Appropriations

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Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on American Forests' fiscal year 2020 appropriations recommendations for U.S. Forest Service programs.

American Forests was established at a pivotal time in the nation's history, barely ten years after the Civil War and during a period of tremendous development and industrial expansion. Forests were being cut down at an alarming rate to make way for new farms, towns and railways, and timber barons were exploiting what then seemed like an inexhaustible resource. Since that time, we have supported progress, but not at all costs. Instead, over the last 140+ years we have advocated for using science to manage and conserve our forestlands so they will be with us and work for us for generations. We have helped develop the US Forest Service and the national forest system. We have funded more than 1,000 forest restoration projects in every state. We have planted nearly 60 million trees, which has included expanding the tree canopy in dozens of major cities and urban areas.

For years, we have testified to the economic value of our forests from cities to wilderness and have underscored the importance of addressing rising threats to forest health. We sincerely thank the committee for FY19 funding levels, which rejected the drastic cuts proposed by the Administration and provide the Forest Service with important tools and resources to manage all our nation's forests.

This year, the nation witnessed loss and destruction from wildfire at levels we have never seen before. In fact, over the last decade, each year has been worse than the last and this trajectory shows no signs of changing. At American Forests, we believe our forests are struggling to adapt to a 'new normal' of extremes: extreme drought, low humidity, high winds, shortened 'cold spells'. These extremes produce dramatic tree mortality and high intensity wildfire in the West, and changing tree species composition and declining forest health in the East.

To adapt forests to this 'new normal' will often require more active forest management, including harvesting dead and dying trees, reforestation, reintroducing controlled fire and other measures. More active forest management will require increased federal and private investment and level of effort sufficient to halt this crisis.

Consider California's forests, where over 147 million trees have died since 2010, with roughly 85 percent of those located in the Sierra Nevada. If we do nothing, many areas will experience fires so intense that they cannot be reforested and will transition to a shrub ecosystem. The best hope

for sustaining forests like those in the Sierra will be to thin areas with dead and declining trees, while restoring a more resilient forest and using controlled burns more frequently.

But it's not only western forests. A recent University of Florida study found that southeastern forests are already seeing a changing mixture of tree species in response to prolonged drought. Dangerous forest pests are reaching farther north into New England as its climate warms. New stresses are coming to all of America's forests.

The "Fire Funding Fix" enacted as part of the FY2018 Omnibus appropriations bill was a critical step forward. It will allow the U.S. Forest Service to stop diverting funds away from forest management. This will provide additional resources to support forest restoration on America's 193 million acres of national forests, but we must do much more. The Forest Service needs to rebuild its staff and forestry resources to adequately manage the crisis that is now impacting our forests and to help our forests achieve long-term health and resilience. The question is whether we can shift our thinking and resources quickly enough. To address this crisis, American Forests respectfully urges the Committee to consider significantly increasing investments in the following key programs:

National Forest System

Vegetation Management & Watershed Management:

FY18 Enacted: \$180M; FY19: \$180M; *American Forests FY20 request: \$371.4M*

Reforestation of our national forests, especially after destructive wildfires, should be a national priority. Nearly nine million acres of national forests have burned since 2010 – a significant increase resulting from the harsh 'new normal' conditions. Funding levels for this program need to be recalibrated to match this new scale of reforestation needs. The forest service estimates \$371.4M to reforest 1 million acres. Therefore, American Forests recommends resetting program funding to \$371.4M which would allow the Forest Service to reforest 1 million acres of national forest.

Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP):

FY18 Enacted: \$40M; FY19: \$40M; *American Forests FY20 request: \$80M.*

A well-documented success at improving forest health and safety, CFLRP promotes job stability, a reliable wood supply, and forest health while reducing emergency wildfire costs and risks. Increased funding levels would allow for additional projects to be selected across the country while capitalizing on the growing energy and successes of collaborative management and shared stewardship.

Forest and Rangeland Research

FY18 Enacted: \$297M; FY19: \$ 300M; *American Forests FY20 request: \$315M with \$83M allocated to the Forest Inventory Analysis.*

The USFS's Forest and Rangeland Research program provides essential support for urban and wildland forestry research activities. This program focuses on understanding conditions and trends in our nation's urban and community forests and in providing tools and best management practices – which is critical for addressing the “new normal” these forests face. Agency researchers help policymakers and practitioners understand the environmental, economic, and social services that trees and forests provide. We urge the Subcommittee to continue including language in Interior Appropriations reports encouraging the Forest Service to maintain a strong and vibrant urban forest research program.

State and Private Forestry

Urban and Community Forestry (U&CF):

FY18 Enacted: \$28.5M; FY19: \$29.5M; *American Forests* FY20 request: \$50M

By 2050, 90% of Americans will live in cities and towns where currently there are 136 million acres of trees and forests. U&CF is the core federal forestry program that helps these forests and trees adapt to the “new normal”. Through this program, the Forest Service provides critical technical and financial support to cities and towns across the nation to enhance tree and forest cover, prepare for storms and other disturbance events, contain threats from native and invasive pests, and maximize the economic, social, and ecological benefits of their tree resources. States and partner organizations leverage federal support through the program by at least 2:1 (or in many cases significantly more). Considered a model of federal-state collaboration, U&CF consistently increases communities served, brings together diverse partners and resources, and has lasting impacts on communities of all sizes but the program needs to be recalibrated to reflect the scale of its mission.

Cooperative Forestry/Forest Legacy Program:

FY18 Enacted: \$67.025M; FY19: \$63.990M; *American Forests* FY20 request: \$100M

Since authorization in 1990, the Forest Legacy Program has protected 2.8 million acres of private forests through voluntary conservation easements held by states. Forests conserved through this program must be managed to provide economic and social benefits to the public. The Forest Service recently studied four FLP regions and found the properties support between 280 and 2,500 jobs, contribute an average of \$140 per acre to gross regional product from timber harvesting, tree planting, maple syrup, hunting, fishing, birding, and snowmobiling on the lands. In addition, the study found 34-60% of total project price was covered by non-federal partners which is at least 10% greater than required by the program.

Community Forests and Open Space Conservation Program (CFP):

FY18 Enacted: \$4M; FY19: \$4M; *American Forests* FY20 request: \$10M

CFP has made substantial progress in preserving forests by increasing opportunities for Americans to connect with forests in their own communities and fostering new public-private partnerships. It provides financial assistance grants to local governments, Tribes, and qualified nonprofit organizations to acquire and establish working community forests that provide public benefits. Projects are selected through a competitive process that evaluates community benefits, contribution to landscape conservation initiatives, and likelihood of land conversion.