WRITTEN TESTIMONY
OF
TYLER BELL OF THE WESTERVELT COMPANY
BEFORE THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SELECT COMMITTEE ON CLIMATE CRISIS
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Chair Castor, Ranking Member Graves, and distinguished Members of the House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis, on behalf of The Westervelt Company, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the role of the private sector in effectively providing resilient, landscape-based ecological solutions.

Introduction

I am the Director of Westervelt Ecological Services' Rocky Mountain Region located in Golden, Colorado. Westervelt Ecological Services was established in 2006, and is a division of The Westervelt Company, a privately held, family owned and operated business headquartered in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Westervelt Ecological Services is dedicated to high-quality, large-scale conservation and restoration projects that protect land and water resources for future generations. Wetland, stream, and species mitigation is our business. Regulatory markets or government programs routinely benefit from our ability to deliver quality restoration solutions, which comprises expertise in land acquisition, restoration planning, and long-term stewardship. Our conservation and mitigation projects include over 30,000 acres, an area slightly larger than the city of Eugene, Oregon. That's 30,000 acres that were previously vulnerable to development and are now being managed in perpetuity for public and environmental benefits. Development of Westervelt Ecological Services' restoration portfolio required collaboration with private landowners, businesses, land trust organizations, non-profits, and government entities throughout multiple US regions. Our commitment to responsible land stewardship practices and strong environmental ethics is fundamental to The Westervelt Company.

The Westervelt Company was founded in 1884 and consists of four business units: Westervelt Lumber, Westervelt Forest Resources, Westervelt Ecological Services, and Westervelt New Zealand. As an owner and manager of over 600,000 acres, Westervelt is an industry leader in silvicultural practices and wood products manufacturing. The Westervelt Company is also a leader in environmental stewardship. We are a major landowner and lumber producer that has proactively implemented sustainability on our lands. We have pioneered large and viable mitigation projects through the private funding of Westervelt Ecological Services.

At The Westervelt Company, we believe that sustainability is our responsibility and our legacy. Our commitment to environmental, social, and leadership standards is proven through our voluntary sustainability reporting (Westervelt's Sustainability Story). Westervelt Ecological Services furthers the Westervelt Company's mission through the restoration and long-term land stewardship of ecological habitats. This is of value and benefit to future generations. The Westervelt Company and Westervelt Ecological Services demonstrate how private sector companies with a commitment to working and restored natural landscapes are vital to national climate resiliency efforts.

We believe large, private landowners, like The Westervelt Company, and private investment should be encouraged to assist in critical restoration efforts. Public funding of lands and government sponsorship of climate resiliency projects is not enough – Congress must incentivize and enlist the expertise, lands, and upfront capital of the private sector to meet the urgency of the climate change challenge.

I am here today to discuss the importance of working forests, wood products, and restored landscapes in climate resiliency, and the benefits of and ways in which you can help private sector mitigation providers access public funding and develop reliable and consistent regulations.

Importance of the Private Sector in Climate Change Initiatives

Working Forests

National forest health contributes to coastal forest health. Climate mitigation from our nation's forests is provided in many ways: forest carbon sequestration and storage; carbon storage in long-lived wood products; protection of stream habitats and regulation of water flows; and protection of coastal communities from extreme events and sea level rise (Forests Combat Climate Change). Sustainably managed working forests and the forest products they produce are one of our nation's greatest assets for achieving our climate goals. US forests and forest products offset 15% of US industrial carbon emissions every year.

More than one-third of the United States is covered by forests, and 47 percent of US forests are privately owned working forests, owned by families, businesses, and investors. These forests are sustainably managed to supply a steady, renewable supply of wood for lumber, energy, paper, and packaging found in more than 5,000 items that consumers use every day. They are the source of 2.5 million well-paying, American jobs—mainly in rural communities—and support over $280 billion in sales and manufacturing.

Approximately 90 percent of the wood and fiber used to make forest products in the US comes from private working forests. At the same time, these forests account for 72 percent of our gross forest carbon sequestration, enough to offset greenhouse gas emissions from all passenger vehicles in the US each year. Private working forests in the US store an additional 82 billion metric tons of CO_2e. That amount is more than all other forest types combined. Westervelt's working forests alone store about 30.4 million metric tons of CO_2e. By providing a continuing cycle of growing, harvesting, and replanting, sustainable forest management optimizes the capacity of private, working forests to sequester and store carbon.

In addition to climate mitigation, there are other important environmental benefits in maintaining working forests. Water supplies for communities around the country come through forested watersheds, where forests act as a natural filtration system for nearly 30 percent of the water we drink. Private, working forests also play an important role in conserving at-risk and declining species. Access to these forests is vital to wildlife conservation, as sixty percent of our nation's at-risk species rely on private forestland for survival. Collaborative conservation efforts, such as the National Alliance of Forest Owners' Wildlife Conservation Initiative, benefit species while keeping private working forests intact.

Private forest owners like Westervelt are leading the way in pursuing natural climate solutions. Recently, our CEO joined more than 40 other leading US forest-owning companies, the National Alliance of Forest Owners, The Nature Conservancy, Environmental Defense Fund, American Forests, and the American Forest Foundation to adopt a unique set of Principles on Private Working Forests as a Natural Climate Solution. These "CEO Principles" express our common vision for increasing the climate mitigation of sustainably managed private working forests and sustainably produced solid wood products through market and incentive-based approaches.

Wood Products

Because wood is fifty percent stored carbon by weight, long-lived wood products also store vast amounts of carbon. Each year, wood products add an additional 100 million metric tons of carbon to the nearly 10 billion tons of carbon stored in wood products – that's nearly three times the carbon stored in all US national parks combined. Advanced engineered wood products, like mass timber, present an enormous opportunity to lower the carbon footprint in the built environment.

Increased demand for wood in the built environment is another significant climate mitigation opportunity that is as important as forest carbon. Heightened market demand for wood utilization coupled with demand for forest carbon can optimize mitigation outcomes.

The United Nations reported that ten percent of global greenhouse gas emissions come from building construction materials (UN 2020 Global Status Report). Advanced engineered wood products, like mass timber, require significantly less energy to produce than alternative building products. Wood used for construction also stores significant amounts of carbon (typically referred to as "embedded carbon") for long periods of time, further expanding the mitigation benefit. With the introduction of mass timber in the nation's preeminent model building code, wood is now approved as a structural material for buildings up to 18 stories tall, a height that encompasses the vast majority of buildings in the US.

Sustainably managed, private working forests are more than capable of meeting any additional demand for wood in the built environment. Harvests of any type (timber stand improvement, thinning, final harvest, etc.) occur on only two percent of the total land area of private working forests each year, and we reforest the same land area each year through planting or natural regeneration. According to the USDA, from 1953 to 2011, in a time of expanding population and increasing demand for homes, paper products, and energy, the total volume of trees grown in the US increased by 50%. Today, private forest owners are growing 43% more wood than they remove.

Restored Landscapes

Compensatory mitigation is required when there is a permanent impact and loss of wetland or stream habitat. Essentially, mitigation is required to replace the loss of wetland and aquatic resource functions in a watershed. This approach helps to preserve the climate benefits provided by habitats. Wetland restoration requirements are driven by the federal Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, or others required by state or local laws. These projects provide water quality, flood control, and wildlife benefits to local watersheds. Westervelt Ecological Services develops these multi-benefit and multi-objective mitigation projects, implemented through sustainable, nature-based solutions and processes. We are the industry leader in providing compensatory mitigation for wetlands, streams, and species when required by state or federal regulatory agencies. The mitigation offsets provided by Westervelt Ecological Services have helped important public infrastructure projects gain approval from regulators, allowing these projects to begin in a timely manner.

Westervelt Ecological Services has private funding to implement these important restoration projects. Our project benefits are multi-faceted and widespread. We have worked directly with State agencies to implement large-scale restoration projects required for a variety of programs. Westervelt Ecological Services has worked extensively in the Sacramento River Delta to identify and fund over 6,000 acres of projects critical to sustain the Delta ecosystem – one of the largest natural estuaries in the Country. We are the selected mitigation provider for the California High-Speed Rail and have assisted the California High-speed Rail Authority in meeting its regulatory obligation for both wetland and species impacts, resulting in implementation of over 4,000 acres of wetland mitigation and conservation. Westervelt is

working with key landowners along the Columbia River to help deliver salmon habitat for commitments required for vital public utilities projects.

In multiple instances, Westervelt has worked with local stakeholders and resource agencies on complex mitigation solutions. These include the Big Thompson Confluence Mitigation Bank, established in an area identified as critical for restoration and flood mitigation following the 2013 floods in Colorado; the Big Gun Conservation Bank, established through complex land purchase negotiations and resulting in the perpetual protection of an imperiled California red-legged frog population in the Sierra Nevada Range; and the Cosumnes Floodplain Mitigation Bank, providing floodplain restoration and protection for the benefit of natural systems, neighboring Sacramento County, California communities, aquatic species, and government regulators that rely on our solutions to permit and approve projects.

Government agencies are particularly important in the approval and implementation of these projects. As such, we take pride in efficiently and effectively working with regulatory agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency, US Army Corps of Engineers, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and others to achieve ecological successes that have long-lasting, positive effects on natural systems. We are proud to provide environmental mitigation options to help our clients—typically pursuing public infrastructure projects—meet local, State, and Federal environmental compliance requirements on their development needs. In short, we assist community development in an environmentally responsible manner.

In addition to our restoration work, we are working with the US Army Corps of Engineers, Tribal Nations Technical Center of Expertise (TNTCX). We are piloting an effort to connect tribal interests with our restoration sites. Connecting these key stakeholders to land that may be beneficial to their culture is important to us. These are examples of some of the ways in which thoughtful restoration projects can provide environmental, community, and cultural benefits to various public stakeholders.

Access to Public Restoration Dollars & How You Can Help

It is important to note that Westervelt Ecological Services is part of a broader, ecological restoration industry supporting $25 billion in economic output and an estimated 225,000 jobs (BenDor et al. 2015). Westervelt Ecological Services is an active and long-standing member of the Ecological Restoration Business Association. This ecological restoration industry, which comprises over 80, primarily private, member companies that deliver resilient, ecological outcomes. Our industry recruits and develops a talented workforce comprising a range of technical and labor skills and good paying, skilled jobs. Allowing private sector participation in public restoration initiatives will result in more efficient and successful restoration projects that create jobs and revenue for the communities in which they occur. It will also develop robust standards in accountability. This is partly because the private sector is accustomed to outcome based and performance-based contracting, where private dollars make the initial investment in the needed solution and the private sponsor company is paid upon proven delivery of the ecological outcome. This model is more beneficial to the public because it stretches use of public dollars in an efficient manner and places risk of ecological success/failure on the private sector.

Creating performance standards for public projects, like how they exist in compensatory mitigation standards, will also result in increased accountability. Performance standards guided by long-term financing, management, and site protection objectives will ensure projects succeed and accomplish landscape goals over time. Site protection typically exists as perpetual conservation easements, guaranteeing that built projects can remain and provide value in perpetuity. These standards are important in assuring sound planning, design, and construction of projects. The private sector ecological

restoration industry is acclimated to these standards and builds projects accordingly. As such, private sector projects exist on the landscape well beyond contract closure.

The US Federal Emergency Management Agency and Department of US Housing and Urban Development hazard mitigation programs can also benefit from more private sector involvement and the above financing, management, and site protection standards. Our first line of defense in climate change is our natural systems. These programs and related grants should fully contemplate investment in private sector restoration projects that will bolster natural defenses in the coastal, riparian and floodplain landscapes. This approach will also save taxpayer money over the long run. For every $1 invested in disaster mitigation—including natural defenses—saves $6 in disaster aid (Every $1 Invested in Disaster Mitigation Saves $6).

Privately funded mitigation providers have a proven record of working well with the US government to achieve development goals. To ensure continued progress, it is critical that industry and government work together to develop streamlined regulations. Without efficient permitting for infrastructure, investors withdraw from private mitigation solutions and there are fewer ecological offset options available to regulators and permittees. This slows the permitting of infrastructure projects, increases regulator staff time evaluating individual mitigation plans, and has negative consequences for the environment. Because most mitigation projects require years of planning and capital expenditure upfront, continuous regulatory uncertainty and lengthy rulemaking exacerbate these issues. Working with the government to develop stable policy will offer the regulatory certainty needed for private sector investment in mitigation options, and in turn reduce regulatory confusion and delays in permitting timelines for permittees and mitigation providers.

Regardless of the funding or regulatory mechanisms, landscape-scale restoration is of benefit to the public and in combating climate change. This growing sector has a positive public impact and should have bipartisan support by Congress. With appropriate guardrails, including contracting only qualified private sector sponsors with demonstrated experience, Congress and states can ensure procurement processes involve the private sector. This will allow the private ecological restoration sector to bid and compete for resiliency grants and contract outcomes alongside the traditional public agencies and non-governmental organizations that have historically been awarded this funding. Ultimately, bringing successful, private restoration providers to the table will result in the development of ecologically sound, resilient, and sustainable projects that benefit everyone.

Conclusion

The Westervelt Company has contributed to over 600,000 acres of working forests and over 30,000 acres of restored and conserved lands. Our wood products, derived sustainably from our working forests, contribute vital carbon storage benefits. The Company's extensive conservation and restoration portfolio is a demonstration of our success working with the many stakeholders associated with privately funded landscape-scale efforts. Our mitigation efforts are part of a broader $25 billion dollar industry, and, with legislative support and federal funding, our industry can restore and protect many more natural lands and resources. To continue to grow these efforts, we your need assistance with appropriate procurement and contracting procedures to ensure we can continue to develop important restoration and conservation projects. We also need to collaboratively develop streamlined regulations that allow for efficient and effective permitting avenues. Finally, we need to ensure legislation or federal funding (e.g., grant language) does not preclude the private sector from participating in the delivery of restoration or conservation projects.

Thank you again for conducting this hearing. The right climate solutions can enable private forest owners and mitigation providers to invest further in sustainable landscape restoration and management that enhances the quality and abundance of wetlands and streams, ameliorates flood impacts and increase flood storage, creates wildlife and plant habitat, and produces needed jobs for local communities. The Westervelt Company stands ready as a resource to this Committee as it addresses the important challenge of climate change, and the solutions private industry can offer.