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BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND PUBLIC LANDS

JULY 13, 2021
Concerning

H.R. 2049 – Repairing Existing Public Land by Adding Necessary Trees Act
H.R. 2816–Legacy Roads and Trails Remediation Program
H.R. 3132 – Lake Tahoe Restoration Reauthorization Act
H.R. 3211– Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership Act

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) on several bills under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service).

H.R. 2049—REPLANT Act

The REPLANT Act would remove the cap of $30 million per year on the Reforestation Trust Fund and allow the Forest Service to access additional funds already being collected through tariffs on foreign wood products. The REPLANT Act also would direct the agency to prioritize National Forest System (NFS) lands in need of reforestation due to natural disasters. The REPLANT Act defines reforestation as the act of renewing tree cover, taking into consideration species composition and resilience, by establishing young trees through natural regeneration, natural regeneration with site preparation, or planting or direct seeding.

The 2020 fire year was unprecedented in many ways: more acres burned on Forest Service-managed lands than in any previous year since the historic Big Burn of 1910. The increased frequency of wildfires in the wildland-urban interface continues to affect more homes and communities than ever before, with more acres burned in California than in any previous year on record. All indications suggest 2021 will be another long and arduous fire year, driven by extreme drought in much of the West.

Reforestation is a key tool for restoring national forests after natural events such as wildfire. Consequences of not planting trees in areas that are unlikely to regrow on their own include: conversion to non-forested conditions and delayed forest recovery; lost potential for carbon storage and mitigation of climate change; declines in wildlife habitat; decreased overall health and resilience of national forests; and adverse impacts on water quality. NFS lands play a critical

role in supporting the nation's drinking water supply. Approximately 20 percent of the nation's fresh water originates in national forests and grasslands. An estimated 180 million people in over 68,000 communities rely on these lands to capture and filter their drinking water. Major U.S. cities that may seem distant from national forests also rely on water diverted from NFS lands. Los Angeles, Portland, Phoenix, Denver, and Atlanta receive a significant portion of their water supply from national forests. Access to clean drinking water in these areas is threatened if national forests are not restored after severe wildfire.

Tree planting is a critical component of ecosystem restoration given its role in mitigating climate change, increasing carbon storage in forests, promoting resilience after pest infestations, and creating and maintaining ecological services vital to this nation. We currently have planned reforestation activities on over 1.3 million acres of nation forests. These plans represent only about one-third of NFS reforestation needs, which are estimated at four million acres. Wildfires create over 80 percent of reforestation needs, including approximately one million acres that burned with high severity in 2020 alone. Currently, we address only 6 percent of post-wildfire replanting needs per year, resulting in a rapidly expanding list of reforestation needs from wildfire and other natural disturbances. To meet this challenge, we must dramatically increase the rate of reforestation on NFS lands. We are also placing special emphasis on planting the right species in the right place and under the right conditions, so that national forests will remain healthy over time.

President Biden's American Jobs Plan calls for restoring natural resource-based infrastructure to increase resilience and reduce risks associated with extreme wildfires. Our post-disturbance reforestation needs have outpaced available resources. The Forest Service currently receives $30 million per year for the Reforestation Trust Fund. The yearly authorization for the Reforestation Trust Fund has not increased since it was established almost 40 years ago per 16 U.S. Code § 1606a. The Reforestation Trust fund provides most of the funding for post-disturbance reforestation on NFS lands. USDA supports the REPLANT Act, which would close the funding gap and enable national forests to address urgent reforestation needs now and in the future.

H.R. 2816—Legacy Roads and Trails Act

The Forest Service manages over 370,000 miles of roads, 159,000 miles of trails, and more than 13,000 road and trail bridges. This road and trail system provides access for virtually every public use of Forest Service-managed lands, a large proportion of which is in rural America. Recreational activities such as hiking and hunting and commercial activities such as grazing, recreation, and timber harvesting depend on this infrastructure. The Forest Service's road and trail network is also of critical importance to our wildfire response.

There are significant adverse financial, environmental, and public access impacts when road and trail systems deteriorate and become unusable. The increase in severe weather events has accelerated the deterioration of NFS roads and NFS trails. The Forest Service Legacy Road and Trail Remediation (LRT) Program was established by Congress in 2008 to address these challenges. The LRT Program emphasizes areas where Forest Service roads and trails may be contributing to water quality problems in streams and water bodies that support threatened,

endangered, and sensitive species or community water sources. The President's FY2022 budget requested $8 million to continue this work.

The LRT Program was funded at $300 million for the ten-year period covering 2008 through 2018, and produced the following accomplishments:

- 18,057 miles of NFS roads maintained or storm-proofed to help withstand powerful storms and provide public access.
- 1,030 culverts replaced to restore fish passage.
- 1,671 miles of stream habitat restored.
- 7,053 miles of unneeded roads decommissioned, thereby enhancing wildlife habitat for hunting and wildlife viewing.
- 137 bridges constructed or reconstructed to promote safety.
- 5,020 miles of NFS trails repaired, allowing greater recreational access.
- over 1,000 jobs created or maintained each year during the program.
- $3.5 million in reduced annual road maintenance costs each year.

H.R. 2816 would reauthorize the LRT Program and would require the Forest Service to consider predicted changes in weather and hydrology related to global climate change. The reauthorized LRT Program also would support storm damage risk reduction, restoration of waterways and natural migration for fish and other aquatic species, and the decommissioning of NFS roads and unauthorized roads and trails. H.R. 2816 would require the Forest Service to prioritize projects that protect or restore water quality and watershed function; drinking water systems; fish and wildlife habitat; and watershed protection and restoration pursuant to the Healthy Forest Restoration Act at 16 U.S.C. 6543. USDA supports reauthorization of the LRT Program and would like to work with committee and bill sponsor to address issues with timeframes outlined in the bill.

H.R. 3132—Lake Tahoe Restoration Reauthorization Act

The Lake Tahoe Restoration Act, P.L. No.106-506 authorized $415,000,000 in appropriations for a period of seven fiscal years, beginning the first fiscal year after the date of enactment of the Water Resource Development Act of 2016. Of that amount, $150,000,000 was authorized to carry out fire risk reduction and forest management priority projects, with at least $100,000,000 to be used for programs identified as part of the Lake Tahoe Basin Multi-Jurisdictional Fuel Reduction and Wildfire Prevention Strategy 10-Year Plan. Further, $113,000,000 was authorized to support stormwater management, erosion control, and total watershed restoration priority projects. With much consultation and coordination, the Forest Service has funded approximately $33 million in environmental improvement projects within those two programs during this time.

A significant amount of the appropriated funds authorized under the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act have been delivered through our cooperators as they increase our ability to complete forest, watershed, erosion control and invasive plant projects on both NFS and private lands. In addition, the agency has greatly accelerated the pace and scale of forest restoration activities through the use of the categorical exclusion from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement in the Act. With the authority to conduct mechanical thinning

on up to 3,000 acres of NFS lands around Lake Tahoe, the Forest Service has reduced the timeframe for and cost of planning efforts, resulting in faster implementation of projects. By coordinating with our cooperators, we have minimized conflicts in project planning and implementation.

H.R. 3132 reauthorizes the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act through September 30, 2034. USDA supports the reauthorization as it removes the four-year requirements to enter into contracts and cooperative agreements with states, local governments, and other public and private entities to provide for fuel reduction, erosion control, reforestation, and other management activities on federal and non-federal lands under the programs outlined in the Act. We would like to work with the bill sponsor to allow for the use of Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act of 1998 funds to increase fuel reduction activities on the environmentally sensitive urban lots acquired under the Santini-Burton Act.

H.R. 3211—Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership Act

H.R. 3211 would establish a Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership program. This program would improve the health and resilience of NFS, State, Tribal, and private lands. The program would also provide for the Forest Service, state and tribal governments, and private landowners to coordinate activities to reduce wildfire, protect water quality and supply, and improve habitat for at-risk species. The bill would be implemented on national forests and grasslands to improve their health and resilience through applicable programs and authorities administered by the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), other than the conservation reserve program authorized by 16 U.S.C. § 3831 et seq. and through existing programs and authorities administered by the Chief of the Forest Service.

H.R. 3211 would provide for the appropriate Regional Forester and State Conservationist to submit project proposals annually to the Joint Chiefs and would establish selection criteria for the projects, including whether the proposal would reduce wildfire risk in a municipal watershed or wildland-urban interface; was developed collaboratively with participation from diverse stakeholders; would increase national forest workforce capacity or forest business infrastructure and development; would leverage existing authorities and non-Federal funding; would provide measurable outcomes; would support established State and regional priorities; and any other criteria as the Chiefs deem appropriate.

H.R. 3211 also would authorize the appropriation of $90,000,000 for each of fiscal years 2021 through 2030 and would allow the Secretary of Agriculture to use funds otherwise available to carry out the program. H.R. 3211 specifies that of the funds allocated, at least 40% be allocated to NRCS and at least 40% to the Forest Service.

The Forest Service and NRCS currently manage an initiative called the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership (Partnership), which focuses on collaboration to restore landscapes, reduce wildfire threats, protect water quality, and enhance wildlife habitat on public and private lands. The Partnership began in 2014, and each year the agencies select new three-year projects. The current initiative is popular and has grown over time. Proposals are developed in

collaboration with local cooperators and align with state or regional priorities related to wildfire, water, or at-risk species. In fiscal year 2021, the Forest Service and NRCS invested more than $46 million through the Partnership. This year's selections bring the total number of Partnership projects to 93. Forty states and Puerto Rico have participated in the Partnership projects.

An ongoing Partnership project, the Northern Front Range Collaborative Watershed Resilience project, helped save several rural communities from wildland fire during the 2020 fire season in Colorado. Nearly 7,000 acres have been treated across multiple lands ownerships in this highly collaborative effort. As a result, these treatments helped save the Colorado communities of Red Feather Lakes, Rustic, and Glacier View Meadows from the 208,000-acre Cameron Peak fire.

USDA supports H.R. 2311, as it highlights the importance of cross boundary projects and interagency partnerships that work to improve the health and resilience of forest landscapes across not only NFS lands but also State, Tribal and private lands. We would like to work with the subcommittee and bill sponsors regarding the selection criteria included in the bill and the authorization of appropriations provision, as the Forest Service and NRCS are in two separate appropriation bills.