

**Written Testimony of the National Association of State Foresters (NASF)
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**Submitted to the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry
Hearing on “A 2022 Review of the Farm Bill: Forestry” July 13, 2022**

The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) is pleased to provide written testimony to the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry for this important hearing on, *A 2022 Review of the Farm Bill: Forestry*. Thank you, Chairwoman Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and members of the committee, for holding this hearing today and for the opportunity to testify on behalf of NASF.

NASF represents the directors of the forestry agencies in all 50 states, five U.S. territories, three nations in compacts of free association with the U.S., and the District of Columbia. State foresters deliver technical and financial assistance to private landowners for the conservation of more than two-thirds of the nation’s forests. They also partner with federal land management agencies through cooperative agreements and Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) to manage national forests and grasslands. All state forestry agencies share a common mission to protect America’s forests and most have statutory responsibilities to provide wildland fire protection on all lands, public and private.

State Foresters believe the Farm Bill is a unique opportunity to support rural America’s economic backbone and improve the quality of life for all Americans by enhancing support for America’s trees and forests.

Between the 2018 Farm Bill and the 2018 Omnibus Appropriations Bill, several significant achievements were accomplished, providing new authorities for improving forest management. The 2018 Farm Bill forestry title built upon 2014 achievements, streamlining decision-making and expanding authorities within several programs and creating several new programs and authorities while continuing to address and provide for cross-boundary and landscape-scale forest management.

Recent Farm Bills have also been instrumental in elevating the role of forestry in conservation title programs. State forestry agencies are proactively involved in working with the federal agencies in successfully implementing these programs which provide invaluable support to small private landowners in their forest management objectives. NASF appreciates the ongoing program support and attention in the Farm Bill that is responsible for significant on-the-ground results due to these partnerships.

Good Neighbor Authority

The GNA program has allowed the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) to partner with states on federal forest restoration and management projects, facilitating critical work to improve species habitat, enhance watersheds, and reduce hazardous fuels and mitigate wildfire risks.

Since GNA was first authorized by Congress with the 2014 Farm Bill, at least 36 states have broken ground on over 130 GNA projects. Through these GNA projects, states are contributing to the restoration of federal forests on a scale never before realized. According to the Congressional Research Service, the amount of Forest Service timber sold under GNAs has increased from 14.4 million board feet in fiscal year (FY) 2016 to 182.6 million board feet in FY 2019.

In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress expanded GNA to make Tribes and Counties eligible entities to enter into Good Neighbor Agreements. However, Tribes and Counties were not afforded the same authority as states to retain GNA project revenues to reinvest in conservation, greatly reducing a significant incentive to engage and partner on critical management projects including wildfire mitigation, invasive species management, and habitat maintenance.

Additionally, the 2018 Farm Bill removed the ability for restoration services that were agreed to under the Good Neighbor Agreement to take place off federal lands. This means adjacent state, tribal, county, and other land that is essential to the health and productivity of National Forests can no longer be restored as a comprehensive landscape with revenues generated from GNA projects.

NASF supports authorizing counties and Federally Recognized Tribes to retain and expend GNA timber sale revenues and restoring the cross-boundary nature of GNA by removing the requirement that GNA timber sale revenues must be spent solely on federal lands.

Additionally, NASF supports further expanding GNA to all federal land management agencies, making the authority permanent, or at a minimum extending the October 1st, 2023, sunset date for states to retain GNA timber sale revenue, and amending GNA to authorize the reconstruction, repair, and restoration of roads administered by the Bureau of Land Management, and other federal agencies (should GNA be expanded to include other federal land management agencies).

Landscape Scale Restoration Program

The 2018 Farm Bill codified the Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) program which was a key policy priority at the time for NASF. The program originated with the 2008 Farm Bill and existed for a decade as a jointly administered program between the Forest Service and state forestry agencies.

In addition to codifying the program, the 2018 Farm Bill also stipulated a new “rural” requirement for LSR. As a result, and per a subsequent rulemaking made by the Forest Service, LSR work can only be conducted in communities made up of fewer than 50,000 people. This change significantly reduced the scope and efficacy of the program by prohibiting work in areas across the United States with legitimate need for LSR grant support.

The LSR rural requirement has eliminated opportunities for state forestry agencies to leverage their Urban and Community Forestry (U&CF) program work, and greatly restricted their ability to conduct hazardous fuels reduction projects under LSR in the areas with populations greater than 50,000 including many areas within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

LSR should be returned to a flexible program able to address the highest priority needs across landscapes as identified in state Forest Action Plans, regardless of community size. The program should not exclude larger communities or populations that depend on trees for their health and wellbeing, particularly in historically marginalized communities.

Forests aren't just found on mountainsides or in wildlands, but in cities, towns, and communities as well. Community forests – especially in areas with over 50,000 residents – are shown to significantly improve human health outcomes and provide tremendous socio-economic benefits. Healthy community forests aren't a given; they take work. For decades, state forestry agencies have helped communities manage their forests by providing technical and financial assistance for the planting and care of street, park, and other community trees. State forestry agencies and their U&CF programs are crucial to ensuring *all* people have equitable access to the many benefits of trees.

The LSR program has supported many successful U&CF projects in priority areas with competitive grant funding in the past. It is crucial that LSR projects can once again include U&CF work.

NASF supports striking the rural requirement from LSR legislative language established in the 2018 Farm Bill. To be as impactful as possible across ownerships and on a landscape scale, *all* lands – including cities, suburbs, and towns – should be eligible for LSR support as they were prior to the 2018 Farm Bill.

Promoting Cross-Boundary Wildfire Mitigation

The 2018 Farm Bill amended section 103 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (16 U.S.C. § 6513), providing a new authority for the Forest Service to spend up to \$20 million on grants to state foresters for hazardous fuel reduction projects that cross land ownership boundaries, particularly in priority landscapes as identified in state FAPs.

While section 8401 of the 2018 Farm Bill, *Promoting Cross Boundary Wildfire Mitigation*, is working well, there is a need for increasing the authorization of appropriation for this provision. Additionally, it is our understanding the Forest Service used this new authority to codify an existing mechanism for implementing cross-boundary hazardous fuels projects commonly known as 'Stevens Money'. As such, the helpful authorities provided under 'Stevens Money' are no longer being utilized, and the net increase to the authorization of appropriations for cross-boundary hazardous fuels projects is \$5 million. The end result has not been \$20 million in new authority.

In FY 2002, Senator Ted Stevens championed the addition of earmarked hazardous fuels funds. These funds are often referred to as 'Stevens Money' and were to be spent towards hazardous fuels

treatments on non-federal lands that were adjacent to National Forest System lands where hazardous fuels work was being conducted or where other work was being conducted that increased the threat to the adjacent lands. The authorization allowed for money to be spent to protect communities when hazard reduction activities were being planned on adjacent National Forest System lands.

This authorization allowed for work on Federal and non-Federal lands to complement each other and provided flexibility for the Forest Service to use the money where it would provide the most benefit. This provision has been added to the Interior-Environment and Related Agencies appropriations bill every year since FY 2002. In the FY 2003 Interior-Environment and Related Agencies appropriations bill the following language was added: "Provided further, that in addition to funds provided for State Fire Assistance programs, and subject to all authorities available to the Forest Service under the State and Private Forestry Appropriation, up to \$15,000,000 may be used on adjacent non-Federal lands for the purpose of protecting communities when hazard reduction activities are planned on national forest lands that have the potential to place such communities at risk" capping 'Stevens Money' at \$15 million.

The intent from the Forests in the Farm Bill Coalition for section 8401 of the 2018 Farm Bill was to supplement existing mechanisms for implementing cross-boundary hazardous fuels projects, and augment funding available for accomplishing this work, not to supplant 'Stevens Money'. Both 'Stevens Money' and the 2018 Farm Bill authority are important tools in the toolbox for mitigating wildfire risk for communities. We look forward to working with members of the subcommittee and our partners in the Forests in the Farm Bill Coalition on developing a solution that will best utilize all available authorities and funding for accomplishing this important work.

Post-Disaster Landowner Assistance and the Emergency Forest Restoration Program

Since the 2018 Farm Bill was passed, forest landowners across the country have been impacted by a myriad of natural disasters, In the wake of hurricanes in the South, the 2020 Derecho in Iowa, catastrophic wildfires in the West, and tornados, ice storms and more everywhere in between, we have realized the significant federal programming gap that exists in helping landowners reforest and get back on their feet, The Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP) which was codified in the 2008 Farm Bill (Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008) has proven to be woefully inadequate and bureaucratically cumbersome for most landowners to benefit from. Forest landowners should have equal support from the federal government compared to other agriculture commodities when faced with the impacts of natural disaster. 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, recreation opportunities, rural economic stimulus and more.

Forestry Support under Conservation Programs

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is playing an increasingly important role in helping non-industrial private forest owners (NIPF) access both financial and technical assistance to sustainably manage their forests. EQIP and other conservation title programs like the Conservation Stewardship Program and Conservation Reserve Program are absolutely essential to helping private landowners keep their forests as forests, continuing to provide a full suite of ecosystem benefits to society. Through strong partnerships between NRCS, Forest Service, State forestry agencies and other partners, the share of EQIP obligations going to forestry practices has increased from 4.3% to 7.3% over the past decade, meaning more forest landowners have been able to access assistance to help keep more forest acres in conservation. Commensurate with this increase in financial assistance, more funding for technical service provision through states and other providers is needed to keep pace. NASF appreciates the subcommittee's ongoing support of EQIP, especially its role in forestry and wildlife habitat conservation.

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 science based, sustainable 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, our partners with us here today and our federal partners, including the USDA Forest Service and NRCS. Our common goal is the same: to support the health of America's trees and forests and the rural and urban communities which rely on them. We look forward to working with you to provide the collective insights of the nation's State Foresters in developing the 2023 Farm Bill.