

July 11, 2011

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Pat Roberts
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Member Roberts:

On behalf of the millions of forest owners, conservationists, hunters, anglers, forest product manufacturers, and natural resource professionals represented in the Forests in the Farm Bill Coalition, we are pleased to offer some initial recommendations as you begin your work to shape the 2012 Farm Bill.

We know you and your colleagues on the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee are faced with significant budget deficit issues and we remain concerned with efforts in the appropriations process and the debt ceiling discussions that make it incredibly difficult to craft the next Farm Bill. We also know that you face persistent rural unemployment and economic health challenges, amongst many other challenges that you will be working to address in the next Farm Bill. We stand ready to work with you and your colleagues as you address these issues in a way that makes sense for forest conservation and America's rural communities. We also remain ready to help address issues related to improving program efficiencies and streamlining programs to better serve program participants, especially forest owners.

The nation's private forests, which make up more than two-thirds of all U.S. forests and supply Americans with clean water and clean air, fish and wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and forest products, are a key component of America's rural landscapes, stimulating healthy rural communities and economies, and supporting well-paying jobs in rural America.

At the same time, the nation's private forests are faced with a number of threats and challenges that make it difficult to keep these lands intact and healthy, so all Americans continue to reap these environmental and economic benefits. These threats and challenges include development pressures that have the potential to breakup and permanently convert as many as 57 million acres of private forests by 2030, which will

significantly challenge the provision of critical water supplies across key watersheds. Invasive species, insects, and diseases currently threaten roughly 58 million acres of forests. Additionally, wildfires threaten as many as 400 million acres of private forests.

Even as these external pressures threaten private forests, 170 million acres of these lands are owned by landowners that are 55 years or older, meaning these lands are at high risk of parcelization or development in the near future. To compound the problem, only 4 percent of private forest owners have a forest management plan, meaning only a limited number have thought about and planned for the future management of their forest.

As you know, the 2008 Farm Bill included significant improvements for forest owners, supporting more forest conservation and agroforestry practices and activities across the country. We hope to build on the success of the 2008 Farm bill and make further improvements, while respecting the budget situation.

With these challenges and threats facing private forests, the 2012 Farm Bill should include a focus on enabling forest conservation on private forests and surrounding rural landscapes, while also supporting the creation and maintenance of forest-dependant rural jobs and strong rural economies in forest communities. To do this, we have come together as the Forests in the Farm Bill Coalition to offer recommendations in four key areas:

- Improving Conservation Programs for forests;
- Strengthening forestry outreach, education, research, and inventory programs;
- Combating forest-related invasive species;
- Improving forest market opportunities

While each of our organizations has priorities within, and in addition to these recommendations, we agree that the recommendations below are important components for the next Farm Bill. Please see the attached document for detailed suggestions in each of these key areas.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to working with you as you develop the next Farm Bill.

Sincerely,

American Forest & Paper Association
American Forest Foundation
American Forests
Appalachian Mountain Club
Association for Temperate Agroforestry
Biomass Energy Resource Center
Biomass Thermal Energy Council

Boone and Crockett Club
Defenders of Wildlife
Environmental and Energy Study Institute
Environmental Defense Fund
Forest Capital Partners
Forest Guild
Green Diamond Resource Company
Forest Resources Association
Hardwood Federation
Land Trust Alliance
Lyme Timber Company
Mississippi Land Trust
Mississippi River Trust
National Alliance of Forest Owners
National Association of Forest Service Retirees
National Association of State Foresters
National Association of University Forest Resources Programs
National Network of Forest Practitioners
National Wild Turkey Federation
National Wildlife Federation
National Woodland Owners Association
Northern Forest Center
Pinchot Institute for Conservation
Quail Unlimited
Ruffed Grouse Society
Society of American Foresters
Sustainable Forestry Initiative
Sustainable Northwest
The Conservation Fund
The Nature Conservancy
The Trust for Public Land
Weyerhaeuser
Wildlife Mississippi

Forests in the Farm Bill Coalition¹
2012 Farm Bill Recommendations

The 2012 Farm Bill should include a focus on four key areas that will better enable forest conservation on private forests:

- Improving Conservation Programs for forests;
- Strengthening forestry outreach, education, research, and inventory programs;
- Combating forest-related invasive species;
- Improving forest market opportunities

Please note these recommendations are in no order of priority.

Improving Conservation Programs for Forests

Farm Bill Conservation Programs offer a variety of tools for private forest owners to improve their management practices as well as help keep their forests intact and economically viable. These programs help improve wildlife habitat for hunting and fishing, help forest landowners and farmers who own forests implement practices to keep our water and our air clean, and help landowners combat insects, disease, and invasive species.

To ensure these Conservation Programs continue to provide conservation tools for private forest owners, Congress should:

Reauthorize the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and strengthen opportunities for forest owner participation, putting forestland conservation on equal footing with farm and ranch land in the program. Currently forests can only make up 10 percent of the program's acreage. CSP should also be modified to allow multiple contract renewals as long as lands are improved through renewal. Since the 2008 Farm bill opened CSP to

¹ *The Forests in the Farm Bill Coalition includes:*

*American Forest & Paper Association American Forest Foundation American Forests
Appalachian Mountain Club Association for Temperate Agroforestry
Biomass Energy Resource Center Biomass Thermal Energy Council Boone and Crockett Club
Defenders of Wildlife Environmental and Energy Study Institute
Environmental Defense Fund Forest Capital Partners Forest Guild
Green Diamond Resource Company Forest Resources Association Hardwood Federation
Land Trust Alliance Lyme Timber Company Mississippi Land Trust Mississippi River Trust
National Alliance of Forest Owners National Association of Forest Service Retirees
National Association of State Foresters National Association of University Forest Resources Programs
National Network of Forest Practitioners National Wild Turkey Federation
National Wildlife Federation National Woodland Owners Association
Northern Forest Center Pinchot Institute for Conservation Quail Unlimited
Ruffed Grouse Society Society of American Foresters Sustainable Forestry Initiative
Sustainable Northwest The Conservation Fund The Nature Conservancy The Trust for Public Land
Weyerhaeuser Wildlife Mississippi*

forest owners, the program has improved valuable habitat and forest health on over 3.2 million acres of private forests.

Reauthorize the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and maintain opportunities for forest owner participation. Since the 2008 Farm Bill, EQIP has invested \$108 million in conservation of forested landscapes, working with more than 36,000 landowners annually to improve forest management.

Reauthorize Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) and maintain opportunities for forest owner participation. Since the 2008 Farm bill, WHIP has invested more than \$34 million in improvements to forested fish and wildlife habitat.

Reauthorize the Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP) and consider combining with the existing endangered species recovery provision from the 2008 Farm Bill, that will enable greater flexibility for forest owners who wish to conserve species habitat and contribute to endangered species recovery. Since its creation, HFRP has conserved or restored more than 9,000 acres of prime habitat for endangered species.

Reauthorize and strengthen the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). Since more than 60 percent of the nation's wetlands are forested, programs like WRP offer essential assistance to help forest owners restore and maintain the water filtration and flood protection benefits as well as the wildlife habitat established through the reforestation of wetlands.

WRP can be strengthened to better address forested wetlands issues in a number of ways including by better engaging third parties in program implementation, by allowing new landowners to participate in the program, and by allowing greater flexibility to enroll acres in the program, including riparian land within limitations.

Reauthorize the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and strengthen the forest-related components of the Program. The Conservation Reserve Program has led to reforestation of over 3 million acres of marginal agricultural land and the restoration of several important forested ecosystems including longleaf pine.

Forest components of the program can be strengthened by continuing the variety of enrollment opportunities, especially continuous enrollments and CREP signups; by reducing re-enrollments of land with minimal wildlife or conservation value; and by better using mid-contract management authorities to ensure the benefits of forests continue throughout the contract life.

Create new Debt for Conservation authority to allow farmers and forest landowners to voluntarily swap farm debt for payments from conservation title programs. This will enable landowners to accomplish conservation objectives and avoid defaulting on loans,

which are extremely costly. With previous authorities, over 320,000 acres of farmland was placed under conservation contracts, which in many cases resulted in only idling marginal agricultural lands, not restoring these lands like this new debt provision would allow.

Boost Technical Assistance Capacity for family and other private forest owners, especially landowners who are currently not engaged in conservation or management of their lands. State forestry agencies, non-governmental organizations and other private technical service providers should be utilized to reach landowners whose forests provide vital services and benefits.

Maintain the funding allocation for and strengthen the Conservation Innovation Grants (CIGs) program by clarifying that grants are available to eligible entities seeking to broaden adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies demonstrated through this and other programs, including the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, and by requiring NRCS to fully incorporate lessons learned from the CIG program into all its programs. Currently, while innovation is encouraged through this program, there is no clear mechanism for incorporating the lessons learned and proven approaches and technologies into broader applications in conservation programs.

Maintain the funding allocation for and strengthen the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI), by allowing CCPI proposals to incorporate Reserve Programs in addition to working lands programs. This will enable the use of the full set of conservation program tools, including contracts and easements, giving landowners a full suite of options for conserving and managing their land.

Better Incorporate Forest Priorities into Conservation Programs by encouraging the State Technical Committees to consider the priorities in the State Forest Resource Assessments and Strategies and the State Wildlife Action Plans. This will also enable more landscape scale prioritization and focus of conservation programs, especially on critical forested watersheds, through local and state level processes.

Allow beginning forest owners and tree farmers to qualify for existing beginning farmer and rancher incentives throughout the Conservation Title. Just like farmers, the majority of forest owners are age 55 or older, leaving over 170 million acres of forests, owned by this group of owners, at risk of being subdivided, fragmented, or developed as current owners die or become unable to care for their land. Forest owners should be put on equal footing with farmers and ranchers, in conservation title provisions that help the next generation begin to manage and conserve their land.

Strengthening Forestry Outreach, Education, Research, and Inventory:

Forestry and agroforestry outreach and education activities are essential for engaging private forest owners in conservation and management activities on their land. Without

these activities and programs, landowners will not have the knowledge and tools to take the next steps and practice responsible management on their land. This education and outreach must be informed by solid forestry research and a comprehensive forest inventory that provide real-time information on health and condition of our forests.

To strengthen the availability of forestry outreach, education, research, and inventory, Congress should:

Reaffirm the importance of the US Forest Service's Forest Inventory and Analysis Program (FIA) and direct the Agency to enhance the program's efficiency and effectiveness to ensure the program is fully implemented in all states and to enhance the program's ability to address emerging forest data needs such as biomass and carbon markets as well as the State Forest Resource Assessments and Strategies. FIA provides the essential forest data upon which the forest community—from conservation and wildlife organizations to the forest products industry—relies to make decisions about how best to care and manage our forests.

Reauthorize the National Institute of Food and Agriculture's Renewable Resources Extension Act, maintaining the current funding authorization level. This program supports forestry extension and outreach conducted by the universities, which often serves as a gateway for engaging landowners in conservation and management of their land.

Modify and maintain the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (Section 7410 of the 2008 Farm Bill) to better incorporate outreach and education of beginning tree farmers and family forest owners. As mentioned above, a significant amount of private forest land in the U.S. is owned by individuals that are over 55—meaning these forests are at risk as landowners die and become unable to care for their land. This outreach program, combined with the incentives included in the Conservation title mentioned above, will help reduce the subdivision, fragmentation, and development of these lands by encouraging the next generation to get involved.

Combating Forest-related Invasive Species Recommendations

According to the US Forest Service, roughly 58 million acres of forests are at risk of increased mortality due to insects and disease. A new report, the Southern Forests Futures Report, points to continuing infestations, especially of invasive species, with severe impacts on our forests.

To help combat these forest-related invasive species, Congress should:

Maintain the Plant Pest and Disease Management and Disaster Prevention Program. This program helps build and preserve critical plant health safeguarding initiatives, helping to protect forests or mitigate damage of invasive species. In addition to this key

issue, Congress should also urge the agencies to evaluate their existing plant health safeguards for their effectiveness.

Improving Forest Market Opportunities Recommendations

Without strong markets for both traditional and emerging forest products, forest owners have difficulty keeping their land forested and keeping it healthy. Strong markets also give landowners resources to reinvest in their land. While markets are driven in large part by private sector activities, there are a number of policies and tools that Congress uses to stimulate market opportunities.

To improve market opportunities for private forest owners, Congress should:

Modify the USDA Biobased Labeling Program to better incorporate appropriate forest products as renewable, and biobased products. Without forest products markets providing landowners with a source of income, we'll have fewer forests; therefore, maintaining strong forest products markets helps conserve forests and provide revenue for good forest management. Unfortunately, this USDA program currently discourages the use of wood products, impacting markets for forest owners.

Improve development of Ecosystem Markets by encouraging better monitoring and evaluation of conservation outcomes associated with particular practices and approaches of conservation programs—which will ultimately aid better valuation and accounting of ecosystem services for market systems. Currently, many of the Farm Bill programs have significant ecosystem service outcomes, such as cleaner water and healthier wildlife habitat, but the agencies do very little to communicate these outcomes, especially the forest-related outcomes. The Forest Resource Coordinating Committee, reconfigured in the last Farm Bill, could play a leadership role in determining and promoting the forest outcomes of Farm bill and other forest conservation programs—focusing on the ecosystem service outcomes.

Congress should also reaffirm the importance of developing consistent metrics for measuring ecosystem services, as included in the last Farm bill. Since ecosystem service markets in many cases are still in development, USDA leadership in this area is essential.

Strengthen policies and programs that enable generation of renewable energy from forests. Renewable energy markets have potential to help supplement traditional forest products markets with a complimentary market for forest owners, helping to keep forests as forests.

The Farm bill can strengthen these opportunities by continuing to support renewable energy research and development and strengthening the focus in R&D on forest-related energy opportunities that minimize impacts on wildlife, water and habitats.

The Farm Bill should also include renewable energy infrastructure development assistance for sustainable community scale projects that focus on efficient biomass technologies such as thermal and combined heat and power applications. These “community scaled” efficient technologies have the strongest potential to support sustainable forest management, enable new local markets for forest land owners, and support rural economic development.

Additionally, the Farm Bill should support efforts to develop new supplies of forest-related biomass, for both new and existing industries, focusing on developing forest biomass sources that do not have existing markets.