

Statement of Steven W. Koehn
State Forester of Maryland
On Behalf of the National Association of State Foresters

Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture

April 30, 2003

On the President's Healthy Forests Initiative

I. Introduction

On behalf of the National Association of State Foresters, I am pleased to testify on the President's Healthy Forests Initiative. NASF is a non-profit organization that represents the directors of the state forestry agencies from all fifty states, eight U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia. State Foresters manage and protect state and private forests across the U.S., which together encompass two-thirds of the nation's forests.

I am representing NASF in my role as Chairman of the Water Resources Committee. In recent years, the Water Resources Committee has taken the lead in development of proposed legislation to improve management of forested watersheds on non-industrial private lands. We believe the concepts of 'healthy forests' and 'healthy watersheds' are inextricably intertwined.

With approximately 190 million acres of federal lands now at risk to wildfire, and more than 70 million acres of all forestland ownerships at risk to increased mortality from insects and diseases over the next 15 years, it is essential that steps are taken to improve the condition of our forest resources. Such steps will protect communities, watersheds, wildlife habitat, recreation opportunities, and the quality of our air and water, and will ultimately reduce the costs (environmental, social and economic) of catastrophic wildfire.

II. Need to Reduce Hazardous Forest Fuels

NASF has been deeply involved in the development and now, implementation, of the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy for a Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment, dated May 2002. This document was developed pursuant to the conference report for the Interior Appropriations Act of 2001 and was endorsed by the Western and Southern Governors Associations. We have a State Forester serving on the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, which was established by the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior. We have been supportive of the recent administrative efforts to facilitate implementation of the 10-Year Strategy, and we support additional legislative efforts that are consistent with the 10-Year Strategy and accompanying Implementation Plan. We believe that the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, introduced this week by Rep. McInnis and others, supports these efforts.

State Foresters recognize the importance and urgency of reducing the hazards to communities at risk of catastrophic fire. To do this, we must address hazards within the wildland-urban interface, but I must caution that the hazards are more than local in scope. To fully accomplish the goals of the 10-Year Strategy and Implementation Plan, we must look at the larger landscape and address the forest health and watershed issues on all ownerships. We note that the legislation introduced by Rep. McInnis and others takes this approach.

III. Watershed Forestry Assistance Program Provides Additional Benefits to the Healthy Forests Initiative

NASF recommends the inclusion of our proposed Watershed Forestry Assistance Program in any Healthy Forests legislation. Because of my long involvement with the Chesapeake Bay restoration effort, I am particularly supportive of this effort. We developed and proposed the Watershed Forestry Assistance Program to improve forested watersheds on non-industrial private forestlands. The initiative was considered last year as a part of the 2002 Farm Bill, where it received bipartisan support in the Senate. By offering incentives to improve the condition of these forested watersheds, the program would contribute significant benefits to the Healthy Forests Initiative.

The discussions surrounding the Healthy Forests Initiative were initiated by the unsustainable conditions of western forests, primarily on public lands. As important as these issues are, there are also important forest health and watershed concerns on all forestlands—public and private, large owners and small owners—across the country. The Watershed Forestry Assistance Program brings emphasis to the national relevance of the Healthy Forests Initiative.

Although ownership patterns and local conditions differ widely between regions, the protection and management of watersheds for the production of clean water is a critical issue everywhere. In the eastern U.S., where I live and work, this is particularly true, since 90% of the forestland is privately owned. The private forests of the northeast and southeast together produce two-thirds of the water we need for recreation and for fish and wildlife habitat. They also provide the drinking water supply for millions of Americans in the east. In addition to environmental benefits, these same private ownerships produce over 50% of the nation's wood and paper products.

The health of eastern forests is threatened by invasive pests and plants, fire, overcrowding, poor regeneration, and land-use fragmentation. Loss of forests is directly affecting the ability of some watersheds to sustain quality water supplies. The conservation, restoration, and stewardship of healthy private forestland is viewed as crucial to watershed health in the U.S.

In the west, the Watershed Forestry Assistance Program is no less important. For example, it can provide assistance to landowners for the rehabilitation and restoration of burned watersheds to limit soil erosion and benefit community drinking water supplies. Effective partnerships can address these issues before they become more overwhelming.

IV. Environmental and Economic Benefits of Utilizing Small, Noncommercial Wood From Overcrowded Forests

NASF supports forest biomass utilization as a tool to help reduce unnaturally dense forest fuels and the associated risks posed to communities and watersheds. Utilizing forest biomass from overstocked or unhealthy forest stands can also be an effective way to reduce the costs of treating hazardous forest fuels. Making use of otherwise non-commercial wood products can bring environmental benefits by supporting the production of renewable energy and lowering wildfire risks, thereby reducing the amount of carbon released in the atmosphere by catastrophic wildfires.

V. Impacts of Forest Pests on Healthy Forests

Provisions to enhance research programs to address forest pests will also help carry out the Healthy Forests Initiative on all lands. Accelerating efforts to address new invasive pests and providing additional assistance to aggressively implement pest management strategies would be helpful to all landowners and serve the public interest.

For example, Maryland has been dealing with hemlock woolly adelgid for several years now. If left unchecked, naturally occurring stands of hemlock, which are important in helping to maintain cold water fisheries, will be impacted with the same detrimental effects seen in adjacent mid-Atlantic states. Many other forest pests significantly impact our nation's forests, from the southern pine beetle, to the non-native emerald ash borer that is devastating forests of the midwest, to sudden oak death in the west, just to name a few. Noxious and invasive weeds also threaten our forests and are in need of aggressive control. Accelerating the work to address these and other forest pests through authorization and funding is critical to improving the health of our nation's forests.

VI. Conclusion

Legislation that will enhance public and private land managers' efforts to improve forest health and provide for healthy watersheds will benefit the public and the environment, and is simply good management.

On behalf of the National Association of State Foresters, I urge the Committee to include all of the above programs in legislation to carry out the President's Healthy Forests Initiative. These measures are designed to address and improve forest health on public and private lands, consistent with the National Fire Plan 10-Year Strategy and Implementation Plan. In particular, I will remind you that the Watershed Forestry Assistance Program proposed by NASF will provide benefits nationwide. The improvement of watershed conditions on private forestlands will complement the other goals of the Healthy Forests Initiative by enhancing water quality and quantity generated from our nation's forestlands.

Our abundant and magnificent forests helped to build our nation. Wise and sustainable forest policy, that recognizes the importance of healthy and resilient forests, will help to

assure its continued strength. I thank the Committee for the opportunity to testify today, and I would be happy to answer any questions.