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Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Introduction

- It's nice to see so many friendly faces, including that of my good friend, Leah MacSwords. Leah had to put up with me during our tenure together in Kentucky and she's still recovering.
- I bring greetings from NRCS Chief Dave White, who is sorry he isn't able to be with us today.
- The 12 months between last year's meeting in Hyannis and this one have been both extremely busy and, I would argue, tremendously important to the future of American forestry. In the intervening year, a handful of really significant things have happened that are already influencing the management of forests across landscapes and watersheds nationwide.
- This morning, I want to recap those events and some of their likely impacts.

MOU

- In September 2008, we celebrated the signing of a national memorandum of understanding between NRCS, NASF, the National Association of Conservation Districts and the Forest Service. That document reflected months of work by our Joint Forestry Team, in addition to years of active discussion and planning and thinking by many people in this room.
- That national MOU has already supported many cooperative efforts between State Conservationists, State Foresters and others. The first example that comes to mind is the

formation just this summer of the Montana Joint Forestry Team, which incorporates Extension and some other unique elements.

- Clearly, the JFT model and MOU are catalysts for growing partnerships at the watershed, state, and multi-state levels to address critical resource concerns that, by their very natures, demand our joint action and attention.
- One very interesting statewide effort is right here in New Mexico, where State Forester Butch Blazer and State Conservationist Dennis Alexander are sharing a forester position. Similar sharing arrangements are in place in Missouri, Tennessee, Ohio, West Virginia and Nebraska.
- Multi-state initiatives include the Upper Mississippi Forestry Partnership and the Western Joint Forestry Team; another focuses on long-leaf pine restoration in the Southeast and on “Keeping Forest in Forest” in the Northeast. I know plans for more such purposeful partnerships are percolating all around the country.
- You will recall that the MOU identified five barriers to coordinated delivery of forestry assistance. All of the partnerships I just listed show we are making great strides in breaking down those barriers. But NRCS believes—as I know many of you do—that eliminating them permanently to effectively deliver the full range of forestry and conservation assistance to land owners will require a dedicated and long-term commitment from all of us.

The Secretary’s Remarks

- I think that’s exactly what USDA Secretary Vilsack was getting at in his now much-discussed August 14th speech in Seattle. He laid out a vision for forestry to guide the department in “address[ing] the challenges we face and to make the most of our opportunities to conserve and restore our forests.”
- And he directed close collaboration between the Forest Service and NRCS in adopting an “all-lands approach” that includes national forests, non-federal forests, state, tribal and private forest lands.

- He also noted that farmers and ranchers are vital stewards of our working lands who provide, in addition to food and fiber, clean water, carbon sequestration and wildlife habitat. So, too, our forest landowners, who provide their fellow citizens with much more than valuable wood products.
- He recognized that climate change is exacerbating threats from fire, insect and disease—threats that he acknowledged know no boundaries.
- I’m guessing that you all were struck, as I was, by the fact that Secretary Vilsack called on Forest Service Chief Tidwell and NRCS Chief White *by name* in the speech, to seek “opportunities to utilize this all-lands approach” and to work together to “develop new markets” for ecosystem services as a means of conserving our forests. That seems a pretty clear mandate.
- It is unusual to hear a Secretary of Agriculture speak so much about forestry, isn’t it? This was no “flash in the pan,” though. I’m happy to tell you that the Secretary has continued to push these themes, on many occasions and in many places—including in his monthly column to all USDA employees, and in his five stated priorities for his term of office.
- The priority relating to conservation reads like this: Forests and private working lands are conserved, restored and made more resilient to climate change and are managed to enhance water resources.
- So, if you had any concerns about the depth of his concern—particularly for our forests—you can set them aside.

NRCS’ Commitment

- I think it’s also worth noting—as many have said to me privately—that his speech echoes and very much underscores the bold goals and promises we have sent down for ourselves in the JFT charter and MOU.

- One piece of evidence supporting that claim is the fact that we're signing a five-year extension of the JFT charter this week.
- Another piece of evidence is that NRCS has decided to permanently fund and staff the National Forester position in our D.C. headquarters. As you know, FS employee Andy Mason served as NRCS's National Forester these past two years. Following Andy's detail, NRCS has decided to make a long term commitment to forestry by selecting Bruce Wight, a career NRCS employee and forester, to that job.
- We've also committed to filling behind Bruce full time in his former position at the National Agroforestry Center.
- Further, during this first year of implementation for the new farm bill, we've worked hand-in-hand with the State Technical Committees, the Forest Service and state forestry agencies to develop program rules that meet the spirit and intent of the law and make sense for all of us.
- We've also committed to helping landowners make their way through the maze of these programs, as well as future opportunities in ecosystem services markets and elsewhere.

The Farm Bill

- The 2008 Farm Bill is truly historic with its increased emphasis on forested lands and forest management. Although at NRCS we were already increasing our technical and financial assistance to forest landowners prior to its passage, it must be said the new bill certainly "ups the ante" in areas such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, the Healthy Forests Reserve Program, and the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative.
- We reviewed many of these programs with forestry partners during May's webinar and at farm bill workshops. At that time, though, we didn't have many details related to the new Conservation Stewardship Program, so I'd like to spend a minute on that to bring you up to speed.

- CSP is designed to improve water, air and soil quality; assist in addressing global climate change; and encourage environmentally responsible energy production.
- The new CSP, as contrasted with the old, expressly identifies private non-industrial forests as an eligible land use.
- The new program also offers continuous sign-ups nationwide, and is no longer based on selected watersheds.
- We opened up the first sign-up period for eligible agricultural and forestry producers in early August; this initial sign-up will run through September 30, when we'll do a cut-off for the purpose of ranking the first set of applications. To date, about nine percent of the acres signed up are non-industrial private forestland.
- As you can imagine, seven weeks isn't very much time to get everyone on board—especially when that period overlaps with harvest and other end-of-season operational priorities. So, I ask your help in making your colleagues and producers aware of this opportunity, which is important to producers and critical to conservation. We don't want to leave anything on the table!

Two More Areas Needing Continued Attention

- Having mentioned the extension of the charter, the signing of the national MOU, the Secretary's vision on forestry, and the new Farm Bill, I'd be remiss not to highlight two additional key areas where we've made headway this year—but where we need to keep the momentum going.
- The first is completing the Statewide Forest Assessments and Strategies referenced in the MOU. As you move to complete this task, I encourage you to continue discussing these strategies with your State Conservationist to facilitate coordinated action to address priority forestry needs.
- The second is the further integration of our planning processes to support multiple uses, so landowners don't have to start at square one to establish eligibility for new forestry-

related programs. Nationally, work continues to enable the electronic flow of Forest Stewardship Plans between the Forest Service Web-based Data Entry Tool (WebDET) and the NRCS Conservation Planning database with testing to occur in 2010. In the meantime, states are working together to make the flow of information as seamless as possible. Oklahoma Forestry is providing electronic files of Forest Stewardship plans to NRCS field offices to speed up data entry for a landowner applying for EQIP. In Montana and Missouri, state forestry, NRCS and other partners have agreed on a common forest management plan template. Similar discussions are occurring in many states.

In Closing

- It has truly been a hectic year since we last met, but it has also truly been a productive one. We all have a lot to be proud of and a great foundation for delivering on the Secretary's vision for America's forests, both public and private.
- Thank you. I look forward to hearing your questions.

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