

Written Public Testimony of the National Association of State Foresters
Submitted to the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Concerning FY 2017 USDA Forest Service Appropriations

March 31, 2016

The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) appreciates the opportunity to submit written public testimony to the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies regarding our fiscal year (FY) 2017 appropriations recommendations. Our priorities focus primarily on appropriations for the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) State and Private Forestry (S&PF) programs.

State Foresters deliver technical and financial assistance, along with forest health, water and wildfire protection for more than two-thirds of the nation's 751 million acres of forests. The Forest Service S&PF mission area provides vital support to deliver these services, which contribute to the socioeconomic and environmental health of rural and urban communities. The comprehensive process for delivering these services is articulated in each State's Forest Resource Assessment and Strategy (State Forest Action Plan), authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill and continued in the Agriculture Act of 2014.

Your support of the following programs is critical to helping states address the many and varied challenges outlined in Forest Action Plans.

Wildland Fire and Forest Fuels

Wildland Fire Funding: State Foresters ask for your continued support to pass legislation that fixes the broken wildfire funding system and addresses much-needed forest management reforms, either separately or in tandem.

The current wildfire suppression funding model and cycle of fire transfers and repayments continues to challenge the Forest Service's ability to achieve its overall mission and negatively impacts Agency programs of priority to State Foresters. Additionally, the increasing 10-year average has not met annual suppression needs since before FY 2002. We are thankful to the Committee for the full transfer repayment and increased suppression funding in FY 2016. However, we understand this is not expected to occur every year. The Department of the Interior and the Forest Service need a long-term fire funding solution that would result in stable and more predictable budgets.

In addition to the wildfire funding challenges are the challenges posed by the nation's unhealthy, overgrown and fire-prone federal forests. **We support environmentally responsible forestry reforms on federal lands as part of the funding remedy or as a separate effort.**

State Fire Assistance (SFA): More people living in fire-prone landscapes, high fuel loads, drought, and unhealthy landscapes are among the factors that led most State Foresters to identify wildland fire as a priority issue in their state Forest Action Plans. We now grapple with increasingly expensive and complex wildland fires - fires that frequently threaten human life and property. In 2015 there were 68,151 wildfires with a record-breaking more than 10 million acres burned. **Eighty percent of the total number of fires were where state and local departments had primary jurisdiction.** Twenty-seven percent of the total acres burned were on state and private lands. **In 2015, 85 percent of all local and state crews and engine dispatched outside of their geographic area were responding to federal fires, primarily on initial attack.**

Attacking fires when they are small is the key to reducing fatalities, injuries, loss of homes and cutting federal fire-fighting costs.

SFA and Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) are the fundamental federal mechanisms for assisting states and local fire departments in responding to wildland fires and in conducting management activities that mitigate fire risk on non-federal lands. SFA helps train and equip local first responders who are often first to arrive at a wildland fire incident and who play a crucial role in keeping fires and their costs as small as possible. A small investment of SFA funds supports state forestry agencies in accessing and repurposing equipment from the Federal Excess Personal Property and the Firefighter Property programs. In fiscal year 2015, these two programs delivered more than \$169 million in equipment for use by state and local first responders. ***NASF supports funding the State Fire Assistance program at \$87 million and Volunteer Fire Assistance at \$15 million in FY 2017. These are the 2011/12 enacted levels. The need for increased funding for fire suppression has broad support and the administration's budget recommends a 12 percent funding increase to meet the anticipated fire threat. The need to increase fire suppression funding for state and private lands, where 80 percent of wildfires occur, is just as urgent.***

Forest Pests and Invasive Plants

Also among the greatest threats identified in the state Forest Action Plans are native and non-native pests and diseases. These pests and diseases have the potential to displace native trees, shrubs and other vegetation types in forests; the Forest Service estimates that hundreds of native and non-native insects and diseases damage the nation's forests each year. **They are also devastating the trees and forests of America's cities and towns. (The cost of replacing a single street tree is approximately \$1000.)** The growing number of damaging pests and diseases are often introduced and spread by way of wooden shipping materials, movement of firewood, and through various types of recreation. In 2010, approximately 6.4 million acres suffered mortality from insects and diseases¹ and there is an estimated 81.3 million acres at risk of attack by insects and disease over the next 15 years.² These losses threaten clean and abundant water availability, wildlife habitat, clean air, and other environmental services. Furthermore, extensive areas of high insect or disease mortality can set the stage for large-scale, catastrophic wildfire.

The Cooperative Forest Health Management program supports activities related to prevention, monitoring, suppression, and eradication of insects, diseases, and plants through provision of technical and financial assistance to states and territories to maintain healthy, productive forest ecosystems on non-federal forest lands. **Forest pests know no bounds. Controlling pests on private lands can stop millions of dollars in damage much of which would occur on public lands.** The Cooperative Forest Health Management program plays a critical part in protecting communities already facing outbreaks and in preventing exposure of more forests and trees to the devastating and costly effects of exotic and invasive pests and pathogens. ***NASF supports funding the Forest Health Management—Cooperative Lands Program at \$48 million in FY 2017. (2012 enacted level.)***

Assisting Landowners and Maintaining Working Forest Landscapes – Forest Stewardship Program

Working forest landscapes are a key part of the rural landscape, providing an estimated 900,000 jobs, clean water, wood products, and other essential services to millions of Americans. Private forests make up two-

¹ Man, Gary. 2011. Major Forest Insect and Disease Conditions in the United States: 2010 Update. Last accessed on March, 5, 2015 at: http://www.fs.fed.us/foresthealth/publications/ConditionsReport_2011.pdf

² Tkacz, Bory, et al. 2014. NIDRM 2012 Report Files: Executive Summary. Last accessed on March, 5, 2015 at: http://www.fs.fed.us/foresthealth/technology/pdfs/2012_RiskMap_Exec_summary.pdf

thirds of all the forestland in the United States and support an average of eight jobs per 1,000 acres.³ However, the Forest Service estimates that 57 million acres of private forests in the U.S. are at risk of conversion to urban development over the next two decades. Programs like the Forest Stewardship Program and Forest Legacy Program are key tools identified in the state Forest Action Plans for keeping working forests intact and for providing a full suite of benefits to society. Almost 90 percent of those who have stewardship plans, implement them. **Almost 50 percent of the nation's wood supply comes from small landowners who are the target of this program.** Last year this program assisted over 323,000 landowners. Again **fires and diseases know no bounds.** A robust program has positive impacts on the nation's watersheds, wildlife habitat and neighboring public lands. ***NASF supports funding the Forest Stewardship Program at \$29 million in FY 2017. \$29 million is the FY 2012 enacted amount. The need for increased funding on federal lands for more active management has broad support and the administration's budget recommends an eight percent increase over last year's enacted budget line item. The need to increase funding on state and private lands is just as urgent.***

Forest Legacy Program

This program provides critical federal assistance to states and private landowners to **keep working forests working through permanent conservation easements and in some cases, fee acquisitions.** Each easement acquisition is required to have a long-term forest stewardship plan.

Working forests play an important role to sustain the economic, ecological, and social well-being of America's rural and urban areas through the jobs they support and the benefits they provide, such as wildfire threat reduction, clean air and water, wildlife habitat, and outdoor recreation space. ***NASF supports funding the Forest Legacy Program at \$62 million in FY 2017. (NASF supports the program being fully funded from the Land and Water Conservation Fund and not be included in the discretionary budget cap. NASF also recommends report language requiring coordination with State Foresters prior to recommendation and selection of easements and acquisitions due to land management considerations and tax implications.)***

Urban and Community Forest Management Challenges

Urban forests are important to achieving energy savings, improved air quality, neighborhood stability, aesthetic value, reduced noise, and improved quality of life in municipalities and communities around the country. **There are demonstrable studies that show positive impacts urban trees and forests have on: childhood asthma, mitigating the impacts of auto exhaust, reducing home heating and air conditioning costs, providing economically viable solutions for storm water absorption, and even reducing crime rates.** In fact, urban forests have been shown to provide environmental, social, and economic benefits to the more than 80 percent of Americans living in urban areas.⁴ Yet, urban and community forests face serious threats, such as development and urbanization, invasive pests and diseases, and fire in the wildland urban interface (WUI).

Since its expansion under the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1990 (CFAA), the Forest Service's Urban and Community Forestry (U&CF) Program has provided technical and financial assistance to promote stewardship of urban forests in communities of all sizes across the country. The program is delivered in close partnership with State Foresters and leverages existing local efforts that have helped thousands of communities and towns manage, maintain, and improve their tree cover and green spaces. The program directly serves more than 7,000 communities across the United States. In terms of climate change

³ Forest2Market. *The Economic Impact of Privately-Owned Forests*. 2009.

⁴ United States Census Bureau, *Growth in Urban Population Outpaces Rest of Nation*, *Census Bureau Reports*. Available at https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb12-50.html. Last Accessed March 5, 2015.

mitigation and effectiveness, urban and community activities including tree planting have virtually no detractors. The program has over a 2:1 match for federal dollars provided for this program. ***NASF supports funding the Urban and Community Forestry program at \$31 million in FY 2017.***

Importance of Forest Inventory Data in Monitoring Forest Issues

The Forest Inventory and Analysis program (FIA) enables forest managers and the natural resource community to understand the scope and scale of trends and changes in forest conditions and to make projections of future conditions. Funding for FIA supports state and private lands, which account for two-thirds of America's forests and provide public benefits such as clean air and water, wildlife habitat, outdoor recreation, jobs and wood products.

NASF is concerned with the recent proposed and realized reductions to the USDA Forest Service Research and Development budget and recommends a total R&D funding level of \$303 million—\$83 million allocated to FIA. ***NASF supports funding the Forest Inventory and Analysis program at \$83 million in FY 2017.***

Landscape Scale Restoration

National priority Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) projects are a key way that states, in collaboration with the USDA Forest Service and other partners, address critical forest priorities across the landscape. LSR projects focus only on the most critical priorities identified in each state's Forest Action Plan and on achieving national goals as laid out in the State and Private Forestry national themes. As a result, LSR contributes to achieving results across the landscape and to making meaningful local, regional, and national impacts.

Competitive allocation of Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act funds was codified in the 2008 Farm Bill. The LSR budget line item was subsequently included in the fiscal year 2014 appropriations bill as the funding mechanism for a competitive process aimed at addressing critical priorities identified in state Forest Action Plans and based on the tenets of the State and Private Forestry redesign effort—conserve working forest landscapes, protect forests from harm, and enhance public benefit from trees and forests.

LSR allows state forestry agencies to target resources toward the highest priority forest needs in a state, group of states, or region, while also meeting national priorities.

Regional review teams comprised of state and federal officials with knowledge of the on-the-ground realities within the region carry out a rigorous review process to select the LSR projects that will receive funding within their region. Selected LSR projects are, as a result, the best and most ground-truthed landscape-scale, cross-boundary, outcome-driven projects.

NASF supports funding the Landscape Scale Restoration program at \$23 million in FY 2017. NASF does not support increases in this program coming at the expense of other programs described above. NASF also supports report language which requires additional funding over FY 2016 levels for LSR to be allocated for the highest national priorities as identified in each of the State Forest Action Plans as determined by each State Forester.