

Written Public Testimony of the National Association of State Foresters
Submitted to the House Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Concerning FY 2020 USDA Forest Service Appropriations

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) 2020 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 areas. The comprehensive process for delivering these services is articulated in each State's Forest Resource Assessment and Strategy (Forest Action Plan), authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill and continued in the 2018 Farm Bill. S&PF programs provide a significant return on the federal investment by leveraging the boots-on-the-ground and financial resources of state agencies to deliver assistance to forest landowners, tribes, and communities. As federal and state governments continue to face financial challenges, state foresters, in partnership with the S&PF mission area of the Forest Service, are best positioned to maximize effectiveness of available resources by focusing work on priority forest issues where resources are needed most.

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

NASF applauds Congress' hard work and dedication to achieve a bipartisan wildfire suppression funding solution to permanently end the raiding of the Forest Service's non-wildfire suppression programs, including the Agency's S&PF programs. We appreciate your continued support, as demonstrated in the FY 2019 Appropriations bill, in this critical area through additional funding for the Agency's fire suppression and prevention accounts, as well as increased funding for hazardous fuels mitigation on both federal lands and cross boundary areas. Fire knows no boundaries and state forestry agencies play a significant role in helping to reduce threats from fire as well as costs. The increased funding for both State Fire Assistance (SFA) and Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) in FY 2019 is a wise investment and we encourage further financial support for these programs.

State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance*

More people living in fire-prone landscapes, high fuel loads, drought, and deteriorating forest health are among the factors that led most state foresters to identify wildland fire as a priority issue in their Forest Action Plans. We now grapple with increasingly expensive and complex wildland fires - fires that frequently threaten human life and property. In 2018, more than 58,083 wildland fires burned nearly 8.8 million acres.¹ State and local agencies respond to the majority

¹ National Interagency Fire Center, Historical Wildland Fire Summaries, pg. 7. Last accessed March 4, 2019 at https://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/intelligence/2018_statssumm/intro_summary18.pdf.

of wildfires across the country; in 2018 state and local agencies were responsible for responding to 45,559 (78%) of the 58,083 reported wildfires across all jurisdictions.²

SFA and VFA are the fundamental federal mechanism 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 also 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 minimal as possible.

The FY 2019 Forest Service Budget Justification highlights program success in Alaska during FY 2017 when the state used \$1.6 million in SFA funds to increase capacity by paying for additional positions, including air attack operators for initial and extended operations, command staff for the statewide control centers, and technical experts for interagency fire plans. Funding supported the training of over 1,700 personnel, and was also used to defray the costs of senior level firefighters in the State of Alaska. These same personnel are also dispatched to assist in firefighting efforts across the Nation. By directing resources to actions that help reduce the number of large wildland fires—including prevention education, preparedness activities, and fuels mitigation—the SFA program directly addresses concerns over rising wildland fire suppression costs while also reducing wildland fire risk to communities.

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. In 2016, 82 percent of the total number of fires were where state and local departments had primary jurisdiction. Attacking fires when they are small is the key to reducing fatalities, injuries, loss of homes, and cutting federal fire-fighting costs. The need for increased funding for fire suppression on federal lands has broad support. The need to increase fire suppression funding for state and private lands, where roughly 80 percent of wildfires occur, and where many federal fires begin, is just as urgent.

NASF supports funding the State Fire Assistance program at \$87 million and Volunteer Fire Assistance at \$18 million in FY 2020.

Forest Pests and Invasive Plants

Also among the greatest threats identified in the 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. 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 2015, more than 6 million forested acres suffered mortality from insects and diseases, 1.3 times greater than the previous year,³ and there is an estimated 81 million acres at risk of attack by insects and disease over the next 8 years.⁴ These losses threaten clean and abundant water availability, wildlife

² *Id.*

³ Man, Gary. 2015. Major Forest Insect and Disease Conditions in the United States: 2015 Update. Last accessed on March, 5, 2019 at: http://www.fs.fed.us/foresthealth/publications/ConditionsReport_2015.pdf

⁴ Tkacz, Bory, et al. 2014. NIDRM 2012 Report Files: Executive Summary. 2013–2027 National Insect and Disease Forest Risk Assessment. Last accessed on March, 5, 2019 at: http://www.fs.fed.us/foresthealth/technology/pdfs/2012_RiskMap_Exec_summary.pdf

habitat, clean air, and other environmental services. Further, 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. 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 damaging pests and pathogens. *NASF supports funding the Forest Health—Cooperative Lands Program at \$51 million in FY 2020.*

Assisting Landowners and Maintaining Working Forest Landscapes – Forest Stewardship Programand Forest Legacy Program**

Working forest landscapes are a vital 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-thirds of all the forestland in the United States and support an average of eight jobs per 1,000 acres.⁵ 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 (FSP) and the Forest Legacy Program are key tools identified in the Forest Action Plans for keeping working forests intact and for providing a full suite of benefits to society.

FSP is the most extensive family forest-owner assistance program in the country. Management assistance is delivered in cooperation with state forestry agencies through technical assistance services and the development and implementation of Forest Stewardship Plans. The program works to ensure that private landowners have the best information to help them manage their land for wildlife, recreation, aesthetics, timber production, and many other goals. In FY 2018, nearly 24 million acres of private forest lands across the Nation were managed under Forest Stewardship Plans, and of this total nearly 13 million acres are within high priority landscape areas identified in State Forest Action Plans. Additionally, FSP supported direct outreach to roughly 475,000 landowners which includes 11,888 new Forest Stewardship Plans. The technical assistance provided through FSP is a gateway to other effective USDA, state, and private sector programs designed to help keep working forests intact. For instance, the FSP enables landowners to participate in USDA programs including the Forest Legacy Program and Environmental Quality Incentives Program. *NASF supports funding the Forest Stewardship Program at \$29 million and the Forest Legacy Program at \$62 million in FY 2020.*

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. Urban trees and forests provide a wide array of social, economic, and environmental benefits to people living in urban areas; today, more than 83 percent of the Nation's population lives in urban areas.⁶ Yet, urban and community forests face

⁵ Forest2Market. *The Economic Impact of Privately-Owned Forests*. 2009.

⁶ USDA Forest Service FY 2016 Budget Justification at pg. 119.

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. In FY 2016, the U&CF program delivered technical, financial, educational, and research assistance to nearly 8,000 communities across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories and affiliated Pacific Island nations.⁹ **NASF supports funding the Urban and Community Forestry program at \$35 million in FY 2020.**

Importance of Forest Inventory Data in Monitoring Forest Issues

The Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program, managed by Forest Service, Forest and Rangeland Research, is the only comprehensive inventory system in the United States for assessing the health and sustainability of the Nation's forests across all ownerships. FIA provides essential data related to forest species composition, forest growth rates, and forest health data, and it delivers baseline inventory estimates used in Forest Action Plans. Further, this data is used by academics, researchers, industry, and others to understand forest trends and support investments in forest products facilities that provide jobs and products to society. The program provides unbiased information used in monitoring of wildlife habitat, wildfire risk, insect and disease threats, invasive species spread, and response to priorities identified in the Forest Action Plans.

As the key partner in FIA program delivery via state contribution of matching funds, state foresters look forward to continued work with the Forest Service to improve efficiency in delivery of the program to meet the needs of the diverse user groups for FIA data. **NASF supports funding the Forest Inventory and Analysis program at \$83 million in FY 2020.**

Landscape Scale Restoration

The Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) program is an important way that states, in collaboration with the Forest Service and other partners, address critical forest priorities across the landscape. LSR projects focus 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. **NASF supports funding the Landscape Scale Restoration program at \$20 million in FY 2020.**

NASF appreciates the opportunity to share our FY 2020 appropriations recommendations for the USDA Forest Service with the Subcommittee.

⁹ USDA Forest Service FY 2018 Budget Justification at pg. 64.

*The President's Budget renamed these programs National Fire Capacity and Rural Fire Capacity respectively
**The President's Budget renamed this program Working Forest Lands