June 29, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pompeo  
Secretary of State  
2201 C St. NW  
Washington, DC 20520

The Honorable Eugene Scalia  
Secretary of Labor  
200 Constitution Avenue  
Washington, DC 20210

The Honorable Chad F. Wolf  
Acting Secretary of Homeland Security  
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretaries Pompeo, Scalia and Wolf:

On behalf of the undersigned national and state leaders in the forestry sector, we write to express our concern regarding unintended impacts of President Trump’s Proclamation suspending the entry of H-2B visa guest workers until December 31, 2020. The forestry sector relies heavily on seasonal forestry workers who legally enter the U.S. to perform important forestry work that renews our public and private forestlands through the tree planting, forest health improvement, and wildfire prevention and suppression.

Overall, the H-2B program differs from other visa categories included in the President’s Proclamation. These differences include a legislatively mandated cap that limits the number of H-2B workers that can enter the U.S. and the requirement that prior to hiring H-2B workers, employers must first advertise these jobs to Americans. The forestry sector typically has difficulty securing a sufficient seasonal citizen workforce, even during times of high unemployment, because the work requires travel to multiple states, often encountering rough terrain and inclement weather.

H-2B forestry workers play a major role in planting more than 1.6 billion trees on 2.6 million acres of public and private forestlands annually, including Federal forestlands. If this work is not completed, it could prevent forestland owners from meeting states’ regulatory requirements or compliance with forest certification programs for years to come. Guest workers who plant trees are also critical in meeting the President’s support of the World Economic Forum Trillion Trees Initiative. The proclamation will impede progress towards President Trump’s commitment to plant trees.

H-2B workers are important to the forestry economies of rural communities across America. This is supported by a recent General Accountability Office report which concluded, “counties with H-2B employers generally had lower unemployment rates and higher average weekly wages than counties that do not have any H-2B employers.” \(^1\) Further, the H-2B program protects the jobs of the full-time, year-round American workers, who rely on the H-2B workers to sustain their jobs. Every H-2B worker supports 4.6 American jobs.\(^2\)

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The work performed by H-2B forestry workers is critical to maintaining a viable forest products industry in America, especially as we face the daunting task of full economic recovery from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. H-2B forestry workers play a vital role in the wood supply chain and are essential to the near and long-term economic strength of the forest products industry in the U.S.

As you work together to establish standards defining categories of guest workers covered by section 3(b)(iv) of the proclamation, we urge you to recognize the importance of H-2B forestry workers to the forestry sector and to the economic recovery and continued economic growth of our nation.

Sincerely,

Deb Hawkinson
FRA President
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Alabama Forestry Association
American Forest Resource Council
Arkansas Forestry Association
Arkansas Timber Producers Association
Associated Logging Contractors – Idaho
Black Hills Forest Resource Association
Empire State Forest Products Association
Federal Forest Resource Coalition
Florida Forestry Association
Forest Landowners Association
Forest Resources Association
Forestry Association of South Carolina
Georgia Forestry Association
Great Lakes Timber Professionals Association
Hawai‘i Forest Industry Association
Intermountain Forest Association
Kentucky Forest Industries Association
Louisiana Forestry Association
Maine Forest Products Council
Maple Flooring Manufacturers Association
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National Association of State Foresters
National Woodland Owners Association
North Carolina Forestry Association
Northeastern Loggers Association
Ohio Forestry Association, Inc.
Oregon Forest & Industries Council
Pennsylvania Forest Products Association
Pennsylvania Forestry Association
Railway Tie Association
South Carolina Timber Producers Association
Southeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association, Inc.
Southern Loggers Cooperative
Tennessee Forestry Association
Texas Forestry Association
Virginia Forestry Association
Washington Forest Protection Association
Western Wood Preservers Institute
West Virginia Forestry Association