



National Association of State Foresters: Forest-based Solutions for America

Executive Summary

America's trees and forests are a strategic national resource with vast potential as solutions for climate change, public health, and economic challenges. Wildland fire is a national crisis – bold action is needed to sustain forests, protect public safety, and prevent the conversion of forests from carbon sinks to carbon emission sources. Active forest management, supported by forest markets, combined with coordinated wildfire prevention, mitigation, and suppression efforts can substantially mitigate the effects of climate change.

For more than a century, state forestry agencies have partnered with the USDA Forest Service to deliver professional forest management and protection across complex landscapes. With greater federal support, state foresters can leverage more state resources and local partnerships to achieve accelerated forest management and wildland fire outcomes on all lands.

The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) recommends the following to increase the pace and scale of active forest management and wildland fire protection on all lands:

- I. Target Federal Funding to Meet Immediate State and Private Forestry Needs** – Provide \$500 million with maximum spending flexibility for State and Private Forestry (S&PF) work
- II. Accelerate the Implementation of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy** – Provide leadership and resources to fully implement the effective strategy already in place
- III. Support State-based Solutions Driven by Forest Action Plans** – Build on historic federal-state partnerships and shared stewardship approaches to achieve national strategic outcomes
- IV. Implement Forest-based Climate Solutions** – Strengthen roles for the Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program, Resources Planning Act (RPA) Assessments, and other initiatives
- V. Make Organizational Improvements** – Ensure federal agencies have continuity of leadership, adequate permanent staff, and the right advisory mechanisms for forests and wildland fire

Introduction

Meaningful, landscape-scale forest restoration doesn't happen without collaboration across ownership boundaries. It is spurred and strengthened by the support of a determined executive, and underpinned by federal financial support largely conveyed through the USDA Forest Service's State and Private Forestry (S&PF) mission area.



Investments in S&PF programs and a shared commitment to working across jurisdictions ensure a holistic “all lands, all hands” approach to forest management. From Forest Service technicians to municipal arborists to state field foresters, together we can work across all land ownerships – federal, tribal, state, and private – to mitigate the most pressing threats America’s forests face.

NASF has developed specific recommendations for targeted annual funding levels and policies that would support state forestry agencies’ work at a time when state budgets are still reeling from COVID-19 pandemic response. If adopted by the Biden-Harris administration, the following recommendations would ensure our forests continue to play their all-important role in the environmental, social, and economic health of our nation.

I. Target Federal Funding to Meet Immediate State and Private Forestry Needs

Provide \$500 million with maximum spending flexibility for State and Private Forestry (S&PF) work

This additional investment could be made through supplemental appropriations for S&PF programs or with block grants to states with dedicated funding for state forestry agencies with three to five years of spending authority. In either case, we would encourage this funding be awarded directly to state forestry agencies or to designated third-party partners (non-governmental organizations, local governments, etc.) approved by the state forester to ensure these federal dollars are put to work on the ground where they can do the most good.

Maximum spending flexibility for S&PF or block grant funding allows state forestry agencies to:

- Retain employees, determine staffing levels for S&PF programs, and hire technical assistance foresters to build capacity to jump start rural economies through forestry activities.
- Focus S&PF dollars where they will provide the most support to the forestry sector, local economies and jobs, and overall economic recovery.
- Purchase equipment that supports essential forestry and wildland fire activities—e.g. dozers, aviation assets, small equipment needs, etc.

Built-in spending flexibility includes:

- Waiving or reducing state match requirements for three to five years to allow federal program implementation to continue even under state budget shortfalls.
- For two fiscal years (FY22 and FY23), temporarily reallocating Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) funds to the four S&PF base programs from which LSR funding was originally sourced. (Note that these funds should be reallocated to the states based on each program’s respective allocation formula.¹)

¹ The concept for LSR was developed over a decade ago by state foresters to pool a portion (15%) of their allocation from four base programs (Forest Stewardship, Urban and Community Forestry, Forest Health-Cooperative Lands, and State Fire Assistance) to develop a competitive grant program for innovative projects enhancing the base programs. LSR was eventually codified in the 2018 Farm Bill. With the current



This additional \$500 million in S&PF funding would go directly to further priorities identified within each state's Forest Action Plan. Forest Action Plans offer practical and comprehensive roadmaps for investing federal, state, local, and private resources where they can be most effective in achieving national conservation goals.

Our collective efforts will be most effective if available resources are focused on priority issues and landscapes of national importance using the most up to date information identified in the revised 2020 State Forest Action Plans. Supporting the work outlined in Forest Action Plans not only helps address our immediate forest management needs nationwide: it provides economic support to rural communities across the country. Forest Action Plans call for forest health and habitat restoration, hazardous fuels reduction and community wildfire preparedness, reforestation, rural and community tree planting, capacity building for local and volunteer fire departments, and increasing delivery of technical assistance to private forest land owners. All of these activities require workforces of varying levels of skill.

II. Accelerate Implementation of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy

Increase Active Forest Management

Substantial increases in active forest management and fuel treatments across all landscapes and ownership boundaries are needed in the areas at greatest risk for unwanted wildfire. Wildfires in the West may be top of mind, but managing wildfire is a national challenge. Without an increase in coordinated forest management, wildfires will continue to pose a threat to the nation's forests, destroy our cherished communities, and irrevocably alter American landscapes. The scale of wildfires and their community impacts far outpace current efforts to prevent them and mitigate the damage they cause. **Fire threats are best addressed by a holistic all-lands approach to wildfire response and proactive forest management across federal, state, and private lands.**

Fully Implement the Wildfire Funding Fix

In 2018, Congress passed the "wildfire funding fix" to end the practice of "fire borrowing" and to free up hundreds of millions of dollars to increase the pace and scale of restoration projects. Although the "wildfire funding fix" has been implemented with a new cap adjusted suppression and reserve account, additional funding for mitigating restoration work has not materialized in the Forest Service budget. The commonly held expectation was that additional Forest Service mitigation funding would flow into

COVID-19 state-budget realities threatening base program capacity, developing and implementing new projects and running this grant program will be more difficult to deliver effectively.



non-suppression programs such as Hazardous Fuels, State and Volunteer Fire Assistance, and S&PF programs, like Forest Health and Forest Stewardship, all of which experienced severe budget shortfalls due to “fire borrowing.” **Building a plan for full implementation of the “wildfire funding fix” will be a critical first step in addressing the wildfire emergency.**

Commit to Sustained Investment in Wildfire Mitigation

Wildfires in America are an emergency and should be treated like one. Funding the normal budget line items of the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior each year will not solve – and has not solved – the problem. An off-budget solution that provides reliable funding each year to the Forest Service, the Department to the Interior, and state forestry agencies for the implementation of the highest priority risk-reduction projects is essential to fighting wildfires before they start. **Increased collaboration between federal and state agencies, non-government organizations, local communities, and private landowners – bolstered by a sustained and unprecedented federal investment over the next ten years – is needed to make the difference.**

Build Capacity to Support Cohesive Strategy Partners

Collaboration and coordination have already increased as a result of strong partnerships between state forestry agencies, the Forest Service, and conservation partners, but additional resources are needed to truly push this work forward at the pace and scale necessary to protect Americans and their communities. Building workforce capacity in federal and state agencies, as well as among partner organizations, will need to be a key focus going forward. Making these significant investments in state forestry agencies to support wildfire mitigation projects will not only reduce risk, but create jobs in rural America at a time when they’re needed most. In revising their Forest Action Plans, states have used the most up-to-date information to identify priority areas for this work. **The need and priority planning are there; the last pieces of this puzzle are the dollars to get the work completed.**

Increase Support for S&PF Wildfire Programs

Increased support for the State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance (SFA/VFA) programs has proven to significantly increase the amount of hazardous fuels acres treated and improve wildfire response capacity for state, local, and volunteer departments across the country. **Bolstering support for both of these key programs should be included as part of any national strategy.**

Empower the Wildland Fire Leadership Council to Convene Cohesive Strategy Partners

The Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC) should serve as the convening body for the broad group of partners vital to the National Cohesive Wildfire Management Strategy’s (Cohesive Strategy) success. Convened by WFLC, these partners can explore increasing the capacity and involvement of non-governmental organizations and building a larger coalition to support this work at the national scale. **Wildfire management is inherently a partnership effort between federal, state, local, and volunteer agencies and departments.**



Increase the Use of Prescribed Fire

There is an immediate need for the return of low intensity fire to our landscapes. The appropriate use of prescribed fire makes our forests and communities more resilient to natural and necessary fire cycles. Increasing the use of prescribed burning depends on partnerships among the U.S. and state environmental protection agencies and a shared understanding that small smoke emissions from prescribed fire pose less risk to human health than mega-emissions from uncontrolled wildfire. **The National Prescribed Fire Act offers a legislative solution to increase the use of prescribed fire.**

Increase the Pace and Scale of Cross-boundary Work

Additional funding for Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) projects is needed to support improved federal forest health. **GNA projects are proven to increase the pace and scale of critical forest treatments, support cross-boundary projects and coordination, and provide job opportunities for rural communities.** State forestry agencies could hire temporary employees to conduct GNA work that benefits federal lands without supplanting vacant Forest Service positions.

III. Support State-based Solutions Driven by Forest Action Plans

The complexity of America's forest resources and patterns of land ownership require flexible state-based approaches for forest-based solutions that achieve national outcomes. [State forestry best management practices](#) are a shining example of state-based solutions achieving national outcomes for water quality.

State foresters have a long history of serving as convenors of partnerships that work across ownership boundaries to address shared forestry and wildland fire risk issues. Since 2008, states have gathered partners together to develop Forest Action Plans, which prioritize strategies, areas, and actions for all forested land – federal, state, private, urban, and rural. In 2020, all states revised their Forest Action Plans. Collectively, [Forest Action Plans are a powerful strategic plan for America's forests](#) that target resources where they're needed most.

NASF's report, "[A Century of Shared Stewardship: State Foresters and the Forest Service](#)," illustrates how building on the historic federal-state partnership will build national capacity and infrastructure for active forest management and wildland fire protection. For example, every year, state forestry agencies:

- Employ 7,850 trained foresters and 12,280 wildland firefighters
- Respond to wildfires on all lands – in 2018, 6,026 out of 8,080 state personnel mobilized through the National Interagency Fire Center responded to wildfires burning on federal lands
- Provide training to over 57,000 local fire department personnel
- Assist more than 8,000 local governments manage community forests
- Provide direct technical assistance to more than 270,000 private landowners.



- Produce an average of 170 million tree seedlings

Over 30 states have taken the initiative to formalize their commitments to greater partnership and collaboration through [shared stewardship agreements](#) with the USDA Forest Service and others. States have played a vital role in ensuring the success of the collaborative shared stewardship framework by coordinating key partners and facilitating active management across all ownerships, including federal lands. State-based approaches to shared stewardship enhance outcomes through shared decision-making and shared priority-setting.

IV. Implement Forest-based Climate Solutions

Maximize USDA's contributions to climate change mitigation by bolstering two key facets of the Forest Service Research and Development mission area:

Strengthen the Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) Program

The FIA program is the only source of forest data and analysis that is national in scope. It informs decision-making in the forestry sector, shapes wildfire protection strategies, serves as the basis for assessing urban tree canopy, and helps land managers analyze the effects of forest fragmentation on economies and ecosystems. Increasingly, FIA is relied on to provide data on the state of the nation's largest carbon sink—our forests—making it an essential component of decisions regarding climate change mitigation and adaptation strategy. However, the demands for information on forest carbon are becoming more varied and at scales that outstrip the current funding-constrained capabilities of the program.

State forestry agencies contribute over \$5 million annually to FIA implementation and look forward to serving as key implementing partners in the necessary growth and expansion of the program.

Strengthen the Role of Resources Planning Act (RPA) Assessments

The Resources Planning Act (RPA) Assessments and supporting technical reports produced by the Forest Service RPA research team constitute a trove of valuable scientific information presently underutilized by stakeholders interested in forests, carbon, and climate. Additionally, stakeholder engagement with the RPA Assessments has been lacking in recent years. In order to enhance utilization and strengthen the applicability of RPA Assessments in policy making, NASF recommends Forest Service leadership prioritize engagement with external stakeholders to help direct more timely and responsive RPA research efforts on forest carbon projections, and respond to specific policy-relevant questions from interested stakeholders. An additional \$3.5 million to the Forest Service Research and Development mission area would further accelerate forest carbon-related research and capacity for carbon modeling.



Strengthen the Role of Forests and Forest Programs

NASF's policy statement, "[Enhancing Forest Resilience and the Role of Forests in Dealing with Climate Change](#)," offers recommendations for increasing carbon storage, promoting the use of forest biomass for energy, and establishing greater emphasis on climate change mitigation in federal program implementation.

V. Make Organizational Improvements

Ensure Continuity of Leadership and Adequate Permanent Staff

Support the missions of both state forestry agencies and the USDA Forest Service by ensuring vacant federal positions are filled in a timely manner. For the last four years, many important Forest Service positions were left vacant or cycling through "acting" status, making it exceedingly difficult for states and federal agencies to share in decision-making and priority-setting for America's forests. When state forestry agencies and the Forest Service are empowered to work together, America's forests will not only be healthier and more productive, all Americans will be safer and better off.

Ensure Effective Advisory Mechanisms

Federal advisory committees have provided valuable stakeholder forums for building consensus and informing sound USDA decisions that benefit America's forests. NASF supports renewing the charters and maintaining USDA support for:

- ***National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council (NUCFAC)***. NUCFAC brings together federal, state, and local government leaders with non-profit, industry, and citizen experts to develop and implement a national action plan for urban and community forestry. The NUCFAC [Ten-Year Urban Forest Action Plan](#) (2016-2026) provides specific goals, actions, and recommendations for improving urban and community forests across the U.S. and its territories.
- ***Forest Resource Coordinating Committee (FRCC)***. FRCC brings private landowners, state foresters, conservation organizations, conservation districts, and forestry consultants to advise USDA on private forest conservation. Renewing FRCC would further enhance coordination between USDA, state forestry agencies, and the private sector in addressing a key national priority for private forest conservation: keeping forests as forests.
- ***Forestry Research Advisory Council (FRAC)***. FRAC brings together as many as 20 members from federal, state, university, industry, and non-governmental organizations to advise USDA on forest research.



Restore the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to the USDA Natural Resources and Environment (NRE) Mission Area

In 2017, NRCS was moved from NRE into the newly created Farm Production and Conservation mission area. NASF supports returning NRCS to NRE where the Forest Service is currently housed to ensure USDA alignment on forestry and conservation policy.

Conclusion

The National Association of State Foresters stands ready to work with this administration in providing the forestry leadership our country needs. America's forests are a strategic national asset, renewable resource, and climate change solution that face an array of threats. State forestry agencies are in a unique position to help guide the development of the policies and programs we can use to address these threats from the national level to the grassroots. Please do not hesitate to call on us.