April 14, 2021

The Honorable Jeff Merkley  
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on  
Interior, Environment and Related Agencies  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chellie Pingree  
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on  
Interior, Environment and Related Agencies  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski  
Ranking Member, Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable David Joyce  
Ranking Member, Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Merkley and Chairwoman Pingree, and Ranking Members Murkowski and Joyce:

Over 50% of U.S. forestland is owned and managed by more than 10 million private owners, most of which are families and individual forestland owners. These landowners represent a diverse group of people who have many reasons for owning their forest land and represent a key constituency in helping address issues of forest sustainability and conservation. However, private landowners face barriers – including unforeseen costs and insufficient technical assistance – that can prevent them from taking necessary management action. As population growth and urbanization increase nationwide, private forest lands are threatened by land use conversion and development. Now more than ever, it is critical that we maintain our privately owned forest lands in a condition that supports the health, prosperity, security, and well-being of all Americans.

The Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) administered by the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service), is delivered in partnership with state forestry agencies, cooperative extension services, certified foresters, conservation districts, and other partners. Regardless of who provides assistance, the end goal is the same: to help landowners achieve healthy, resilient, and productive forests. Well-managed, private forests and woodlands offer a number of public benefits, including enhanced wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, recreational opportunities, watershed protection, and timber production.

FSP equips private forest landowners with the unbiased, science-based information they need to sustainably manage their forests now and into the future, helping to keep forests as forests. Sometimes this information is delivered to the landowner in the form of a Forest Stewardship plan; other times, it is provided through an in-person or virtual workshop or a one-on-one field consultation with a professional forester. In addition to delivering technical assistance directly to forestland owners, state Forest Stewardship programs are often gateways to other landowner cost-share assistance programming, like the USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program,
state programs, and partner programs, that can help landowners keep their forests working and intact.

Today there are nearly 24 million acres nationwide managed with Forest Stewardship plans. From 2019 to 2020, the total amount of acres covered by current Forest Stewardship plans increased by nearly half a million acres. State forestry agencies routinely provide technical assistance to upwards of 300,000 private forestland owners annually. Forestland owners that have management plans are almost three times more likely to meet their management objectives compared to those without management plans. The FSP leads landowners to reach their management objectives while tying those objectives to the state’s Forest Action Plan.

Increased federal funding for FSP will allow state forestry agencies to ramp up outreach efforts and provide additional technical assistance to landowners to ensure that private forestland acres are maintained. Forest Stewardship plans provide guidance for family forest landowners to keep their land healthy and productive and often serve as management roadmaps for several generations.

Although effective and in demand, FSP has seen a troubling 50% decline in federal funding over the last decade, accounting for inflation. Some of this decrease was due to the historical impact of the increasing cost of wildfire on the Forest Service budget. We appreciate the efforts of Congress to enact the “Wildfire Funding Fix” in 2018 and are now eager to see program increases to those programs that suffered cuts in the past, including FSP.

Thanks to Congress directing the Forest Service to transition to a more modern and transparent budget structure, we now understand that historically, roughly 43% of the federal funding appropriated to FSP has gone toward salaries and other administrative expenses within the Forest Service. For years, roughly 57% of appropriated FSP funds have been going to state forestry agency and other partner efforts to deliver the program on the ground. On average, state forestry agencies and other partners match federal investments 2:1, which means the impact of federal dollars delivered through the FSP have amplified on-the-ground impacts. The undersigned organizations are confident that increased funding for this program under the new budget structure will result in more landowners receiving technical assistance and developing management plans for their forests.

Following congressional direction, the National Association of State Foresters has worked closely with the Forest Service to modernize the funding allocation formula to state agencies for FSP, focused on improving program delivery with greater emphasis on performance-based outcomes. Under the new allocation formula, priority areas and priority resource concerns have been designated in each state and greater emphasis has been placed on providing technical assistance and implementing land management plans in those priority areas.
Keeping forestland as working forests is paramount to the ability of our forests to provide the economic, environmental, and social benefits that are essential to society. In order to retain and properly care for their forests, landowners need sources of revenue. Forests can provide traditional forms of revenue from harvesting of timber as well as other forms of economic return including from recreation and ecosystem services. The technical assistance services provided through FSP, support landowners in achieving their management goals, which in turn provide forest products, carbon sequestration, wildlife habitat, clean water and air, jobs, and opportunities for recreation.

The undersigned organizations recommend funding the Forest Stewardship Program for fiscal year 2022 at $30 million (including $22 million for program work under the new budget structure).

Alabama Forestry Association  
American Forest Foundation  
American Forests  
American Resources  
American Woodcock Society  
Arkansas Forestry Association  
Associated Logging Contractors – Idaho  
Association of Consulting Foresters  
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies  
Association of Forest Industries  
California Forestry Association  
Connecticut Forest & Park Association  
Florida Forestry Association  
Forest Landowners Association  
Forest Resources Association  
Forest Stewards Guild  
Forestry Association of South Carolina  
Georgia Forestry Association  
Hardwood Federation  
Indiana Forestry & Woodland Owners Association  
Idaho Forest Owners Association  
Indiana Hardwood Lumberman’s Association  
Kansas Forestry Association  
Kentucky Forest Industry Association  
Kentucky Woodland Owners Association  

Longleaf Alliance  
Louisiana Forestry Association  
Maine Woodland Owners  
Maryland Forestry Foundation  
Maryland Forests Association  
Massachusetts Forest Alliance  
Minnesota Forestry Association  
National Alliance of Forest Owners  
National Association of Conservation Districts  
National Association of State Foresters  
National Deer Association  
National Wild Turkey Federation  
National Woodland Owners Association  
Ohio Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers  
Ohio Conservation Federation  
Ohio Forestry Association  
Ruffed Grouse Society  
Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition  
Society of American Foresters  
Southeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association  
Southern Regional Extension Forestry  
Texas Forestry Association  
The Nature Conservancy  
University of Kentucky, Dept. of Forestry and Natural Resources  
Virginia Forestry Association