

Written Public Testimony of the National Association of State Foresters (NASF)
Joe Fox, Arkansas State Forester, and President, NASF
Submitted to the House Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Concerning FY 2022 USDA Forest Service Appropriations
April 16, 2021

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) 2022 appropriations recommendations. Our priorities focus primarily on appropriations for the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) State and Private Forestry (S&PF) programs, as well as the Research and Development (R&D) Forest Inventory and Analysis Program.

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.

FY21 marked the first year that Congress appropriated the Forest Service budget under a modernized structure. To transition to this new structure, the historical budget for each program account was broken out into three parts: operations (aka cost pools), salaries & expenses, and program dollars. Congress determined its FY21 appropriations levels based in part on an historical analysis performed by the Forest Service that described how FY21 program budgets would have broken out under the previous budget structure. *While the modernized budget structure has resulted in unprecedented levels of transparency—as the FY21 budget was implemented, it became clear that elements of Forest Service analysis were incorrectly estimated.*

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

State Fire Assistance (SFA) and Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA)

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 2020, 58,950 wildland fires burned more than 10.1 million acres.¹ State and local agencies respond to the majority of wildfires across

¹ National Interagency Fire Center, Historical Wildland Fire Summaries, Last accessed April 15, 2021 at <https://www.nifc.gov/fire-information/statistics/wildfires>

the country; in 2019 state and local agencies were responsible for responding to 39,804 (79%) of the 58,477 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. 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 \$88.5 million including \$79 million for program dollars, and Volunteer Fire Assistance at \$20 million in FY 2022.*

Forest Pests and Invasive Plants

Also among the greatest threats identified in the Forest Action Plans are native and non-native pests and diseases which 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. There is an estimated 81 million acres at risk of attack by insects and disease.³ These 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 including \$39.43 million in program dollars in FY 2022.*

Assisting Landowners and Maintaining Healthy Forests – Forest Stewardship Program and Forest Legacy Program

Actively managed healthy forest landscapes are a vital part of rural America, providing an estimated 900,000 jobs, clean water, wood products, and other essential services to millions of Americans. Over 50% of U.S. forestland is privately owned and supports an average of eight jobs per 1,000 acres.⁴ 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 (FLP) are key tools identified in the Forest Action Plans for keeping working forests intact and for providing a full

² *Id.*

³ 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

⁴ Forest2Market. *The Economic Impact of Privately-Owned Forests*. 2009.

suite of benefits to society. With the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) signed into law, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) will receive permanent annual funding at the full authorized level, nearly doubling historical appropriations for the LWCF. FLP should receive significant increased funding levels commensurate with the increased funding provided to the LWCF by the GAOA.

FSP is the most extensive family forest-owner assistance program in the country and is delivered in partnership with state forestry agencies, cooperative extension services, certified foresters, conservation districts, and other partners. 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. In addition to delivering technical assistance directly to forestland owners, the Forest Stewardship Program often serves as a gateway 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. 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.

Following congressional direction, NASF 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. *NASF supports funding for the Forest Stewardship Program at \$30 million including \$22 million for program dollars, and the Forest Legacy Program at \$128 million in FY 2022.*

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. 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).

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 2020, 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. *NASF supports funding the Urban and Community Forestry program at \$40 million including \$31.91 million in program dollars in FY 2022.*

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. This will ensure that, at a minimum, the historical level of base program delivery is accomplished, which should include funding the collection of data on a 7-year cycle in the east and 10-year cycle in the west. *NASF supports funding the FIA program at no less than \$93.5 million in total funding in FY22 including no less than \$32.4 million for program dollars. However, we request that this increase not be realized at the expense of other critical Forest Service Research & Development or S&PF programs. We request you to work with the Forest Service to establish a budget line item for FIA for salaries and expenses.*

Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR)

The concept of the LSR Program was developed over a decade ago by state foresters. They agreed to reallocate 15% of the federal dollars their agencies received annually through four core programs (Forest Stewardship, Urban and Community Forestry, Forest Health-Cooperative Lands, and State Fire Assistance) to a new competitive grant program, now called LSR. Given the tremendous toll COVID-19 has had on state budgets, now more than ever, S&PF programs are critical to protecting our forested landscapes nationwide. To better support private forestland owners and the state forestry agencies that provide them with wildfire protection and forestry assistance, NASF is recommending Congress return LSR funding back to the S&PF core programs it originated from for the next two years. This return of support to our nation's core cooperative forestry programs is essential to bolstering the forestry supply chain in the U.S. and helping Americans weather prolonged economic instability. *In the absence of COVID-19 stimulus funding for state forestry agencies, NASF requests LSR funding be returned to the four core S&PF programs it originated from—Forest Stewardship, Urban and Community Forestry, Forest Health-Cooperative Lands, and State Fire Assistance—for both FY22 and FY23. If supplemental funding is provided for state forestry agencies or S&PF funding, NASF supports funding LSR at \$20 million in FY22.*

NASF appreciates the opportunity to share our FY 2022 appropriations recommendations for the Forest Service with the Subcommittee.