

Written Testimony of the National Association of State Foresters (NASF) Christopher Martin, Connecticut State Forester and NASF President

Submitted to the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry Hearing on “A 2022 Review of the Farm Bill: Forestry” July 13, 2022

The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) is pleased to provide written testimony to the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry for today’s hearing: *A 2022 Review of the Farm Bill: Forestry*. Thank you, Chairwoman Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and members of the committee, for holding this important hearing and for the opportunity to testify on behalf of NASF.

NASF represents the directors of the forestry agencies in all 50 states, five U.S. territories, three nations in compacts of free association with the U.S., and the District of Columbia. State foresters deliver technical and financial assistance to private landowners for the conservation of more than two-thirds of the nation’s forests. They also partner with federal land management agencies through cooperative agreements and Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) to manage national forests and grasslands. All state forestry agencies share a common mission to protect America’s forests and most have statutory responsibilities to provide wildland fire protection on all lands, public and private.

State foresters believe the Farm Bill is a unique opportunity to support rural America’s economic backbone and improve the quality of life for all Americans by enhancing support for America’s trees and forests.

Recent Farm Bills have also been instrumental in elevating the role of forestry within conservation title programs. The 2018 Farm Bill (coupled with the 2018 Omnibus Appropriations Bill) built upon 2014 Farm Bill achievements by both streamlining decision-making and expanding authorities within several forestry programs and by creating several new programs and authorities to provide for cross-boundary and landscape-scale forest management.

State forestry agencies work proactively with federal agencies to implement a suite of federal forest management programs – many of which are bolstered through Farm Bill investments. These programs provide invaluable support to small private landowners and create significant on-the- ground wins for forests and communities nationwide.

Good Neighbor Authority

The GNA program has allowed the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) to partner with states on federal forest restoration and management projects, facilitating critical work to improve species habitat, enhance watersheds, and reduce hazardous wildfire fuels.

Since GNA was first authorized by Congress with the 2014 Farm Bill, at least 36 states have broken ground on over 130 GNA projects. Through these GNA projects, states are contributing to the restoration of federal forests on a scale never before realized. According to the Congressional Research Service, the amount of Forest Service timber sold under GNA agreements has increased from 14.4 million board feet in fiscal year (FY) 2016 to 182.6 million board feet in FY 2019.

The 2018 Farm Bill introduced some GNA-related issues, however. For instance, while Congress made Tribes and Counties eligible participants in Good Neighbor Authority agreements, it also disallowed them from reinvesting GNA project revenues into subsequent conservation work. Without the ability to retain GNA receipts (as states are allowed to do), Tribes and Counties have less incentive to engage in critical, cross-boundary forest management projects that mitigate wildfire risk, manage invasive species, and maintain wildlife habitat.

The 2018 Farm Bill also barred states from using GNA revenues to restore state-, tribal-, county-, or privately owned forestlands adjacent to national forests. This provision denies the undeniable cross-boundary nature of forest threats and flies in the face of Congress' original intent for GNA to serve as a tool for landscape-scale forest restoration.

NASF supports Congress authorizing Counties and Federally Recognized Tribes to retain and invest GNA timber sale revenues. It also supports eliminating the requirement that GNA timber sale revenues be spent solely on federal lands. Additionally, NASF supports:

- Expanding GNA eligibility to all federal land management agencies;
- Making the authority permanent, or at a minimum extending the sunset date (October 1, 2023) for states to retain GNA timber sale revenue; and
- Amending GNA to allow for the reconstruction, repair, and restoration of roads administered by the Bureau of Land Management (and by other federal agencies should GNA be expanded to include them).

Landscape Scale Restoration Program

The 2018 Farm Bill codified the Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) program, which was a key policy priority at the time for NASF. The program originated with the 2008 Farm Bill and existed for a decade as a jointly administered program between the Forest Service and state forestry agencies.

In addition to codifying the program, the 2018 Farm Bill also stipulated a new “rural” requirement for LSR. As a result, and per a subsequent rulemaking made by the Forest Service, LSR work can only be conducted in communities made up of fewer than 50,000 people. This change significantly reduced the scope and efficacy of the program by prohibiting work in areas across the United States with legitimate need for LSR grant support.

The LSR rural requirement has eliminated opportunities for state forestry agencies to leverage their Urban and Community Forestry (U&CF) program work, and greatly restricted their ability to conduct hazardous fuels reduction projects under LSR in the areas with populations greater than 50,000 including many areas within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

LSR should be returned to a flexible program able to address the highest priority needs across landscapes as identified in state Forest Action Plans, regardless of community size. The program should not exclude larger communities or populations that depend on trees for their health and wellbeing, particularly in historically marginalized communities.

Forests aren't just found on mountainsides or in wildlands, but in cities, towns, and communities as well. Community forests – especially in areas with over 50,000 residents – are shown to significantly improve human health outcomes and provide tremendous socio-economic benefits. Healthy community forests aren't a given; they take work. For decades, state forestry agencies have helped communities manage their forests by providing technical and financial assistance for the planting and care of street, park, and other community trees. State forestry agencies and their U&CF programs are crucial to ensuring *all* people have equitable access to the many benefits of trees.

NASF supports striking the rural requirement from LSR legislative language established in the 2018 Farm Bill. To be as impactful as possible across ownerships and on a landscape scale, *all* lands – including cities, suburbs, and towns – should be eligible for LSR support as they were prior to the 2018 Farm Bill. The LSR program has supported many successful U&CF projects in priority areas with competitive grant funding in the past. It is crucial that LSR projects can once again include U&CF work.

Promoting Cross-Boundary Wildfire Mitigation

The 2018 Farm Bill amended section 103 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (16 U.S.C. § 6513), providing a new authority for the Forest Service to spend up to \$20 million on grants to state foresters for hazardous fuel reduction projects that cross land ownership boundaries, particularly in priority landscapes as identified in state FAPs.

While section 8401 of the 2018 Farm Bill, *Promoting Cross Boundary Wildfire Mitigation*, is working well, there is a need for increasing the authorization of appropriation for this provision. Additionally, it is our understanding the Forest Service used this new authority to codify an existing mechanism for implementing cross-boundary hazardous fuels projects commonly known as 'Stevens Money'. As such, the helpful authorities provided under 'Stevens Money' are no longer being utilized, and the net increase to the authorization of appropriations for cross-boundary hazardous fuels projects is \$5 million. The end result has not been \$20 million in new authority.

In FY 2002, Senator Ted Stevens championed the addition of earmarked hazardous fuels funds. These funds are often referred to as 'Stevens Money' and were to be spent towards hazardous

fuels treatments on non-federal lands that were adjacent to National Forest System lands where hazardous fuels work was being conducted or where other work was being conducted that increased the threat to the adjacent lands. The authorization allowed for money to be spent to protect communities when hazard reduction activities were being planned on adjacent National Forest System lands.

This authorization allowed for work on Federal and non-Federal lands to complement each other and provided flexibility for the Forest Service to use the money where it would provide the most benefit. This provision has been added to the Interior-Environment and Related Agencies appropriations bill every year since FY 2002. In the FY 2003 Interior-Environment and Related Agencies appropriations bill the following language was added: “Provided further, that in addition to funds provided for State Fire Assistance programs, and subject to all authorities available to the Forest Service under the State and Private Forestry Appropriation, up to \$15,000,000 may be used on adjacent non-Federal lands for the purpose of protecting communities when hazard reduction activities are planned on national forest lands that have the potential to place such communities at risk” capping ‘Stevens Money’ at \$15 million.

The intent from the Forests in the Farm Bill Coalition for section 8401 of the 2018 Farm Bill was to supplement existing mechanisms for implementing cross-boundary hazardous fuels projects, and augment funding available for accomplishing this work, not to supplant ‘Stevens Money’. Both ‘Stevens Money’ and the 2018 Farm Bill authority are important tools in the toolbox for mitigating wildfire risk for communities. We look forward to working with members of the subcommittee and our partners in the Forests in the Farm Bill Coalition on developing a solution that will best utilize all available authorities and funding for accomplishing this important work.

Post-Disaster Landowner Assistance and the Emergency Forest Restoration Program

Since the 2018 Farm Bill was passed, forest landowners across the country have suffered numerous natural disasters. In the wake of hurricanes in the South, derechos in the Midwest, catastrophic wildfires in the West, and tornados, ice storms, and more severe weather everywhere in between, it is clear that a significant gap in federal disaster recovery programming exists where family forest landowners are concerned.

The Emergency Forest Restoration Program – codified in the 2008 Farm Bill – is too bureaucratically cumbersome for most landowners to benefit from. Forest landowners should receive the same support from the federal government that other agriculture commodity producers have when faced with the impacts of natural disaster. Timely and ecologically sound timber salvage and reforestation operations help ensure our nation’s private forestlands continue to provide public benefits like clean air and water, jobs, and more.

Forestry Support Provided by Conservation Programs

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is playing an increasingly important role in providing non-industrial private forest (NIPF) landowners with access to the financial and technical assistance that makes sustainable forest management possible. EQIP and other conservation title programs like the Conservation Stewardship Program and the Conservation Reserve Program are absolutely essential to helping private landowners keep their forests as forests and providing the many social, economic, and environmental benefits trees offer over the long run.

Through strong partnerships among NRCS, the Forest Service, state forestry agencies, and other partners, the share of EQIP obligations going to forestry practices has increased from 4.3% to 7.3% over the past decade. This increase means that more forest landowners have had access to the financial assistance they need to sustainably manage their forests. To keep pace, more funding for technical assistance delivered by state forestry agencies and other providers is needed.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the subcommittee today and provide testimony on behalf of NASF. We appreciate the ongoing work of this subcommittee to provide federal and state forest managers, as well as private landowners, with the tools they need to increase the pace and scale of science-based forest management across all landownership boundaries.

We look forward to working with the subcommittee, our partners with us here today, and our federal partners, including the Forest Service and NRCS. Our goals are shared: to support the health of America's trees and forests and the rural and urban communities which rely on them. We look forward to providing this panel with the collective insights of the nation's state foresters as you develop the 2023 Farm Bill.