

April 21, 2023

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

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

Dear Chairmen Merkley and Simpson, and Ranking Members Murkowski and Pingree:

Over 50% of U.S. forestland is owned and managed by more than 10 million private owners, most of which are families and individuals. 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) and delivered in partnership with state forestry agencies, cooperative extension services, certified foresters, conservation districts, and other partners, is the primary federal mechanism for supporting those landowners in making sustainable management decisions. Regardless of who provides the 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. With this in mind, **the undersigned organizations recommend funding the Forest Stewardship Program for fiscal year 2024 at \$22 million¹.**

¹ Beginning in FY21, Congress restructured the Forest Service program budgets, separating out appropriations for cost pools, salary & expenses, and program funding. This advocacy level represents solely the program funding request for FSP.

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 educational opportunities like 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 (EQIP), state programs, and partner programs, that can help landowners keep their forests working and intact.

Today there are over 20 million acres nationwide managed under Forest Stewardship plans. In FY22 alone, the program led to the development of almost 11,000 new management plans covering over 1.68 million acres and provided assistance and educational opportunities to over 498,000 landowners. However, this represents only a fraction of the landowners and acres that could potentially benefit from the technical assistance provided through FSP with an increase in funding. 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 helps landowners to reach management objectives that tie to the state's Forest Action Plan². 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, sustaining ecosystem services like clean air and water, carbon storage, wildlife habitat and timber output into the future.

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. We appreciate the \$500K increase for FSP included by Congress in the FY23 omnibus, but believe a much larger increase is needed to support the return of this program to the prominence it had in years past, and justified based on the return on investment this highly efficient program provides. Increased federal funding for FSP will allow state forestry agencies and partners to better meet existing landowner demand and help ensure forestland acres are maintained. **On average, state forestry agencies and other partners match federal investments 2:1, which means the impact of federal dollars delivered through the FSP has amplified on-the-ground impacts.**

Keeping forestland in a healthy working condition 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 like carbon and water quality.

² <https://www.stateforesters.org/forest-action-plans/>

The technical assistance services provided through FSP support landowners in achieving their management goals in a way that is financially sustainable, which in turn provides public benefits including forest products, carbon sequestration, wildlife habitat, clean water and air, jobs, and opportunities for recreation.

Following congressional direction, the National Association of State Foresters has worked closely with the Forest Service to modernize the funding allocation process to state agencies for FSP, with greater emphasis placed on performance-based outcomes. Under the new allocation process, 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. **This means that Congress can have added assurance that increased funding to this priority program will be delivered to the locations and for the resource concerns that generate the highest public benefit.**

With all this in mind, the undersigned organizations recommend funding the Forest Stewardship Program for FY 2024 at \$22 million, a \$9.5 million increase over the FY 2023 enacted level.

Alabama Forestry Association	Kansas Rural Center
Aldo Leopold Foundation	Kansas Tree Farm
American Forest Foundation	Kentucky Association of Conservation Districts
Associated Logging Contractors, Inc.	Kentucky Forest Industries Association
Association of Consulting Foresters	Kentucky Woodland Owners Association
Association of Forest Industries, Inc.	L&C Carbon
Audubon Vermont	Louisiana Forestry Association
Calforests	Maine Forest Products Council
Carbon180	Maine Woodland Owners
Cimarron Watershed Alliance	Massachusetts Forest Alliance
Drax Group	Minnesota Association of Soil & Water Conservation Districts
Empire State Forest Products Association	Minnesota Forest Industries
Forest Resources Association	Minnesota Forestry Association
Forest Stewards Guild	National Association of Conservation Districts
Forestry Association of South Carolina	National Association of Forest Service Retirees
Green Forests Work	National Association of State Foresters
Green Infrastructure Center Inc.	National Association of University Forest Resource Programs
Idaho Forest Owners Association	National Walnut Council
Illinois Forestry Development Council	National Wild Turkey Federation
Illinois Tree Farm	National Woodland Owners Association
Indiana Forestry & Woodland Owners Association	Ohio Conservation Federation
Kansas Alliance for Wetlands and Streams	
Kansas Forest Association	

Oregon Small Woodlands Association
Oregon Tree Farm
Otero Soil and Water Conservation District
Rayonier, Inc
Resource Management Service, LLC
Rhode Island Forest Conservator's
Organization, Inc.
Rio Grande Return
Rocky Mountain Ecology
Ruffed Grouse Society & American Woodcock
Society
Society of American Foresters
Sonon Capital
South Central Mountain Resource Conservation
and Development Council, Inc.
Southeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association
Southern Regional Extension Forestry
Sustainable Forestry and Land Retention Project
Network

Texas Chapter of International Society of Arboriculture
Texas Forestry Association
The Climate Trust
The Hardwood Federation
The Longleaf Alliance
The Morton Arboretum
The National Alliance of Forest Owners
The Pennsylvania Forestry Association
Tree Lafayette
Upper Chama Soil and Water Conservation District
Upper Hondo Soil & Water Conservation District
Vermont Woodlands Association
Washington Farm Forestry Association
Washington Forest Protection Association
Washington State University
West Virginia Department of Agriculture
West Virginia University Extension Service
Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association