

**Written Public Testimony of the National Association of State Foresters (NASF)
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Prepared for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and
Related Agencies
Concerning FY 2025 USDA Forest Service Appropriations
May 10, 2024**

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) 2025 appropriations recommendations. Our priorities focus primarily on appropriations for the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) State, Private, and Tribal Forestry (SP&TF) 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 SP&TF 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. State Forest Action Plans—completed in 2010, updated in 2015, and comprehensively revised in 2020 by all 59 states, U.S. territories, freely associated states, and the District of Columbia—offer practical and comprehensive roadmaps for investing federal, state, local, and private resources where they can be most effective in achieving national conservation goals. SP&TF programs provide a significant return on 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 SP&TF mission area of the Forest Service, are best positioned to maximize the effectiveness of available resources by focusing work on priority forest issues where resources are needed most.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA/BIL) has provided game changing support in the form of flexible funding for State Forest Action Plan implementation—allowing states to address the highest priority forest management activities within their state, as identified and developed collaboratively with partners and stakeholders. Additionally, the IIJA/BIL provided critical support for the State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance Programs. We look forward to working with you to develop pathways for these historic investments to continue beyond FY2026.

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

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.¹ 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 providing a full suite of benefits to society. With the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) signed into law, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) now receives permanent annual funding at the full authorized level of \$900 million, nearly doubling historical appropriations for the LWCF. FLP should receive significantly increased funding levels commensurate with the increased funding provided to the LWCF by the GAOA.

Currently, there are over 20 million acres nationwide managed under the Forest Stewardship Program. 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. In 2023, the program initiated over 12,000 new management plans providing assistance and educational opportunities to over 585,000 landowners and covering over 1.32 million acres. 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. Forest landowners with 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 them to the state's Forest Action Plan.

The Forest Stewardship Program is facing an uncertain future. **Not only does current enrollment represent only a fraction of the landowners and acres that could benefit from the program with additional funding, but -- assuming continued level funding -- the Forest Stewardship Program will see close to 7 million acres leave the program over the next three years due to expiring plans.** The result is families and individuals without the additional resources needed to meet their forest management goals and a strain on other agencies' programs and resources to support landowners who previously received assistance through the Forest Stewardship Program. Although effective and in demand, the Forest Stewardship Program has seen a troubling 50 percent decline in federal funding over the last decade. The program simply cannot meet or maintain its current enrollment without sustained increases in funding.

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 \$22 million, a \$10 million increase from the FY 2024 enacted level and the Forest Legacy Program at \$128 million, a \$40 million increase from the FY 2024 enacted level, in FY 2025.***

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

¹ Forest2Market. *The Economic Impact of Privately-Owned Forests*. 2009.

More people living in fire-prone landscapes, high fuel loads, drought, and deteriorating forest health have 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. Prior to 2003, our forests and communities experienced an average of 2.8 million acres burning annually. Since 2004, however, annual wildfires have burned over 7.1 million acres on average, with historic highs in the numbers of acres burned in 2015, 2017, and 2020.² As of last month, we have already seen nearly 1.8 million acres burned in 2024 with the summer and fall fire season yet ahead of us. State and local agencies respond to the majority of wildfires across the country; in 2023 state and local agencies were responsible for responding to 46,176 (82%) of the 56,580 reported wildfires across all jurisdictions.

SFA and VFA are the fundamental federal mechanisms for assisting states and local fire departments in responding to wildland fires and conducting management activities that mitigate fire risk on non-federal lands. SFA also helps train and equip local first responders who are often the 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 \$85 million, a \$9 million increase from the FY 2024 enacted level, and Volunteer Fire Assistance Program at \$25 million, a \$4 million increase from the FY 2024 enacted level, in FY 2025.***

Forest Pests and Invasive Plants

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. An estimated 81 million acres are 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 \$39.43 million in FY 2025, a \$7.4 million increase from the FY 2024 enacted level.***

² *Wildfires and acres*. National Interagency Fire Center. (n.d.). Last accessed on April 30, 2024 at <https://www.nifc.gov/fire-information/statistics/wildfires>

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

Urban and Community Forest Management Challenges

Urban forests are essential for 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 2023, the U&CF program delivered technical, financial, educational, and research assistance to 7,542 communities across all 50 states, U.S. territories, three nations in compacts of free association with the U.S., and the District of Columbia. ***NASF supports funding the Urban and Community Forestry Program at \$42 million in FY 2025, a \$6 million increase from the FY 2024 enacted level.***

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 appreciates Congress supporting this program with a significant increase in FY 2023 and encourages ongoing support of the Forest Inventory and Analysis Program at \$32.4 million in FY 2025, a \$930,000 increase from the FY 2024 enacted level. Furthermore, we continue our request that you work with the Forest Service to establish a budget line item for FIA for salaries and expenses.***

Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR)

The Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) program is an important way that states address critical forest priorities across the landscape, in collaboration with the Forest Service and other partners. LSR projects focus on the most critical priorities identified in each state's Forest Action Plan and on achieving resource objectives outlined in the 2018 Farm Bill. The program prioritizes funding projects that reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfires, improve fish and wildlife habitats, maintain

or improve water quality and watershed function, mitigate invasive species, insect infestation and disease, improve important forest ecosystems, and measure ecological and economic benefits including air and soil quality and productivity. As a result, LSR contributes to achieving results across the landscape and to making meaningful local, regional, and national impacts. ***NASF supports funding the Landscape Scale Restoration Program at \$20 million in FY 2025, a \$6 million increase from the FY 2024 enacted level.***

NASF appreciates the opportunity to share our FY 2025 appropriations recommendations for the Forest Service with the Subcommittee.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Scott L. Phillips". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "S".

Scott Phillips, NASF President and South Carolina State Forester