

**Written Public Testimony of the National Association of State Foresters
Submitted to the House Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Concerning FY 2021 USDA Forest Service Appropriations**

March 6, 2020

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) 2021 appropriations recommendations. Our priorities focus primarily on appropriations for the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) State and Private Forestry (S&PF) programs.

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.

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 2019, more than 50,450 wildland fires burned nearly 4.7 million acres.¹ State and local agencies respond to the majority of wildfires across 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,

¹ National Interagency Fire Center, Historical Wildland Fire Summaries, pg. 8. Last accessed March 4, 2020 at https://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/intelligence/2019_statssumm/intro_summary19.pdf.

² *Id.*

*The President's Budget renamed these programs National Fire Capacity and Rural Fire Capacity respectively

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 \$87 million and Volunteer Fire Assistance at \$19 million in FY 2021.*

Forest Pests and Invasive Plants

Also among the greatest threats identified in the Forest Action Plans are native and non-native pests and diseases. These pests and diseases 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. In 2015, more than 6 million forested acres suffered mortality from insects and diseases, 1.3 times greater than the previous year,³ and there is an estimated 81 million acres at risk of attack by insects and disease over the next 8 years.⁴ These losses threaten clean and abundant water availability, wildlife habitat, clean air, and other environmental services. Further, 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 in FY 2021.*

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. Private forests make up two-thirds of all the forestland in the United States and support an average of eight jobs per 1,000 acres.⁵ 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 suite of benefits to society. FLP provides critical federal assistance to states, private landowners, and conservation groups to protect working forests through permanent conservation easements and fee acquisitions. Working forests play an important role in sustaining the economic, environmental, and social wellbeing of American

³ Man, Gary. 2015. Major Forest Insect and Disease Conditions in the United States: 2015 Update. Last accessed on March, 5, 2019 at: http://www.fs.fed.us/foresthealth/publications/ConditionsReport_2015.pdf

⁴ 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

⁵ Forest2Market. *The Economic Impact of Privately-Owned Forests*. 2009.

**The President's Budget renamed this program Working Forest Lands

communities through the jobs they support and the benefits they provide, such as wildfire threat reduction, clean air and water, wildlife habitat, and outdoor recreation space.

FSP is the most extensive family forest-owner assistance program in the country. Management assistance is delivered in cooperation with state forestry agencies through technical assistance services and the development and implementation of Forest Stewardship Plans. The program works to ensure private landowners have the best information to help them manage their land for wildlife, recreation, aesthetics, timber production, and many other goals. In FY 2019 State Foresters and our partners worked with more than 11,000 landowners, with over 1.1 million acres analyzed and ready for the implementation of restoration projects. Of those landowners, nearly 3,000 previously unengaged landowners owning 283,748 acres are working with foresters to develop forest management plans, and 761 landowners have restored over 81,000 acres of forests.⁶ The technical assistance provided through FSP is a gateway to other effective USDA, state, and private sector programs designed to help keep working forests intact. For instance, the FSP enables landowners to participate in USDA programs including FLP and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. NASF has worked with the Forest Service on the modernizing of the FSP to better focus and prioritize the Federal investment, achieve outcomes on priority lands, serve landowners, and leverage partnerships. Implementation of the restructured FSP is anticipated in 2020. The FSP modernization improvements will include states establishing priority areas for the program, with all federal investment targeting those priority areas. NASF and the Forest Service are also working to develop a new FSP allocation formula that will put more emphasis toward on the ground achievements. *NASF supports funding the Forest Stewardship Program at \$30 million and the Forest Legacy Program at \$64 million in FY 2021.*

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.⁷ 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).

Since its expansion under the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1990 (CFAA), the Forest Service's Urban and Community Forestry (U&CF) program has provided technical and financial assistance to promote stewardship of urban forests in communities of all sizes across the country. 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 2019, 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.⁸ *NASF supports funding the Urban and Community Forestry program at \$35 million in FY 2021.*

⁶ USDA Forest Service FY 2021 Budget Justification at pg. 41

⁷ USDA Forest Service FY 2016 Budget Justification at pg. 119

⁸ USDA Forest Service FY 2021 Budget Justification at pg. 42

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. In FY 2020, the Forest Service increased overhead charges to FIA by \$3M which negatively impacted program delivery. In FY 2021, we request no less than \$83M for the FIA program. 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 Forest Inventory and Analysis program at \$83 million in FY 2021.*

Landscape Scale Restoration

The Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) program is an important way that states, in collaboration with the Forest Service and other partners, address critical forest priorities across the landscape. 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. Changes to the program in the 2018 Farm Bill will focus this program's restoration benefits to rural areas. *NASF supports funding the Landscape Scale Restoration program at \$20 million in FY 2021.*

NASF appreciates the opportunity to share our FY 2021 appropriations recommendations for the USDA Forest Service with the Subcommittee.