



[regulations@obpa.usda.gov](mailto:regulations@obpa.usda.gov)

Office of Budget and Program Analysis,  
USDA, Jamie L. Whitten Building,  
Room 101-A, 1400 Independence Ave SW  
Washington, DC 20250

To Whom It May Concern,

The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) welcomes the opportunity to provide suggestions as to how the US Department of Agriculture can provide better customer service and remove unintended barriers to participation in programs, in response to the federal register notice of July 17, 2017 (V. 82, N. 135, Pg. 32649). NASF represents the heads of the forestry agencies for all fifty states, the District of Columbia and the US Territories. Our members' agencies interact with a wide range of USDA agencies and programs to advance the conservation and sustainable management of forests nationwide, and are proud to be the principal partner in helping deliver USDA programs to private forest owners across the country.

In addition to the specific issues outlined below, we would also like to call attention to our priority programs within USDA, and request your ongoing programmatic and financial support, as well as avoidance of any unnecessary future regulatory activity that might impact delivery to private forest owners:

- USFS State & Private Forestry Programs, including Forest Health, Forest Stewardship, Urban and Community Forestry, Forest Legacy and Landscape Scale Restoration, that ensure the wide range of public services provided by private forests continue through federal investments
- NRCS programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program that provide vital cost-share assistance to landowners to help manage their forests
- USDA Research & Development and Education programs, including the USFS Forest Inventory and Analysis program and USDA extension and land-grant university programs, that provide the latest science, education and training for foresters and landowners.

### **Eliminating Forest Management Plan Duplication**

State Foresters implement the US Forest Service (USFS), Forest Stewardship Program to provide on-the-ground technical assistance to private forest landowners seeking to actively manage their lands. Through a national agreement between NASF, the USFS and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), a Forest Stewardship Plan (FSP) prepared under this program also

**Executive Director**  
Jay Farrell

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qualifies as the plan required for landowners to receive cost-share funds under the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

In order to meet requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), NRCS must also document potential environmental impacts that may be caused by the expenditure of federal funds that enable landowners to carry out conservation practices under the EQIP Program. NRCS provides this NEPA compliance through the completion of a checklist form (CPA-52) for each EQIP funding request. Where a landowner already has an FSP, this essentially equates to a second duplicative planning effort carried out on the same property and to achieve the same forest management objectives. In some states, landowners are not able to qualify for EQIP even though they have a FSP.

In states where the process is working most efficiently, NRCS simply takes the FSP and uses the contents to complete the CPA-52. Where the process is not working due to inefficiencies or lack of forestry knowledge at NRCS offices, there is duplication of workload on the part of both federal employees and forest landowners. We propose that this issue could be avoided if NRCS were allowed to prepare one programmatic-level, national-level NEPA analysis for the EQIP program that eliminates the need for a CPA-52. The federal actions in question are *conservation* practices being implemented on private land, and as such excluding them from a more detailed, project-by-project NEPA review seems warranted.

### **Enhancing the role of Technical Service Providers**

Technical Service Providers (TSPs) are individuals or businesses that have technical expertise in conservation planning and design for a variety of conservation activities, including forest management, that help deliver NRCS programs. TSPs play a critical role in planning, implementing, and checking out USDA cost-share funded private forest management projects. We support the increased use of TSPs from the private sector and state agencies in delivering conservation technical assistance, as well as streamlining processes to enable landowners to get timely and efficient assistance.

We have heard from many parts of the country that the process for becoming a TSP is cumbersome and payment reimbursement from USDA is lengthy. These are issues that need to be addressed to strengthen the pool of TSPs. In addition, in some states NRCS internal quotas may be incentivizing use of federal employee TSPs as opposed to allowing state agency employees or private sector TSPs to service landowners. What is more, in some states, state employees are not allowed to be reimbursed for the TSP-type services they provide. We propose that addressing these issues would provide for enhanced and streamlined technical assistance to forest landowners in need.

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**Streamlining the Emergency Forest Restoration Program**

Natural disasters pose many significant threats to private forests and forest landowners. Hurricanes, tornados, floods, wildfires, and pest outbreaks annually result in significant loss of timber value and other ecosystem services across the country, and the timeliness and efficiency of Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP) assistance from the Farm Service Agency (FSA) is critical to recovery. In some states, landowners and state forestry agency personnel assisting post-disaster have found the EFRP regulations cumbersome and inadequate for landowners, to the extent that participation has been limited.

We propose examining the current EFRP regulations to streamline the process of estimating need and making a disaster declaration at the FSA county committee level, which would allow for landowners to receive funding and restore their land faster. In addition, we propose allowing the State Forester, or equivalent official, to request funds directly from the FSA, on behalf of landowners in areas affected by natural disasters, based on an assessment of damage. We also encourage FSA to work with state foresters, to utilize data collected by state forestry agencies following natural disasters. Finally, we propose that FSA not count the value of any salvaged timber against potential EFRP payments, which improperly penalizes a landowner for salvaging value that they would have eventually capitalized on in the absence of the disaster.

**Conclusion**

We appreciate your willingness to consider these issues and would be happy to discuss any of them further at any time. We look forward to continuing our strong partnerships with the new USDA Administration both as an association and as our member state agencies. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Bill Crapser

Wyoming State Forester  
NASF President

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