



FIFB RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY SOLUTIONS

The purpose of this document is to provide justification for recommendations and proposed solutions to be considered in the Farm Bill. Recommendations below correspond with the summarized recommendations document to provide details of the need for public policy changes and proposed solutions to address the gap in legislation.

FORESTRY

Incentivize ways to have USDA use the tools and funds Congress previously provided to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration, and to work across boundaries to reduce risks posed by wildfire.

JUSTIFICATION: The 2018 Farm Bill amended section 103 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (16 U.S.C. § 6513), providing a new authority (8401 Promoting Cross Boundary Wildfire Mitigation) 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 Forest Action Plans (FAPs). While the new authority is working well, there is a need for increasing the authorization of appropriation for this provision to meet the demand. Additionally, the Forest Service used this new authority to codify an existing mechanism for implementing cross-boundary hazardous fuels projects commonly known as ‘Stevens Money’. 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 to accomplish this work, not to codify ‘Stevens Money’. We look forward to working with members of the Agriculture Committees to develop a solution that will best utilize all available authorities and funding to accomplish this important work.

PROPOSED SOLUTION: Provide 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 forest action plans

Expand and encourage the use of controlled burning and enabling conditions to increase the use of controlled burning as an important tool in ecological restoration, to build forest resilience and address wildfire challenges.

JUSTIFICATION: Fire is a natural part of many forest ecosystems and important in shaping the North American landscape. However, climate and other conditions are escalating risks associated with wildfire, and the need has never been greater for community-based wildfire resilience action and proactive landscape management, emphasizing the use of beneficial controlled burning. Principal among the landscape-scale projects needed are proactive, science-based wildfire resilience efforts, including forest restoration and fuels reduction efforts. All levels of government, Tribal

Nation, NGO and other resource managers must be empowered with resources and a robust workforce to safely and effectively deploy controlled burning at scale. Scaling hazardous fuel appropriations, establishing proper cost sharing authorities across boundaries and managing controlled burning liability issues would vastly increase the utility and practicality of controlled burning as a critical tool for wildfire resilience.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

- Establish a new or improved cost-share authority, allowing for states, Tribal Nations, and federal partners to use a certain percentage of appropriations to enter into cooperative cost-share agreements that allow for fuels projects to be implemented and funded in accordance with a cost-share formula based on a project's ownership profile and treatment types. Challenges identifying and committing funding resources for treatments across ownership boundaries are constraining efforts to plan and implement projects at scale and in areas of high-risk. This approach would offer flexibility and build from experience with the current, suppression model that allows for rapid response and deployment, including after-action, and appropriate funding allocations.
- Create a new Prescribed Fire Assistance Program and budget line item within the Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management (Cooperative Fire) program designed to provide financial assistance to state foresters in support of workforce, mobile training, equipment, coordination, planning, and implementation of prescribed fire programs, including managing certification programs for burn practitioners, which should be incentivized to be interoperable between states. Allow flexibility for states to use Tribes, non-governmental and private contractors to fulfill core functions, regrant or pass-through funds as may be needed to achieve fire management goals (See Section 202 (Human resources) of National Prescribed Fire Act of 2021).
- Invest in a national prescribed fire catastrophe and/or claims fund to address the risk of prescribed fire escapes or damages in instances when burn practitioners adhere to identified best practices. Such a fund could offer discretion to the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to respond to unforeseen circumstances. Eligible damages could be capped, the fund could cover a share of first losses and/or federal resources could be augmented by other state or private resources. This could be paired with development of a nationwide gross negligence standard for prescribed fire liability for all practitioners, and incentives for states to adopt such a standard. (See Section 202d. (Indemnity of Federal and Tribal employees) and Section 203 (Memorandum to address liability of certified prescribed fire managers) of National Prescribed Fire Act of 2021).
- To incentivize and promote sustainable use of wildfire resilience treatments byproducts, authorize new integrated grant systems (or expand existing authority like the Wood Innovation Program), loan guarantee funding, and direct points of coordination to support all aspects of research and development, commercialization, business development and financing, and workforce and demand, modeled after existing interagency efforts.
- Authorize a new contracting mechanism for fuels treatments to streamline and incentivize use and disposal of hazardous fuels byproducts not suitable for traditional markets and treat hazardous fuels byproducts as a waste material (and thus a cost/liability for federal land managers).
- Elevate the existing "acres mitigated" Key Performance Indicator to a principal target on par with the two existing annual timber volume and acres treated targets.
- Increase USFS access to Section 638 authorities to better support Tribal Nations with fuels reduction and controlled burning activities, including direct hiring authority (builds on language from the 2018 Farm Bill).

Support provisions in the Farm Bill that provide opportunities to leverage private investment through loan or bond guarantees for high-quality forest carbon offset projects that financially benefit family forest owners of all sizes, account for - and lay a path for monetizing - embodied and stored carbon in harvested wood products, address disruptions to traditional forest product supply chains, and improve forest health and productive capacity.

JUSTIFICATION: Voluntary carbon markets are on a continuous growth path and small and underserved family forest owners have been left out of the opportunity to participate and financially benefit. For family forest owners entering into high-quality forest carbon offset projects, the key barrier is high upfront investment that cannot be paid back until the additional carbon is generated over a two-decade period if not longer. Recognizing that the need to

ensure compatibility with traditional forest product industries is paramount, any resources provided by the federal government to de-risk private investment must avoid creating artificial market demand for forest carbon offsets. Congress must lend support only to where offset programs capture the carbon benefit of harvested wood products and must provide the necessary support for research and development enabling financial benefits for harvested wood products and embodied carbon through voluntary carbon markets. Compatibility must also extend to ensuring forest carbon offset programs benefiting from federal policies have a clearly defined minimal impact on the supply chains of traditional forest product markets.

Advance the role of forests as a natural climate solution by prioritizing reforestation in conservation programs; supporting more investment and direct assistance to tree nurseries; and supporting voluntary, market- and incentive-based policies through forestry and forest conservation at scale from private U.S. forests, with safeguards to ensure positive outcomes for forests and the climate.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

- Invest in and incentivize the reforestation supply chain by:
 - Increasing capacity for seed collection and storage, tree nursery expansion, workforce development, and improvements in pre- and post-planting practices, to include establishing a loan or loan guarantee program for financing tree nursery and seed bank infrastructure expansion, including purchasing land, building construction, and equipment.
 - Creating a new competitive grants program to support reforestation nursery infrastructure, seed collection and workforce needs among state, private, Tribal Nation and land grant university partners to augment federal infrastructure investments made through the National Seed Strategy and REPLANT Act.
 - Addressing the national shortage of seedlings needed for reforestation efforts such as those proposed in provisions of H.R. 2562 the Solving Our Shortages for Seedlings Act.
- Create a stand-alone Budget Line Item for the USFS Reforestation, Nurseries and Genetic Resources Program (RNGR) and substantially increase the program's funding.

Elevate urban and community forests and drive more equitable and just outcomes in the wildland urban interface.

JUSTIFICATION: Urbanization impacts forest lands, particularly within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). The public in urban areas are recipients of the benefits private and state forest lands provide. The Forest Service would benefit from reinstating an advisory council dedicated to frontline urban forestry. The 2018 Farm Bill codified and stipulated a new rural requirement for Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR). As a result, and per a subsequent rulemaking made by the Forest Service, LSR work could 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 support.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

- Permanently authorize the National Urban Community Forestry Advisory Council.
- Remove the legislative language in LSR established in the 2018 Farm Bill designating the program as a rural program.

Enhance the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) to expand the ability of the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management to partner with states, Tribes, and counties on federal forest restoration and management projects.

JUSTIFICATION: In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress amended GNA to make Tribes and counties eligible entities to enter into GNA agreements. However, Tribes and counties were not afforded the same authority as states to retain GNA project receipts to reinvest in conservation, greatly reducing a significant incentive to engage and partner on critical management projects including wildfire mitigation, invasive species management, and habitat maintenance. Additionally, the 2018 Farm Bill removed the ability to use revenues generated from GNA timber sales for restoration services that were agreed to under the GNA agreement to take place off federal lands. This means adjacent state, Tribal, county, and other land that is essential to the health and productivity of National Forests can no longer be restored as a comprehensive landscape.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

- Authorize counties and Federally Recognized Tribes to retain and expend GNA project revenues.
- Remove the requirement that GNA project revenues must be spent on federal lands.
- Remove (make GNA permanent) or extend the October 1, 2023, sunset date for states to retain GNA project revenue.

Expand and amplify the Wood Innovation Program Grant Program to reach wider audiences, showcase the carbon benefits of manufactured wood products and tall mass timber, and support innovations with highest impact and greatest commercialization potential.

JUSTIFICATION: The Wood Innovation Grant Program was established in 2015 and expanded through the 2018 Farm Bill. It has a successful record of stimulating public-private partnerships to expand markets for wood, including those for mass timber, renewable wood energy, and sustainable forest management. The 2018 Farm Bill codified the program but did not require mandatory funding. Interest in the Wood Innovation Grant Program far exceeds the funding available. For example, in FY 21, 106 proposals were received, and 43 proposals funded; in FY 22, 119 proposals were received, and 41 proposals funded. Consistent and larger funding levels would allow for expanded impact and a reversion to the matching requirements prior to 2018 would expand the ability of smaller organizations to participate. Finally, a targeted award or group of awards recognizing carbon benefits in the built environment would build on the program's existing net zero competition and the carbon and climate accelerator projects it has seeded in Boston, New York, and Atlanta. An estimated 80% of the embodied carbon attributable to building materials comes from structural products. Federal policy can and should recognize carbon reduction strategies that reduce environmental impacts from future buildings.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

- Authorize robust funding levels.
- Reduce match requirements from 100%(\$1 federal: \$1 applicant) to 50% (\$2 federal: \$1 applicant) as was the case prior to 2018.
- Create a targeted award that recognizes embodied carbon in building design.

Direct the Secretary to ensure that all Inventory, Monitoring, and Assessment Research undertaken by the Forest Service within the FIA program, for Resources Planning Act reporting, and for other agency reporting and publications utilizes clearly defined terminology, assumptions, data, and analysis with the goal of transparent reporting on forest area estimates. Further direct the Secretary to report back no later than 180 days after the date of enactment on how Forest Service reporting will apply increased transparency and clarity to agency data and publications.

JUSTIFICATION: Effective forest stewardship relies on a solid foundation of data and information, however more data collected more frequently is not enough. Federal and private sector stakeholders need data information and analysis that is robust, reliable, timely, and relevant to emerging needs. This includes clear definitions and assumptions to calculate forest area estimates at the national and state levels. Distinctions between domestic and international reporting should be fully transparent, including how to differentiate between forestland and timberland, land cover and land use, trees and non-trees, and working forests and non-working forests.

Authorize FIA to create an externally facing office within the program tasked with meeting complex data requests from outside organizations. The new office would be authorized to collect fees from outside organizations to fund the new workload.

JUSTIFICATION: FIA needs greater public-private partnership flexibility and improved materials transfer agreements in order to provide integrated data sets for private sector innovation. The ad hoc nature of FIA fulfilling complex data requests from the public has led to some outside groups having greater access to critical datasets than others. The intent of the new language should make clear that routine requests for basic data by outside stakeholders are not covered by the newly created office or fee-for-service model

Establish a Wood Design and Build Educational Grant and Accelerator Program within U.S. Forest Service's State, Private, and Tribal Forestry division to provide matching grants to colleges, universities, research institutions, vocational training schools, and non-profit organizations that develop and implement curriculum and educational programs to teach the critical environmental and sustainability elements of using wood in product design and building construction. Federal incentives would amplify private sector initiatives already underway, support the sharing of wood design-based curriculum, programs, best practices across institutions, support underserved communities, and enable the integration of new and developing technologies and practices into existing training.

JUSTIFICATION: Targeted and improved educational instruction is needed to train the next generation of architects, engineers, construction managers, product designers, and environmental scientists to use new and emerging wood-based technologies, such as mass timber, thermal modification, and VOC-free stains. Currently, most post-secondary design and construction curricula focus on traditional materials and practices. Although American wood products are widely recognized as sustainably produced and have significant carbon storage and substitution capacity, formal academic instruction and workforce training on these benefits is often absent. For example, U.S. architecture and engineering training programs do not currently require education in engineered wood-based building systems or the environmental benefits of wood products, creating a gap in a new generation of professionals ready to design and build with these materials. Additional federal resources would supplement existing, private sector efforts to develop up-to-date course and instructional materials for use in lectures, learning modules, and design exercises. Educational institutions that focus on underserved communities, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities, would especially benefit from additional resources.

Amend the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Research Act of 1978 to explicitly incorporate forest carbon data collection and analysis in the Forest Service’s Forest Industry and Analysis (FIA) mandate.

JUSTIFICATION: The existing FIA mandate is to “...make and keep current a comprehensive survey and analysis of the present and prospective conditions of and requirements for renewable resources of the forests and rangelands of the United States...” (Section 3.(b)(1) of the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Research Act of 1978. P.L. 95-307). While this is broad enough to encompass carbon data and collection, there is a need for explicit congressional direction given the competition for FIA resources. In addition to the base program supported by the existing mandate, FIA should also collect and analyze above- and below-ground carbon data to improve our understanding of present and prospective forest carbon conditions.

Strengthen existing authorities under the Water Source Protection Program (WSPP) and Watershed Condition Framework (WCF) to reduce risks to water quantity and quality from natural hazards including drought and wildfire with a focus on aquatic and riparian ecosystem restoration and other natural infrastructure approaches.

JUSTIFICATION: Both the WSPP and WCF can be effective tools for water users to implement strategies that reduce natural hazard risks to drinking and irrigation water supplies and infrastructure. Since their authorization in 2018, WSPP and WCF have not received durable funding for implementation. Both programs also have a number of accessibility issues such as duplicative planning requirements, difficult match requirements, and an inability to implement an all-lands approach.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

- Address WSPP accessibility and utilization challenges including, ensuring WSPP is user-driven, expanding eligible entities to include a more diverse range of water users, reducing the non-federal match requirement, and allowing for an all-lands approach.
- Reduce planning redundancy between WCF and WSPP, by allowing plans developed under WCF and other watershed planning efforts to be eligible for implementation under WSPP.
- Reauthorize both the WCF and WSPP at an increased funding authorization level.
- Establish clear program priorities including the utilization of nature-based solutions such as restoring forested wetland and riparian ecosystems to reduce natural hazard risks to downstream communities and infrastructure.

Find ways to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration and reduce risks posed by climate changes, megafires, drought, insects, and diseases, while maintaining protections for vulnerable species and natural resources.

JUSTIFICATION: We seek to ensure agencies have sufficient resources, adopt more efficient processes, and use all available authorities while maintaining important environmental safeguards.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

Increase efficiencies in every Forest Service region to comply with environmental laws, such as the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), while addressing ecosystem needs and forest resilience objectives in high-priority landscapes. Ensure public challenges are focused on areas where impacts are most relevant.

Require the FIA Program to report to Congress no less frequently than every five years with the first to be completed no later than 180 days after the date of enactment. The report must provide a status and prioritization update on FIA's work regarding:

- Delivering the “Elements of Revised Strategic Plan” as listed in Sec. 8301 of the 2014 Farm Bill;
- Increasing workforce capacity;
- Empowering more efficient data-sharing;
- Implementing federal policies regarding FIA data privacy;
- Leveraging public and private data collection;
- Developing Improvements and flexibilities in measurement cycles;
- Implementing nationally consistent data collection protocols and procedures;
- Creating pathways to integrate and report on changes in forest carbon, including below ground carbon; and
- Any other topics as recommended by the FIA User Group.

JUSTIFICATION: A lack of staff and resources has prevented the FIA program from meeting its five-year plot remeasurement cycle, standing up a dedicated forest carbon monitoring program, and supporting more responsive data-sharing with the private sector. The ad hoc nature of FIA fulfilling complex data requests from the public has led to some outside groups having greater access to critical datasets than others. Establishing protocols for combining FIA data with new sources of satellite, LiDAR, and other remote sensing technologies would amplify the benefits and utility of FIA data and allow for great strides in expanded coverage, analysis, and small area estimation.



CONSERVATION

Amend 1 re-enrollment limitation for hardwood stands.

JUSTIFICATION: There should be no limitation on re-enrollment of forested acreage, hardwood, or otherwise, as long as it continues to provide the resource benefits desired of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)-enrolled lands.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

Amend 16 U.S. Code § 3831 (h)(2)), striking in (A) the word hardwoods (so that the one re-enrollment provision applies to all forested stands) and adding an additional exclusion to the one re-enrollment limit in (B) for “stands of endemic and native species,” that have been mid-contract managed or will be managed before re-enrollment.

Restore cost-share for mid-contract management activities on CRP-enrolled land.

JUSTIFICATION: All CRP practices and contracts require landowners to perform mid-contract management activities at least once during the duration of the contract to maintain and enhance the conservation benefits and wildlife habitat resources of the land. These activities, which are included in the conservation plan for the CRP contract, may include prescribed burning, thinning, interseeding, or other practices. Previously, landowners received cost-share payments for these activities; however, this authority was not included in the 2018 Farm Bill. These practices rightly continue to be required by statute and USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA); however, landowners enrolled after the 2018 Farm Bill as enacted will not receive adequate cost-share to assist with the implementation of these practices.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

Amend 16 U.S. Code § 3834 (b)(2) to require the Secretary to provide cost-sharing payments for mid-contract management activities performed under § 3832(a)(5) and 3832(a)(10), if the activity is included in the conservation plan. In addition, cost-share should be retroactively authorized for all mid-contract management activities on contracts enrolled under the 2018 Farm Bill.

Amend Conservation Reserve Program policy to allow for CRP-enrolled loblolly pine stands to be harvested and replanted with conservation priority species without being considered as “destroying the conservation cover.”

JUSTIFICATION: When the Conservation Reserve Program was created in the late 1980s, tree planting was envisioned as a prime way to address concerns over highly erodible agricultural soils. However, CRP did not envision how to support and incentivize beneficial forest health and conservation decisions by landowners as their trees under CRP reached maturity. In some parts of the country, CRP-planted loblolly pine stands are over 30 years old and reaching maturity, having been reenrolled twice over. The landowners of such stands are at a critical decision point in their management; however, they are not allowed to harvest their trees while under a CRP contract. This is viewed by the FSA as tantamount to “destroying the conservation cover,” thus rendering the landowner ineligible for further participation in CRP.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

Include language recognizing that harvesting and converting loblolly pine to a conservation priority species (e.g., longleaf pine, bottomland hardwood, white oak, etc.) is not tantamount to “destroying the conservation cover.”

Support the creation of the Forest Conservation Easement Program (FCEP). FCEP will be the successor to and an expansion of the existing Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP).

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

- It would receive mandatory funding within the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill, without impacting existing longstanding conservation easement programs, and be administered by NRCS.
- FCEP provides two distinct easement options for landowners to choose from: 1) Forest Land Easements (FLE), which are held by eligible entities, including NGOs (such as land trusts) and state, local, and Tribal agencies; and 2) Forest Reserve Easements (FRE), which are federally held and for which landowners can receive funding for land management and restoration activities outlined in the required FRE plan.

Improve Post-Disaster Landowner Assistance through the Emergency Forest Restoration Program

JUSTIFICATION: The incidence of natural disasters impacting private forest owners is on the rise – hurricanes, tornados, wildfires, ice storms, and more. EFRP was designed in the 2008 Farm Bill to support landowners post-disaster with financial support to reforest; however, the utilization of the program has been far less than the documented need indicating significant programmatic barriers to participation. Significant among these barriers is that the program is housed within the FSA, which is not traditionally an agency with forestry expertise, especially at the local level. Additionally, producers across the country have documented challenges with accessing the program and getting reimbursed in a timely and fair manner. USDA post-disaster landowner assistance programming writ large needs to be examined, with either EFRP being overhauled, or a new program created that adequately supports landowner needs.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

Include in the Farm Bill S231 (Emergency Conservation Program Improvement Act of 2023), which would allow for landowners to receive 75% of EFRP payments up-front, as opposed to having to outlay resources and wait to be reimbursed.

Eliminate the requirement for Farm Services Agency (FSA) county offices to activate the program, ensuring all impacted landowners can access the program

Exempt forest landowners from the requirement to have an FSA Farm Number

JUSTIFICATION: Participation in USDA landowner assistance programs requires proof of ownership, which is achieved by applying for and receiving an FSA Farm Number. This process can be very cumbersome, especially for historically underserved landowners without relationships with county FSA offices. Furthermore, the requirement of a Farm Number makes more sense within the context of traditional row-cropping and livestock entities, and less so for forest management.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

Report language recognizing that obtaining a farm number is a process-barrier for forest landowners, especially historically underserved forest landowners.

Enhance the accessibility and utility of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) by building upon and expanding a grant funding model, increasing streamlining, reducing counter-productive funding limitations, creating flexibility in partner contribution, match, and cost-share requirements, and improving technical assistance and planning support.

JUSTIFICATION: RCPP is a promising avenue to accomplish innovative, strategic, and partner-driven projects, and that function should be further enhanced and encouraged. The program also has a steep learning curve and comes with substantial project administration and match requirements that are difficult for many partners to manage. Some partners also have found that the category and amounts of technical assistance dollars are insufficient to fund the range of activities needed to effectively support RCPP projects. Our proposed changes seek to enable greater participation by partners, producers, and landowners and encourage the use of RCPP to expand and enhance ongoing conservation work where there are already non-federal resources being deployed. Additionally, recommendations concerning the use of grant models to implement RCPP and an increase in maximum awards have the potential to remove some of the program's current and potential implementation hurdles.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

- Build upon and expand a grant funding model:
 - Expand the use of AFAs and/or adopt a grant funding model for implementing RCPP projects.
- Increase streamlining:
 - Reauthorize RCPP with a more streamlined administrative process to be more aligned with other Title II programs. Leverage USDA conservation program funds to provide investment alongside private market investment, with improvements in the Regional Conservation Partnership Program's Alternative Funding Arrangements. Increase partners ability to build projects at scale by removing the requirement.
 - Modify project selection criteria to increase likelihood of being able to renew if an initial project is clearly successful.
 - Land Eligibility: Make all NGO owned land eligible for RCPP easements, unless it is subject to an easement or deed restriction that provides similar protections.
 - Remove participation and project implementation barriers by allowing project leads to work directly with producers and landowners within approved project areas to implement eligible activities on eligible lands who are not enrolled in other NRCS programs.
- Reduce counter-productive funding limitations:
 - Allow for RCPP funds to cover indirect, administrative, and staffing costs related to project implementation. Revise the current prohibition on RCPP program funding going toward partners' administrative expenses, which is burdensome and costly for NRCS without associated cost-savings. Instead, RCPP program funds should be permitted to cover allowable indirect expenses to reflect the standard, federal agency-wide practice for NICRA, or Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement.
 - Increase maximum awards, especially for projects with conservation easements due to the high costs of this type of project.
 - Increase reimbursement rates pertaining to maximum program payment percentages to encourage greater participation. Note, the RCPP statute does not look to specify reimbursement rates. This may mean reimbursement rates are determined outside of statute or linked to eligible activities under the statutory authority of a covered program, as defined by RCPP (e.g., Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)).
- Create flexibility in partner contribution, match, and cost-share requirements:
 - Increase flexibility for partner contribution level and type by eliminating a minimum contribution ratio for partners or reducing the current 1:1 contribution ratio.
 - Allow partner activities and costs related to a project that are incurred prior to both application and execution of the partnership agreement to be considered as partner contribution.

- Reduce or remove match and cost-share requirements for entity-held easements and land management activities on lands owned or operated by Historically Underserved Producers (HUPs).
- Provide Landowners with up to 100% Compensation for U.S.-held Easements on working lands; and expand eligible partner match and contribution for U.S.-held easements to include landowner donation and charitable contributions.
- Improve technical assistance (TA) and planning support:
 - Increase the overall TA cap and allow for more flexibility in allocation of implementation TA and enhancement TA, to allow partners the necessary funding and flexibility to best support project management and delivery.
 - Offer NRCS planning grants that give potential RCPP applicants the capacity to put together the partnerships, learn the program, and develop effective RCPP proposals.

Increase forest production, drought resilience and climate resilience within key NRCS programs.

JUSTIFICATION: NRCS land protection programs do not prioritize forest production and drought resilience at this time. Small acreage forest owners need additional incentives to advance climate resilience.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

- Require strategic integration of USDA land protection (ACEP) and restoration (CRP, CSP, EQIP, RCPP) programs and prioritize funding to landowners that both maintain agricultural and/or forest production and increase drought resilience by implementing appropriate activities, projects, and use of innovative measurement technologies.
- Improve NRCS Landscape Conservation Initiatives to address and account for climate resilience particularly to encourage small acreage forest ownerships to address climate change beyond furthering early successional habitat creation (New England–New York Forestry Initiative).

Enhance forest health investments and invasive species management within USDA.

JUSTIFICATION: There is need for a sustained program of directed research, technology transfer, provision of resources, and community outreach that produces the knowledge and practical tools needed to improve forest management and reduce the existential risks posed by non-native insects and diseases that are likely to increase as the climate changes.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

- Authorize a new program to address the threats that non-native insects and diseases present to the sustainability of forestry in the U.S. and the environmental and economic benefits forestry provides.
- Address the lack of directed research on the functional loss of tree species from invasives by incorporating provisions of [H.R.1389](#), the Invasive Species Prevention and Forest Restoration Act.
- Expand the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership program (Joint Chiefs), as codified in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, (a) to include an enhanced focus on invasive non-native plant pests and insects' species control and (b) Expand eligible activities to allow treatments for erosion control materials and resource concerns related to native wildlife species, such as feral ungulates, small mammal predator control, invasive ants, and other insects.
- Extend the 2018 Farm Bill Utility Infrastructure Rights-of-way Vegetation Management Pilot Program.

Reauthorize and strengthen programs that support increased workforce capacity within federal agencies and partnerships serving the natural resources and conservation community.

JUSTIFICATION: The implementation of conservation programs and authorities has been hindered by a shortage of workforce capacity among agency staff, partners, and contractors. These people perform crucial technical assistance functions, such as stewardship or conservation plan development, wildfire management, forestry management, etc., that are necessary precursors for landowners to access federal funding programs. They also represent the implementation workforce that carries out conservation projects on the ground. To support the growing capacity needs of the industry, providing opportunities through programs that focus not only recruitment and retention of entry level positions.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

- Expand the Renewable Resources Extension Act authority to include provisions allowing for the hiring and support of staff at universities for Farm Bill programs in target communities, prioritizing historically underserved and protected audiences.
- Reauthorize the Agriculture Conservation Experience Services program.
- Expand the Public Land Corps Act to include match waivers for non-profits implementing job training and workforce development programs that produce qualified candidates to fill critical NRCS and Forest Service vacancies.
- Support creation of a Civilian Conservation and Climate Corps to promote career opportunities among 16-25 years seeking careers in conservation and natural resources.
- Authorize direct hiring authority for the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Interior for graduates Civilian Conservation Center programs and direct the agency to identify and develop career pathways for graduates at their agencies.
- Direct the U.S. Forest Service and Department of Interior to conduct an assessment of workforce needs at public land agencies and related industries to determine what necessary curriculum, develop marketing and recruitment materials, and provide specialized staff.
- Make the Tribal Forest Protection Act 638 contracting authority permanent and dedicate funding to TFPA 638 contracts.

Encourage expanded NRCS use of Technical Service Providers (TSP).

JUSTIFICATION: The ability for forest landowners to learn about and implement appropriate forestry practices on their land is greatly enhanced when state forestry agencies or other partners are able to serve those landowners in a technical service provider capacity. The process for becoming a TSP needs to be streamlined, and NRCS financial support for and use of TSPs needs to increase to better serve forest landowners. Particular emphasis needs to be placed on developing TSP resources that are trusted within historically underserved landowner communities, and that those landowners are aware of and have access to those TSPs.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

Encourage expansion of NRCS use of financial support to state forestry agencies, private consulting foresters, and other entities to serve as TSPs for NRCS programs, with a focus on ensuring historically underserved landowners have access to this service.

Establish a 10% forestry set-aside at the national level, including language that directs state offices/technical committees to assess and establish priority forestry practices, in The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

JUSTIFICATION: EQIP is a stronghold for providing financial and technical assistance that addresses priority natural resource concerns to private forest landowners. Currently, EQIP obligations data provided by NRCS shows approximately 7% of EQIP funding nationwide is devoted to forestry practices; however, there is significant variation from state to state. Given the existing demand for EQIP funding from forest owners nationwide and the current policy focus on supporting private lands forest management for carbon benefits, ensuring that a large portion of EQIP funding is dedicated to forestry practices is warranted. Additionally, ensuring that each state is assessing and prioritizing the forest management needs in their state would help ensure EQIP forestry funding is used more efficiently across the country.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

Amend “16 U.S. Code § 3839aa–2(f) – Allocation of Funding” to include a third subsection directing “at least 10% of the funds made available for payments under the program shall be targeted at forestry practices” and associated language requiring state offices/technical committees to assess and establish priority forestry practices, in EQIP.



CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

Pursue new and existing strategies to encourage collaboratively developed, landscape-scale conservation projects and build community-based capacity to support such work.

JUSTIFICATION: Both the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program and the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership have become important policy tools for accomplishing ecological restoration and fuels reduction at landscape scales. These programs also reflect the recognition that collaborative, community-based engagement and partnerships are foundational to the success of landscape level, cross-boundary restoration and conservation projects. However, there is no dedicated funding source to support the cultivation of community capacity, partnerships, and collaborations before and during these types of projects. To increase the pace, scale, and ambition of conservation and restoration activities, there is a need to sustain and expand landscape-scale programs such as CFLRP and JCLRP *as well as* provide dedicated funding for increasing community capacity, partnerships, and collaborations that play a critical support role. Encouraging the use of the 20-year stewardship end result contracting authority as an implementation mechanism further supports larger-scale, restoration-focused approaches that emphasize collaboration and local community benefit.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

- Reauthorize the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) and in that reauthorization include:
 - Prioritization of proposals that include prescribed fire projects that take an all-lands, all-hands approach.
 - A requirement for the Forest Service to establish and fund an agency liaison role for each CFLRP landscape that provides support to associated collaboratives established pursuant to sub-section (b)(2).

- An increase in the number of CFLRP projects per region, especially in the West, to take into account new and emerging funding sources (e.g., Wildfire Crisis Strategy, etc.).
- Clarification that implementation costs covered by the CFLRP, as referenced in subsection (f)(2), may include the costs of collaborative facilitation and coordination. Include report language to specify an intent that a portion of CFLRP dollars should be allocated to non-Forest Service partners to provide necessary coordination, relationship-building, facilitation, and other CFLRP collaborative support functions.
- Establish a five-year reauthorization of the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership, as codified in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. Provide Congressional direction that 20% of funding not explicitly allocated to USFS or NRCS for eligible activities should be used for technical assistance, project development, or local capacity building. Retaining a percentage of programmatic funding for these purposes will continue to support communities in identifying consensus-driven projects that can effectively reduce wildfire risk at the landscape scale.
- Authorize the U.S. Forest Service's use of National Forest System funds to enter into cooperative agreements with other federal agencies, Tribes, states, local governments, private and nonprofit entities, and educational institutions to support the work of forest or grassland collaboratives on activities benefitting federal lands and adjacent non-federal lands, including for technical assistance, administrative functions or costs, and other capacity support needs identified by the Forest Service.

Farm Bill programs and authorities have historically been less accessible or not workable for various demographics and communities.

PROPOSED SOLUTION:

- Implement match flexibility, cost-share reductions and/or exceptions for underserved producers and landowners or entities that serve underserved producers or landowners
- Provide continued funding for forest owner assistance for obtaining clear title and estate planning that encourages long-term retention of forest land, through the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program, authorized in Section 2501 of the Farm Bill.



RESEARCH EXTENSION AND RELATED MATTERS

Create a single USDA-sponsored platform with multiple user-friendly tools to provide transparent, high integrity forest and wood product data to measure and monitor forest carbon throughout the value chain, providing evidence of significant carbon benefits. This system, which would be similar to the USDA-sponsored COMET-Farm platform, would:

- Quantify the carbon and sustainability benefits of forests and wood products in ways are accessible by producers and consumers and easily understood by the public;
- Leverage the current USDA investments in carbon data, such as the redevelopment of the Carbon Online Estimator (COLE), as well as USDA entity level guidelines;
- Enable users to analyze the cradle-to-grave benefits of forest products and identify the best opportunities for wood products to participate in carbon markets; and
- Support new wood applications, including those related to mass timber and other long-lived wood products, products using small-diameter materials (thinnings and residues) from forest management and innovative energy uses.
- Align and coordinate with the GHG reporting efforts of other relevant federal agencies to ensure comprehensive data collection and consistency across the government.

JUSTIFICATION: Providing authoritative, transparent, USDA-sanctioned data about the carbon performance of the forestry and wood products sectors is critical to their effectiveness as natural climate solutions. The success of wood products in the marketplace depends on the integrity and transparency of carbon claims. A specialized measurement, monitoring, reporting, and verification (MMRV) system for forest and forest product carbon is required to meet this need. There is currently no comprehensive sector-wide MMRV system that combines data from all parts of the supply chain with USFS FIA data to build a platform that is robust, transparent, and fully accessible to end users.

Establish a public-private partnership between USDA, the Forest Service, other government research funding agencies, and an entity with a diverse and representative independent steering committee to create a joint strategic approach to allocating and leveraging public funding for applied research and development, with an emphasis on meeting identified regional needs.

JUSTIFICATION: The fragmented nature of the forestry and wood products supply chain means that many entities compete for scarce R&D dollars from the same public and private agencies. A more concerted coordinated effort is needed. A public-private partnership that wins strong private sector support and operates with joint governance and an independent steering committee could move rapidly, set joint priorities, operate transparently, and obtain and leverage public funding for R&D. The work of this entity can build off an effort already taking place since 2020 to create a dialogue with national leaders from state foresters, family forests, large private forest owner/managers, forest products, environmental NGOs, USFS National Forest System, USFS Research Station directors, and universities to discuss the benefits, outcomes, resources, investments, priority setting, potential advocacy needs, and other challenges of FFP R&D. In 2022, a national survey effort to prioritize FFP R&D was initiated, and a summit will be held in 2023 to discuss the role of one convening body to advocate for these priorities.



RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Create a pilot program within the U.S. Forest Service, with technical assistance and resource support from the Office of Rural Development, Rural Housing Service, to provide competitive funding opportunities to integrate U.S. produced wood and tall mass timber products into single-family and multi-family affordable housing at the state and local level. This program will expand the federal government’s current commitment to providing affordable housing to underserved communities while supporting the growth of rural economies and promoting carbon-beneficial construction.

JUSTIFICATION: Lack of access to affordable, high-quality housing remains a challenge for millions of Americans and creates dozens of secondary health, economic, and social impacts for disadvantaged communities. Key federal initiatives addressing affordable housing — such as tax credits to build or rehabilitate affordable housing — primarily address barriers in supply. What is not being addressed are approaches that combine access with quality. Promoting wood use in affordable housing will yield many benefits across urban and rural communities. Innovations in wood construction are making affordable housing options more plentiful and cost-efficient. Wood products offer significant advantages in terms of material and construction costs — while meeting all code requirements for safety and performance. The negative impacts of climate change often disproportionately impact disadvantaged and underserved communities; the use of wood products results in lower embodied carbon in building projects and opportunities for carbon storage, while providing biophilic benefits.

Establish regional, forest industry workforce training hubs to support rural forest-based economies and underserved forestry communities. The program would provide grants to academic institutions, vocational programs, and non-profit organizations to establish high school and immersive career pathway training programs that lead to immediate job placement in the logging, sawmilling, engineered wood products, and pulp and paper sectors or advance the pursuit of a post-secondary degree in an allied field of study. Tribes and underserved audiences should be prioritized in the allocation of grants to support these training hubs.

JUSTIFICATION: Industry specific education and training programs have been demonstrated to be effective workforce recruitment tools in computer programming, utility vegetation management, and automotive industries. Regional forest industry training hubs allow participants to stay in or near their communities, which reduces the cost to participate, and affords program developers increased flexibility of adapting training curriculum to meet regional needs through ties to local forest product employers. Career pathway training programs that translate into credits reduce the cost and time to completion of post-secondary degrees.



TRADE

Support inclusion of the bipartisan Supporting Market Access to Reinvigorate Trade Act of 2022 (SMART Act) in the 2023 Farm Bill.

JUSTIFICATION: Exports are vital to the U.S. hardwood industry. More than half of all grade U.S. hardwood lumber and veneer production is exported, making the U.S. the world's largest exporter of hardwoods. Strong markets for hardwood products help maintain strong ties between the hardwood industry and private forest owners. As the USDA Forest Service itself points out, "a healthy wood products industry leads to healthy forests." Increased funding will support critical day-to-day export market development and promotion activities, thereby putting American tree farmers and mill workers at a substantial competitive advantage in the international marketplace. In order to continue to be competitive internationally, the forest sector needs these programs to be at strengthened capacity.

In addition, the committee should take a close look at illegal deforestation driven by commodities produced in violation of existing laws in the countries of production which unfairly threatens the competitive position of US farmers, and take/consider steps to ensure US trade does not contribute to illegal deforestation.

STEERING COMMITTEE ORGANIZATIONS

American Forest Foundation
National Association of State Foresters
National Wild Turkey Federation

