

SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY
Oral Testimony of Robert Harrington, Montana State Forester
On Behalf of the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of STATE FORESTERS
May 1, 2007

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. I am Bob Harrington, the State Forester for Montana, and I am pleased to represent the National Association of State Foresters in testifying before you today.

As I appear before you today, foresters employed by my agency are utilizing federal funds enabled by the 2002 Farm Bill to help family forest landowners in Montana manage their forest sustainably. This type of assistance is crucial nationwide in the effort to conserve working forests across the country, in a time when much of our timberland is more valuable as real estate development than when managed for producing forest products, recreation, and wildlife habitat.

Private forestland comprises 60 percent of our nation's forests, which cover one-third of our country. We often take the benefits of these lands for granted. We should recognize that these lands provide more fish and wildlife habitat, more watershed protection, and produce more timber and other forest products than all of the national forests and industrial forests combined. However, today we are facing the imminent threat of hundreds of thousands of acres of these forests being converted to development unless mechanisms are employed to keep them intact.

My testimony today focuses on the Farm Bill's conservation and cooperative forestry programs that help conserve and improve the health and condition of these forest lands for future generations.

Forestry has historically been a part of programs administered by the National Resource Conservation Service, but only a few states have been able to adequately deliver forestry assistance to landowners through these programs. While the need for healthy sustainable forests has never been greater, the amount of actual funding for forestry programs, particularly in EQIP and WHIP has declined. With increasing fragmentation of forest ownership, how do we best achieve cooperative conservation and harness market mechanisms to achieve sustainable and healthy forests? We first need to analyze what is currently working, and where improvements can be made to be more successful.

As one of those states with a successful partnership with the NRCS in delivering forestry assistance to family forest landowners, I'd like to share some thoughts on our thoughts on our keys to success.

The key elements in building a successful program are:

- Leadership from the State Forester and the State Conservationist (and their staff) to collaboratively deliver assistance to forest landowners,
- Establishment of formal partnerships, which may include MOU's, cooperative agreements, and cost reimbursement between NCRS and the State Forestry agency, and
- Joint agency participation in both the NRCS State Technical Committee and the State Forest Stewardship Steering Committee.

Technical assistance to landowners is an important mechanism for encouraging private landowners to maintain their forestland and ensure its long-term sustainability. State Foresters are the primary mechanism for providing such assistance to landowners, communities, farmers and ranchers, and conservation organizations. With the high demand for these services, limited resources necessitates that we not create redundant capacity. The Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1978 establishes State Foresters as the primary link between USDA and the 10 million family forest owners.

Several NRCS conservation programs such as EQIP and WHIP have demonstrated forestry successes in some states. In 2005 the total cost share funds approved for forest-related conservation practices was \$24.3 million, and only eight states had programs of \$1 million or more. In 2006, forest-related EQIP cost share projects dropped to \$19.3 million and six states had programs of a \$1 million or more.

Geography and topography do not explain the inconsistencies in delivery of forestry related NRCS programs across the country. The states that are successful in this arena are located in different regions of the country and work with significantly different ownership patterns and ecosystems. The keys to success appear to hinge on working at the local and county level with strong cooperative leadership at the state level.

Forestry practices are often successfully utilized on agricultural lands to address clean water and wildlife habitat needs. While the Forestry Title and Conservation Title programs often complement each other, their overall application and focus differ. State Foresters and State Conservationists, working together through State Technical and Forest Stewardship Committees, can improve opportunities for forestry in these conservation programs on a landscape scale across various ownerships to achieve overall conservation goals.

In Montana, here are some areas where we have been successful:

- NRCS used EQIP program funds to support State Forestry staff in the delivery of technical assistance to family forest landowners participating in the EQIP cost-share program;
- The availability of EQIP funds helped eliminate the backlog of Montana forest landowners who needed cost-share assistance to implement forest improvement projects on their land;
- The NRCS partnership has helped implement projects for family forest landowners for post-wildfire rehabilitation, hazardous fuels reduction, and forest stand improvement that otherwise may not have occurred.

The unique nature of forestry is best represented by addressing sustainable forestry issues in a separate forestry title within the 2007 Farm Bill. It is important that overall program objectives are defined at the national level to provide guidance for each state to develop and implement its forestry program and statewide forest resource assessment and planning in a manner that helps ensure sustainable management of private forests.

Given the unique nature of forestry issues in each state, it is important that each state set their priorities for program delivery. Federal legislation in the Forestry Title of the Farm Bill can identify the overall objectives including targets for national and state implementation. Each state should then develop its implementation plan for accomplishing those specific targets. Implementation of this plan optimizes the assistance to family forest landowners and the public benefits derived from them.

The increasing divestiture of industrial timberlands to REIT's and TIMO's is indicative that the condition of our nation's private forestlands is rapidly changing. The potential adverse effect on the public benefits derived from these forests demonstrates the need to address this challenge. Developing economic mechanisms such as markets in ecosystem services, renewable wood biomass energy, maintaining existing forest industrial infrastructure, and developing new products that utilize currently low value wood fiber are critical elements of an overall strategy to maintain forests lands. Congress also needs make changes to tax policy to enhance the sustainable management of these forests.

In summary, we encourage the Senate to:

- Strengthen the forestry language in the 2007 Farm Bill to ensure forested landowners have equal eligibility to all Farm Bill conservation programs;
- Ensure the capacity of the State Forestry agencies deliver the private forest landowner programs,
- Utilize state forest stewardship programs and forest landscape assessments to market and focus NRCS cost-share programs to benefit family forest owners, and
- Ensure the NRCS and other USDA agencies will promote cooperative relationships with state forestry agencies to implement the forestry components of the 2007 Farm Bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. The needs have never been greater to achieve effective technical assistance mechanisms in cost efficient ways. I am pleased to take questions.