Testimony of Tom Martin, President & CEO, American Forest Foundation
For the House Appropriations Committee:
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and related Agencies
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The 22 million family woodland owners in America and the lands they own, are an essential piece of the fabric of rural communities. These lands support hundreds of thousands of jobs, supply more than half of the wood for our forest products, and sustain our environment. America’s family-owned woodlands, over one-third of the nation’s forested landscape, are critical to meeting the nation’s clean air and water, wildlife habitat, and wood supply needs today and in the future.

The American Forest Foundation, a non-profit conservation organization, helps these family woodland owners manage their land to provide these benefits in rural communities across America. AFF also houses the American Tree Farm System®, a national network of over 70,000 landowners who manage their land to internationally-recognized standards of sustainability.

Because America’s forests are both public and privately owned in a patchwork across the rural landscape, strategies to grow jobs, strengthen rural economies, and protect forests from threats like wildfire must take a “shared stewardship” approach where both public and private landowners are working to manage forest resources.

Because threats like wildfire do not exist solely on federal land, in fact in the West, 30% of the high fire risk lands are private, family owned lands, tackling that problem, protecting lives, communities, and water supplies, requires active management of both public and private land. The same can be said for supplying wood. In any one given “wood basket” the mix of public and private ownership is different but sound management, including replanting after harvest, on both types of land is essential to keeping mills in operation and supplied with timber. Any number of other examples, like invasive forest pest outbreaks, source water protection or managing for at-risk wildlife, all require work on both public and private land as these issues do not heed property boundaries.

All of these challenges—that require a shared stewardship approach—if not tackled, will have long-term consequences on rural economies and the federal deficit. With 22 million people across America owning over one-third of America’s forests in small, individual forest holdings, we cannot ignore these landowners if we’re going to successfully tackle these challenges.

While it’s not the federal government’s role to manage private land, targeted assistance through programs like the Forest Stewardship Program, where a landowner is given information on how to manage their land, can have significant impact on the land and the public benefits produced. In fact, the National Association of State Foresters found that landowners with a forest stewardship plan are almost three times more likely to harvest timber. So by providing this small amount of advice landowners can be empowered to do
better management that contributes to healthy forests and stronger rural economies that benefit public and private forest resources. Family woodland owners are not looking for a handout, they are just looking for this helping hand.

AFF believes Congress can improve upon the President’s FY 2018 Budget proposal by supporting this shared stewardship and ensuring sufficient resources for high priority public and private land strategies. AFF strongly believes that given the compelling federal interest in forests and their sustainable management, federal resources should be spent on the highest priority needs. We fully understand the tough budget climate. However, the almost sole focus on federal land management in the proposed US Forest Service budget, paired with drastic cuts in funding for State and Private Forestry Programs in the US Forest Service that are essential to shared stewardship and tackling growing USFS problems like wildfire, will adversely impact the public benefits derived from all forests given the cross-boundary nature of the challenges and threats.

The State and Private Forestry Programs offer a great return on investment. For every dollar invested in the State and Private Forestry Programs, particularly those that focus on rural lands, the states and private landowners invest states and private landowners put at least another dollar. In some programs, like the Landscape Scale Restoration Program, even more than match is leveraged. For very little tax payer money, every American is getting the benefit of the clean air and water, wildlife habitat, for forest products and the resulting jobs these lands produce. Investments through these programs are also leveraged by NRCS’ roughly $80 million spent in forestry practices, the resulting synergy producing even larger impacts on rural economies and environments.

We do believe a hard look at State and Private Forestry Programs, clearly identifying desired outcomes from these programs and targeting resources on outcomes will yield significant results. For example, AFF has identified, based on extensive assessments of private lands issues in the U.S., a need to focus on three key priorities: mitigating wildfire and protecting critical watersheds in the west, managing at-risk species populations in the South and East, and increasing sustainable wood supplies for growing market demand in the south. Programs like the Landscape Scale Restoration Program can support this approach, providing competitive funding to address high priority issues and fostering innovation that leads to improved outcomes and better support for landowners.

There is an opportunity to increase efficiencies, streamline administration, and deliver better service in State and Private Forestry Programs, just like in many other areas across the federal government. We stand ready to work with the Trump Administration and Congress to pursue these opportunities.

With these views in mind, AFF recommends the following for 2018 funding and program direction for the U.S. Forest Service to support shared stewardship of America’s rural forests and the families, communities, and economies that rely on these forests:
• Continue support for Hazardous Fuels at least at 2017 funding levels with direction to continue cross-boundary wildfire mitigation work, including allowing at least $15 million on non-federal lands to maximize the benefits this program delivers.

• Direct the USFS to work with states and other partners to better align State and Private Forestry Programs to deliver impact on key priorities and improve program efficiency while reducing administrative costs. To do this:
  o Forest Stewardship Program funding should at least be maintained at 2017 funding levels, and focused to deliver on key outcomes and national priorities.
  o Landscape Scale Restoration Program, established through the Farm Bill in 2008, should be continued and strengthened through mechanisms such as provided in the Klobuchar-Daines Empowering State Forestry legislation, (S. 962) to better deliver impact on key priorities.

• Forest Health funding, which helps tackle insect and disease infestations on both public and private lands should at least be maintained. This funding helps address issues across the country from mountain pine beetle ravaging the West to the emerald ash borer consuming eastern ash trees.

• We support $87 million for State Fire Assistance and $15 million for Volunteer Fire Assistance, to maintain the initial attack capabilities in states and local governments, helping on both public and private lands, and providing invaluable assistance to the federal government in suppressing wildfires on federal land.

• Forest Inventory and Analysis Program should be funded at $83 million, because both public and private land managers need the best information about our forests to manage them well.

• Lastly, when it comes to leveraging public and private funding to grow rural forest economies, one of the best investments Congress can make is in the USFS Forest Products Laboratory. This Lab should be funded at $27 million, to leverage funds from private industry for research and development into new and improved uses of wood that supports local economies.

We, at AFF, thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to provide some insight on these programs. If you have any questions, please contact Rita Hite at rhite@forestfoundation.org