



Southern Group of State Foresters

# 2023 Farm Bill Priorities

**The Farm Bill represents a critical and regular opportunity for Congress to examine and improve federal programming that supports our nation's forests and woodlands.**

Based on the extensive experience and collective guidance of Southern Group of State Foresters (SGSF) membership, this publication highlights the priorities we would like to see Congress address in the 2023 Farm Bill.

## Conservation Title Programs



- **Amend the Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP) to ensure landowners are compensated and given incentive to replant and recover their forests after a natural disaster.**
  - Allow landowners to receive up-front payments to improve probability for recovery and reforestation, as proposed in S231.
  - Eliminate the requirement for Farm Services Agency (FSA) county offices to activate the program, ensuring all impacted landowners can access the program.
  - Establish firm timelines for landowner application processing and payment.
  - Allow for and encourage FSA to stand-up and mobilize strike teams for natural disasters to alleviate manpower shortages.
  - Direct the Joint Forestry Team and FSA to jointly explore barriers to program implementation and report back to Congress.
- **Increase support of forest management through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) by directing the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to establish forestry priorities in each state.**
  - The NRCS should be encouraged to foster growth of forestry cost-share assistance in all states.
- **Amend Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) policy to allow for CRP-enrolled loblolly or slash pine stands to be harvested and replanted and be exempt from the being rendered ineligible for the program due to an inaccurate classification of "destroying the conservation cover."**
- **Eliminate the single re-enrollment limitation for hardwood stands within CRP.**
  - There should be no limitation on re-enrollment of forested acreage within CRP, hardwood or otherwise, as long as it continues to provide the resource benefits desired of CRP-enrolled lands.
- **Amend the 2018 Farm Bill language directing "10% of conservation program funding to be used for practices that protect source water for drinking water."**
  - The 2018 Farm Bill direction should be continued in this Farm Bill, but amended to ensure some priority is placed on protecting surface water, not solely groundwater.
- **Encourage the expanded use of, and financial support to, state forestry agencies to serve as Technical Service Providers (TSP) for NRCS programs.**
  - The process for becoming a TSP needs to be streamlined. NRCS financial support for, and use of, TSPs needs to increase to better serve forest landowners.

# USDA Forest Service Programs



- **Direct the federal Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program to annually publish its programmatic cost elements and prioritization in its annual budget justification and business report.**
  - Congressional direction for increased transparency is needed. Concrete budget figures will enable FIA stakeholders to better advocate before Congress and the Administration, and ensure adequate funding and support is provided.
  - Cost estimates should be provided for all "Elements of Revised Strategic Plan" as listed in Sec. 8301 of the 2014 Farm Bill.
- **Remove the "rural" requirement added in the 2018 Farm Bill in codification of the Landscape Scale Restoration Program.**
  - Limiting projects to "rural" areas (which the Administration has defined as locations with population less than 50,000 people) excludes critical work, both in increasing tree canopy in historically underserved cities and towns, as well as helping at-risk communities with wildfire risk reduction.
- **Codify a "flexible funding" approach for State Forest Action Plan Implementation.**
  - There is no current authorized funding available for states to implement Forest Action Plans which were developed under a 2008 Farm Bill requirement. An authorization of \$40 million per year would allow for state-use of all available Cooperative Forest Assistance Act authorities, providing the necessary funding flexibility for successful state Forest Action Plan implementation.
- **Create a new budget line item and allow funding from the Reforestation Trust Fund to be used for reforestation, tree nursery and genetic resources work currently supported by the USFS.**
  - Additional investment is needed to achieve collective all-lands reforestation goals. The creation of a budget line-item dedicated to this work (including authorization for the purchase of land to expand nursery capacity) by state forestry agencies, is needed. Additionally, the Reforestation Trust Fund (16 U.S.C. 1606(a)) authorizing language needs to be amended to support funding the expansion of this critical work.

## Wildfire Risk Reduction



- **Clarify cross-boundary hazardous fuels authorizations and appropriations from the 2018 Farm Bill.**
  - There remains a need for increased authorization of appropriations for critical cross-boundary hazardous fuels work as identified in the 2018 Farm Bill.
- **Amend the Healthy Forest Restoration Act to provide a more accurate and inclusive definition for "at-risk community."**
  - The current definition does not accurately represent the full range of communities at risk from wildfire, limiting eligibility to those with federal lands adjacency. Federal programming that supports communities in risk-mitigation work needs to recognize this full range.
- **Amend and modernize the eligibility requirements for the Volunteer Fire Assistance program.**
  - The current requirements have not been updated in more than 40 years and do not adequately represent the full suite of today's Volunteer Fire Departments who need funding to protect the communities they serve from wildfire. The eligibility requirements for this program need to be updated and the authorizing language streamlined.