



Southern Group of State Foresters

2023 Farm Bill Priorities

86% of all southern forests are privately owned, mostly by non-industrial private forest owners.

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.

The southern United States contains 245 million acres of forestland, 86% of which is privately owned, mostly by non-industrial private forest owners. State forestry agencies provide support to these landowners in achieving their forest management objectives, as well as monitoring forest health and sustainability across all forests, from rural to urban.

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. These are not listed in priority order, but are grouped in three themes:

- Conservation Title Programs
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service Programs
- Programs that address Wildfire Risk Reduction

SGSF looks forward to working with Congress to craft a meaningful and bipartisan Farm Bill to address these priorities.





Conservation Title Programs



Amend federal programming to ensure landowners are compensated and given incentive to replant and recover their forests after a natural disaster

The incidence of natural disasters impacting private forest owners is on the rise (hurricanes, tornados, wildfires, ice storms and more). We recommend addressing the following issues within the Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP):

- 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 forestry through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program by directing the Natural Resources Conservation Service to establish priority forestry practices

The use of, and priority placed on, forestry practices varies substantially from state to state. Therefore, it is critical that forestry assistance is available to interested landowners in all states. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) should be encouraged to think programmatically about how to foster growth of forestry cost-share assistance in all states, especially where forestry assistance has not traditionally been embraced as a priority but where landowner demand exists.

Amend Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) policy to allow for CRP-enrolled loblolly or slash pine stands to be harvested and replanted with conservation priority species

In the South, many loblolly pine stands planted under the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) are over 30 years old and reaching maturity, having been re-enrolled twice over. However, the landowners of these stands are not allowed to harvest their trees while under a CRP contract. Doing so is considered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA) as "destroying the conservation cover, rendering the landowner ineligible for further participation in CRP. SGSF recommends landowners also be able to reforest with loblolly or slash pine and be similarly exempt from the determination of not "destroying the conservation cover."



Conservation Title Programs

Continued

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. This is particularly true for stands that have undergone mid-contract management to ensure they are healthy and at the proper stand density. This is important not only for bottomland hardwood forests in the South, but also for supporting the expansion of longleaf pine acreage, as FSA considers longleaf pine a hardwood for the purposes of this program and limits longleaf pine to only one re-enrollment.

To ensure higher priority is placed on surface water coming from forests, amend the 2018 Farm Bill language directing "10% of conservation program funding to be used for practices that protect source water for drinking water."

In some states, the entirety of this sourcewater funding has been directed at projects and practices that address risks to groundwater, completely missing opportunities to support the protection of forested watersheds that support clean drinking water for millions of Americans. The 2018 Farm Bill direction should be continued in this Farm Bill, but amended to ensure some priority is placed on protecting surface water.

Encourage the expanded use of, and financial support to, state forestry agencies to serve as Technical Service Providers for NRCS programs

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 capacity. The process for becoming a Technical Service Provider (TSP) needs to be streamlined, and NRCS financial support for, and use of, TSPs needs to increase to better serve forest landowners.





USDA Forest Service Program Implementation



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

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service budget modernization has made it difficult for external stakeholders to determine what budget resources FIA devotes to its various programmatic areas, and what budget resources are necessary for FIA to meet its mission. 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

The original intent of Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) grant funding was to fund landscape scale forest restoration and management projects inclusive of all forest lands, including urban areas. Urbanization impacts forest lands, particularly within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). 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 communities in the WUI with wildfire risk reduction.

Codify a "flexible funding" approach for State Forest Action Plan Implementation

The 2008 Farm Bill required every state to complete a Forest Action Plan, which is a "statewide assessment and strategy for forest resources" and created a funding authorization to support their development. However, there is no similar authorization for executing these critical plans. This has made the implementation of Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding, dedicated to flexibly funding these plans, a challenge. 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 Forest Service

State nurseries, seed orchards and tree improvement programs play an essential role in achieving the reforestation goals on lands of all ownership types. 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.



2023 Farm Bill Proposals

Wildfire Risk Reduction



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.

Clarify cross-boundary hazardous fuels authorizations and appropriations from the 2018 Farm Bill

The 2018 Farm Bill amended Section 103 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (16 U.S.C. 6513), providing a new authority for the Forest Service to spend up to \$20 million annually on grants to state foresters for hazardous fuel reduction projects which cross land-ownership boundaries, particularly in priority landscapes as identified in State Forest Action Plans. However, the Forest Service interpreted this new authority as a codification of the existing mechanism for funding cross-boundary hazardous fuels projects through the annual appropriations process (commonly known as "Stevens Money"). The intent of those who advocated for this authority in the 2018 Farm Bill was that it be supplemental to, not a codification of, Stevens Money. As such, 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 Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) definition of an "at-risk community" (16 U.S.C. 6511(1)) is overly restrictive, requiring adjacency to federal lands. The definition is nested within the HFRA definition of WUI, which is referred to in many legislative proposals, further exacerbating the problem. Wildfire knows no boundaries, and communities far from federal lands can be similarly at-risk from wildfire as those adjacent to federal land. The current definition does not accurately represent the full range of communities at risk from wildfire. Federal programming that supports communities in risk-mitigation work needs to recognize this full range.

SGSF supports the proposal in S21 sponsored by Sen. Feinstein (D-CA) to address this issue.

