

May 8, 2025

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on
Interior Environment and Related Agencies
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Simpson
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,
Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jeff Merkley
Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee
on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chellie Pingree
Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee
on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Murkowski, Chairman Simpson, and Ranking Members Merkley and Pingree:

The Forest Stewardship Program, a backbone authority of the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act administered by the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) and delivered in partnership with state forestry agencies, cooperative extension services, certified foresters, conservation districts, and other partners, is the primary federal mechanism for supporting nearly 60 percent of U.S. forestland that is privately owned. These forests are managed by more than 10 million hard-working private owners, the majority of whom are families and individuals. **However, the Forest Stewardship Program is facing a dire funding situation, leaving our nation's farmers, ranchers, and forest owners without adequate support, and putting our nation's forests at risk. The undersigned organizations strongly recommend robust funding for the Forest Stewardship Program at no less than \$22 million in fiscal year 2026¹.**

Forest stewardship by farmers, ranchers and forest owners is the key to ensuring the health, productivity, and resilience of the nation's forested lands. These forests – representing over 420 million acres – provide the majority of our nation's forest products, clean air and water, habitat for game and non-game species, recreational opportunities, and more. When properly actively managed with the guidance of resource professionals, they are also a keystone to reducing wildfire risk across our landscape.

Unfortunately, our private forests are at increasing risk from pests and diseases, invasive species, drought, wildfire and other natural disasters. Moreover, as population growth and urbanization increase nationwide, private forest lands are also threatened by land use conversion, development and parcel fragmentation. Private landowners face unprecedented barriers – including unforeseen costs and insufficient technical assistance – that can prevent them from taking intended and necessary management action. The primary purpose of the Forest Stewardship Program is eliminating these barriers and empowering landowners to maximize forest values and outcomes for the benefit of their communities, their states, and the nation. **In fact, a recent analysis of program data revealed that forest stewardship planning and technical assistance to landowners through the Forest Stewardship Program nationally generated over one million jobs and \$62 billion in wages in 2023.** Quite simply, the value of every dollar of federal investment in Forest Stewardship is recouped from the economic engine of healthy working forests that benefit all Americans.

¹ Beginning in FY21, Congress restructured the Forest Service program budgets, separating out appropriations for cost pools, salary and expenses, and program funding. This advocacy level represents solely the program funding request for FSP.

Currently, there are over 20 million acres nationwide managed under the Forest Stewardship Program. This represents only 6 percent of existing forested acres and a small fraction of the landowners that could benefit from the program with additional Congressional support, especially those whose current forests are in an unmanaged, unproductive and unhealthy condition. In 2024, the program led to the successful development of over 11,400 new management plans covering over 2.6 million acres. **However, the Program will see close to 7 million acres leave the program over the next three years due to expiring plans, assuming continued level funding.** In FY25 alone, over 9,000 forest management plans covering 1.75 million acres are set to expire.

Absent additional investment, the result is that families and individuals will be left without the resources needed to meet their forest management goals. Although effective and in high demand, the Forest Stewardship Program has seen a troubling 50 percent decline in federal funding over the last decade. As a direct result of this funding reduction, the number of acres in the program is estimated to experience a similar halving from historical levels. Further compounding the problem is increasing forest fragmentation, land conversion, and intergenerational transfers, which is contributing to a decreasing number of acres per funded stewardship plan. The program simply cannot meet or maintain its current reach without sustained increases in funding.

Forestland owners who have management plans are almost three times more likely to meet their management and timber harvest objectives compared to those without management plans. These plans provide guidance for family forest landowners to keep their land healthy and productive and often serve as management roadmaps for several generations. **Plans provided through the Forest Stewardship Program are gateways to other landowner cost-share assistance programming** like the USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), state programs, and partner programs, that can help landowners keep their forests working, intact, and providing the benefits society relies on. On average, state forestry agencies and other partners match federal investments 2:1, which means the impact of federal dollars delivered through the Forest Stewardship Program have amplified on-the-ground impacts.

Following congressional direction, the National Association of State Foresters has worked closely with the Forest Service to modernize the funding allocation process to state agencies for the Forest Stewardship Program, with greater emphasis placed on performance-based outcomes. Under the new allocation process, priority areas and priority resource concerns have been designated in each state and greater emphasis has been placed on providing technical assistance and implementing land management plans in those priority areas. This means that Congress can have added assurance that increased funding to this priority program will be delivered to the locations and for the resource concerns that generate the highest public benefit.

With all of this in mind, **the undersigned organizations recommend funding the Forest Stewardship Program for fiscal year 2026 at no less than \$22 million.** Now more than ever, it is critical that we maintain our privately owned forestlands in a condition that supports the health, prosperity, security, and well-being of all Americans.

Sincerely,

American Forest and Paper Association

American Forest Foundation

American Forests

Association of Consulting Foresters

Empire State Forest Products Association
Forest Landowners Association
Forest Stewards Guild
Forestry Association of South Carolina
Kentucky Forest Industries Association
Louisiana Forestry Association
Lyme Timber
Maryland Forestry Foundation
Massachusetts Forest Alliance
National Association of Conservation Districts
National Association of State Foresters
National Association of University Forest Resources Programs
National Wild Turkey Federation
National Wooden Pallet & Container Association
National Woodland Owners Association
Resource Management Service, LLC
Society of American Foresters
South Carolina Timber Producers Association
Southeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association
Sustainable Forestry Initiative
The Nature Conservancy
The Hardwood Federation
Treated Wood Council
West Virginia Forestry Association