

March 9, 2026

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,
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

RE: Fiscal Year 2027 Funding for USDA Forest Service Forest Inventory and Analysis Program

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

The undersigned organizations are strong supporters of the Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program underneath USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) Forest and Rangeland Research (R&D). For nearly a century, the FIA program – informally referred to as “America’s Forest Census” – has been recognized as a world leader in national-scale forest inventory data collection and analysis. We rely on the inventory, data, and analysis provided by the program, which make up the backbone of scientific knowledge on the current state of all the nation’s forests, both public and privately owned. This critical information is needed to support sound policy and forest management decisions across all land ownerships and is increasingly important for decisions regarding private investment into forests and forest products manufacturing facilities, wildfire preparedness, forest productivity and health.

We thank the Committees for the programmatic funding increase in fiscal year 2026. Your continued leadership has enabled the Forest Service to deliver on many of the sector’s shared priorities, including funding states and cooperators that help deliver the program, fully funding plot collection in interior Alaska, bolstering Timber Products Output data collection, expanding analysis of the biomass in our forests and growing remote sensing partnerships. However, the FIA program continues to be under-resourced, both on the programmatic side that funds grants to states and partners that help deliver the program as well as on the internal salary and expenses side. Moreover, as a result of inflation, the cost of collecting data has increased regardless of who is collecting the data. federal staff, state cooperators, and private contractors have all seen significant increases in the costs of equipment, vehicles, and other critical aspects of the program. This is occurring as the program tries to maintain historical levels of program delivery, keep up with ever-changing forest landscapes, and incorporate 21st century technologies to increase data fidelity and programmatic utility. Resource deficits have become particularly acute as the Forest Service has initiated reorganization efforts to increase the overall efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of the agency and its activities. Given these realities, **in fiscal year 2027, we request that Congress support increased funding for FIA at no less than \$39.7 million in program funding.**

The FIA program is unique in that it relies on a combination of federal, state and contractor resources to collect plot data, analyze that data to inform user questions and data needs, and provide support functions that ensure a statistically sound and user-friendly data set. These functions are spread across three different appropriations—FIA program dollars, Forest Service R&D salary and expense (S&E) dollars, and agency-wide Information Technology (IT) funding—which are not interchangeable once arriving at the agency. FIA also leverages over \$15 million in contributions from state forestry agencies and other partners. With the dramatic changes occurring at the Forest Service from staffing reductions, reorganization efforts, and other programmatic shifts, it is becoming harder for the FIA program to nimbly and flexibly operate across the three pools of appropriated dollars. Similarly, as stakeholders, it makes advocating for sufficient appropriations challenging.

Beyond program dollars that fund data collection by states and other cooperators, \$63.4 million under Forest Service R&D S&E is needed for the federal crews that collect data, the support staff that provide essential services in quality assurance / quality control, training, sample design and statistical validity, and for program leadership. Additionally, we are concerned that the Forest Service needs to explore different models for FIA program delivery given about a 20 percent reduction in program headcount over the past year—reaching staffing levels not seen since fiscal year 1999—as well as potential further workforce reduction measures. This could necessitate a shift from federal data collection crews to nonfederal, contract crews in order to maintain programmatic inventory data at status quo levels. The result is further increasing the overall program budget by an additional \$9.1 million. We encourage the Committee to engage the Forest Service to understand where FIA investments need to be appropriated to best serve program needs and flexibilities. We stand ready as key partners to help facilitate those conversations.

Congress should also be aware that \$3.9 million in Forest Service IT funding is needed to deliver the core FIA program at historical levels. As a result of a November 2025 directive from the USDA Office of the Chief Information Officer, all USDA agencies are now operating under a broader definition of activities constituting IT. Our understanding is that activities previously funded through program dollars must now be exclusively derived from the pooled and allocated amounts made available under Forest Service Operations - Information Technology and Centralized Processing. As the Forest Service continues to effectuate this internal direction, we are concerned that the current funding available for overall Forest Service IT is insufficient to provide for an allocation to FIA that covers the IT needs to maintain delivery of the current program functions.

Finally, the FIA program has historically utilized Blue Ribbon Panels at pivotal points to steer its development and ensure its alignment with both technological advancements and stakeholder needs. These panels consist of experts who review and recommend methodologies, technologies, and policies to optimize the program's efficacy and relevance. As key FIA stakeholders, we would like to work with Congress and the Forest Service to convene a third Blue Ribbon Panel in the coming year, aimed to address contemporary challenges such as integrating advanced remote sensing technologies, refining small area estimation techniques, and restructuring program funding and organizational models to meet modern demands. The insights from these panels are critical in ensuring that the FIA remains at the forefront of forest inventory and analysis technologies and methodologies and informing Congressional appropriations and authorization decisions.

We again thank the Committees for their staunch support of the FIA program and the immense value it represents. Given the increasing challenges facing our forests across all ownerships—uncertainty in forest products markets, wildfire, insects and disease, and development pressures—the FIA program is more important now than ever before. We look forward to working with Congress and the Forest Service to continue sustainably growing this program and ensuring accurate and timely inventory of America’s forests.

Sincerely,

Alabama Forestry Association
American Forest & Paper Association
American Forest Foundation
American Forests
American Wood Council
Arkansas Forestry Association
Arkansas Timber Producers Association
Association of Consulting Foresters
Calforests
CTrees
Empire State Forest Products Association
Florida Forestry Association
Forest Landowners Advocacy Guild
Forest Landowners Association
Forest Resources Association
Forestry Association of South Carolina
Green Diamond Resource Company
Guldin Forestry LLC
Idaho Forest Owners Association

Kentucky Forest Industries Association
Maryland Forestry Foundation
Maryland Forests Association
Massachusetts Forest Alliance
Mississippi Forestry Association
National Alliance of Forest Owners
National Association of State Foresters
Open Space Institute
Port Blakely
Society of American Foresters
South Carolina Timber Producers Association
Sustainable Forestry Initiative
Tennessee Forestry Association
The Hardwood Federation
The Lyme Timber Company
The Nature Conservancy
The Wilderness Society
Treated Wood Council
West Virginia Forestry Association