

March 26, 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,
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 and unsustainable funding situation. In fiscal year 2025, states experienced a reduction of approximately 50 percent, with some receiving even less. These abrupt cuts significantly constrained states' ability to deliver services, maintain staffing levels, and meet federal expectations under the program. **The undersigned organizations strongly recommend robust and consistent funding for the Forest Stewardship Program at no less than \$22 million in fiscal year 2027.**

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 timber and other forest products, clean air, clean 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.** 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.

Currently, there are over 19 million acres nationwide managed under the Forest Stewardship Program. This represents only 5 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 fiscal year 2025, the program led to the development of over 10,800 new management plans covering over 1.7 million acres, though as a result of funding reductions there was a 5 percent decrease in new management plans and a 34 percent decrease in covered acres compared to 2024.

Although effective and in high demand, the Forest Stewardship Program has also seen a troubling decline in federal funding over the last decade, culminating in a 50 percent reduction over prior year levels in fiscal year 2025. Fewer Forest Stewardship Plans were completed, fewer acres were actively managed, and fewer landowners received the technical guidance needed to address forest health threats, hazardous fuels, insects, and invasive species. These reductions shift forest management from proactive, resilience-focused planning to more reactive and costly responses over time. Funding instability also erodes state capacity, landowner relationships, and institutional knowledge that are difficult to rebuild. 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 programs like the USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program, 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.

With all of this in mind, **the undersigned organizations recommend funding the Forest Stewardship Program for fiscal year 2027 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,

Aldo Leopold Foundation
American Forest and Paper Association
American Forest Foundation
American Forests
Association of Consulting Foresters
Bitter Root RC&D
Climate and Wildfire Institute
Decorative Hardwoods Association
FireSafe Montana
Forest Landowners Association
Howard Fire Company

Kentucky Forest Industries Association
Maryland Forestry Foundation
Massachusetts Forest Alliance
Montana Forest Action Council
Montana Forest Owners Association
Montana Forest Stewardship Foundation
Montana Tree Farm System
National Association of Conservation Districts
National Association of State Foresters
National Association of University Forest Resource Programs
National Wild Turkey Federation
National Woodland Owners Association
Northern Forest Center
Society of American Foresters
Sustainable Forestry Initiative
Tennessee Forestry Association
The James C. Finley Center for Private Forests at Penn State
The Lyme Timber Company
The Nature Conservancy
The Pennsylvania Forestry Association
West Virginia Forestry Association
Wisconsin Paper Council