

From: "info@forestguild.org%inter2" <info@forestguild.org>
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Email: info@forestguild.org

FirstName: Henry

LastName: Carey

Address1: PO Box 519

Address2:

City: Santa Fe

State: New York

zipcode: 87504-0519

Question1:

Question2:

Question3:

Question4: We appreciate the opportunity to express our forest-based perspective on the importance of private lands conservation for ecosystem services and for community development.

The Forest Guild is a national association of professional field foresters and associated land stewards whose work is broadly acknowledged as providing tangible examples of sustainable forestry. The common bond of Guild members is a passion for forests, land stewardship and the communities that depend on them. Our members practice imaginative silviculture that respects the complexity of natural forests. We believe that responsible economics and good forest ecology are inseparable.

Many of our members live in our rural communities and through their small and medium sized forestry consulting businesses work at the local level to develop the healthy forests that sustain these communities. Therefore, in our comments to Questions 4 and 5 we wish to draw a particular connection between forest conservation goals, locally based, market-driven forestry businesses, and the enhancement of rural economic growth. It is our belief that these small consulting firms and the highly educated and experienced foresters who run them are an overlooked and untapped resource. If we can utilize well-designed federal programs to leverage this locally based potential, we can protect our important national forest resources in the most effective and efficient way.

42% of the nation's forestlands belong to 10 million family forestland owners. Together these lands provide an array of ecosystems services that are essential to rural, suburban and urban American life. These services include air and water filtration, stormwater flow reduction, carbon sequestration, energy conservation, fish and wildlife habitat protection, wood products for manufacturing, nontimber forest products, aesthetic amenities and recreation settings. Perhaps the primary and most beneficial service of our forests is not the production of timber products, as most individuals would guess, but the production of clean, plentiful water. More than 2/3 of our nation's drinking water is provided by our upland forests.

Regrettably, our nation's private forests have produced these services so unfailingly and inexpensively that these services have been overlooked and not adequately supported through federal and state policy. However, these lands and the services they provide are now threatened. Land ownership patterns are shifting, parcels are becoming smaller, and the new landowners more transient and less familiar with and interested in forest management. Large industrial divestiture of

corporate lands is shifting ownership from experienced professionals to an array of new owners. Urban and country home expansion in the interface between forest and developed lands brings greater fire risk. Second home development in rural areas threatens to fragment forested landscapes and wildlife habitat with houses and roads. Fewer professionals look to jobs as foresters, loggers or sawyers for careers.

These current landowners of private lands find themselves in a new era. Most will not be able to afford the costs associated with restoring and managing their land without technical assistance, improved infrastructure and appropriate incentives.

Current Programs that should be maintained and enhanced:

The Forest Guild is supportive of the range of USDA programs that currently provide assistance and resources for the protection and conservation of private forests. Our members utilize these programs well on the 50 million acres under their management.

Provide technical and educational assistance to private landowners. A range of technical and educational assistance programs are currently authorized although we find many obstacles to actually implementing them on the ground. Service foresters, state foresters, fish and wildlife professionals, hydrologists and cooperative extension professionals have all brought their skills to help private landowners. Private consultant foresters play a major role as well and, in fact, are often the first and only contact a landowner may have with the professional natural resource community. Unfortunately, only a small percentage of landowners who harvest their property get the assistance of a professional forester. Delivering technical assistance to landowners should include these professionals as well. Grants to creative community forestry programs could be directed through new programs modeled after the Sustainable Agriculture and Research Education (SARE) program. Another possibility would be a Natural Resource Block Grants modeled after the Community Services Block Grants. Many different types of groups from community based nonprofit organizations to land trusts to professional forest conservation organizations could access these funds.

A good example of the potential of innovative delivery of services on a local level is the Vermont Town Forest Project. This project was designed by the Northern Forest Alliance and has grown quickly to include the University of Vermont and several state and national land trusts. A grant from the National Forest Foundation (NFF) will allow the Forest Guild to partner with the Vermont Town Forest Project. The Guild will bring our Vermont foresters into town-based forestry education projects. The NFF seed money will allow Guild Foresters to work with state service foresters to develop sustainable forest plans for model Town Forests. The Guild professionals will then follow up this pilot through their locally based consulting businesses, by educating other local landowners, and bring more acreage into sustainable management. In this case study approach to the challenge of the diverse and diverging private forest land ownership base, the most local community unit - the Vermont township - is used as the focal point for education, training, delivery and modeling. Established, locally based businesses are empowered and counted on to deliver services through the market place.

Increase funding for cost share assistance to non-industrial private landowners.

Forest Guild members have historically used cost share programs such as SIP and FIP, and more recently Forestland Enhancement Program (FLEP) to

implement sustainable forestry practices on private landholdings. Also, the Forest Stewardship Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) and the Urban and Community Forests Program are vital to the protection of our nations forestlands. These programs worked well when the funding was adequate and could be counted upon. Unfortunately, as funding for these programs has diminished, landowners and practitioners have had a difficult time justifying the time and effort and the programs have not reached their potential. Our members have found EQIP awkward to work with. In order to be more effective it needs to be more user friendly and its intent for forest landowners clarified.

Forestland funding could also be increased by expanding cost-share eligibility for key Farm Bill programs that are now only available for forestland that is incidental to traditional agricultural lands. In some regions forests are the dominant cover and need to be addressed and encouraged as critical components of landscape ecological functioning.

Support conservation and maintenance of working forest through tools such as conservation easements.

The Forest Guild supports conservation easements as a tool for keeping forestland in productive working forests. The Forest Legacy Program has worked extremely well in regions facing rapid landowner turnover and development pressure. As the need grows and the number of states participating expands, the total funding for Legacy needs to keep pace. The Forest Legacy Program could also be adapted to address a variety of conservation needs such as protection of smaller parcels of private forestland near rapidly developing urban centers or protection of larger parcels of private forest in more remote settings. It is also important to explore Farm Bill funding to help support the expenses of private landowners or municipalities when placing easements on their land.

Another logical extension of Legacy or a new easement program would be to allow direct adequate funding for community-owned forests. The Forest Guild has observed a growing trend toward communities seeking to protect their forest heritage and working forest by directly acquiring local forestland.

Question5: Rural economic growth is tied to the health of the land base and in some of our regions this includes a dominant forest cover. The local economic infrastructure that historically supported the forest-based economies in these regions is diminishing. Continued and increased federal investment is required to maintain and restore this infrastructure and utilize it to restore and maintain the land base and the ecosystem services it provides. USDA has provided important programs in the past to help rural communities build and maintain their social and economic infrastructure.

Current programs that should be maintained and enhanced.

Economic Action Programs: These programs provide assistance to help businesses and rural communities dependent on forest-based resources become sustainable and self-sufficient.

National Rural Development Partnerships: These public-private partnerships work to improve rural policy and implement rural initiatives. They should be fully funded.

Rural Community Advancement Program: This program is the core funding stream for USDA rural development programs that deliver help to community infrastructure and facility projects.

Rural Business Cooperative Service: A suite of grant and loan programs, including the Rural Business Enterprise Grants and Rural Business Opportunity Grants, provide funding to rural communities to help create small businesses.

Rural Utilities Service: USDA Broadband programs are the only federal programs suited to helping create critical telecommunication infrastructure for rural communities.

New ideas.

Training and workforce:

Our rural communities and forest-based communities in particular are facing a sea change in the availability of trained experience workers. New job creation should be focused on efforts that sustain the forest ecosystem and insure the flow of ecosystem services. Agencies might consider the development of a program like the Jobs in the Woods program for private forests.

Flexible grants to build capacity:

Cost share grants that are leveraged by state, local and private programs will be most effective in building capacity and local infrastructure for business technologies, business development skills and marketing capacity. Programs like the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program or block grants may be useful models for capacity building in forest-based communities.

We are losing our industrial forestry capacity so rapidly that it may be time to consider a major capacity building program within the Farm Bill. The export of our manufacturing capacity overseas is making it impossible to practice restoration forestry in parts of the country. The consequence will be the loss of local manufacturing jobs and ecosystem services. For example, in order to provide plentiful, clean water and wildfire control, it may make sense to invest now in appropriate manufacturing infrastructure. A more aggressive and focused program within the Farm Bill utilizing grants and tax incentives could stimulate mill retrofits and new manufacturing capacity for biomass, engineered wood products and traditional sawlogs.

Biomass Utilization for Sustainable Development:

It is time to tap the potential for the use of biomass from public and private lands for sustainable rural development purposes. The 2007 Farm Bill should explore how to deal with biomass as it deals with issues of private forestland restoration and grapples with scale-appropriate rural development.

Question6: