

National Association of Forest Service Retirees

Recommendations for the New Administration

December 12, 2016



The National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR) is an organization that represents thousands of Forest Service retirees who dedicated their lives to caring for the nation's forests and managing the National Forests and Grasslands. We care deeply about the management and use of the natural resources that are so important in making our nation strong. Our membership spans the entire spectrum of natural resource professions and research endeavors.

It is important to note that the US Forest Service not only manages 193 million acres of the nation's forests and grasslands; it also manages the largest natural resource research organization in the world, represents our nation with its International Forestry arm, and in cooperation with the nation's state foresters, the State and Private Forestry branch manages diverse cooperative programs from rural assistance to urban and community forestry. The Chief of the Forest Service is also the nation's Chief Forester. Our members represent each of these four critical areas and include several former agency Chiefs. Our hands on, decades long experience at managing public lands uniquely positions us to provide advice and counsel to the political leadership of the country.

We believe that what America's forests and grasslands need is better management by resource professionals, greater collaboration with citizens, states and counties, and investment in our public lands. Achieving better management requires recognition of the many effective ways to involve, collaborate, and work closely with states to respond to the management of public lands including use of multiple "good neighbor" authorities that encourage general coordination and cooperation. It also means effective legislation that reduces red tape and accelerates science based forest restoration projects. It puts projects developed by diverse stakeholders on a fast track for execution and discourages obstructionist litigation that slows so many forest projects. We should also require courts to give deference to resource professionals on the ground, making it harder for courts to halt forest restoration projects with injunctions. Finally, we must promote new markets for wood products coming from our national forests. These are actions that can increase rural employment, make use of forest products that are now going up in smoke, reduces fire danger, and promotes America's energy independence.

The situation we face today not only threatens communities at an increasing rate; it is also increasing future environmental impacts and loss of economic opportunity that results from charred landscapes and subsequent flooding. These conditions threaten the very basics of life...clean water and air, and a safe environment. Our country and government can respond with action that will improve environmental function, create jobs and improve the quality of life in rural America. To that end NAFSR has some initial recommendations for consideration by the new Administration that we are confident will improve the health of the land, economies of forest-dependent communities in rural America, as well as adjacent communities that will benefit from forest restoration activities.

Bring back jobs to rural America by aggressively restoring the health, resilience and productivity of the National Forests and Grasslands.

The nation's natural infrastructure is in critical condition. The lack of active management across large areas of the national forests has resulted in excessive fuels accumulations in the forest and overly crowded tree stands. Added to this are the recurring drought conditions that have occurred routinely in the west, leading to dying trees and a dramatic increase in insects and disease as well as catastrophic wildfire. Our forests are dying at an alarming rate. These conditions have led to an ever-increasing number of catastrophic wildfires and millions of acres devastated and in need of reforestation each year. Accelerated active management is the solution!

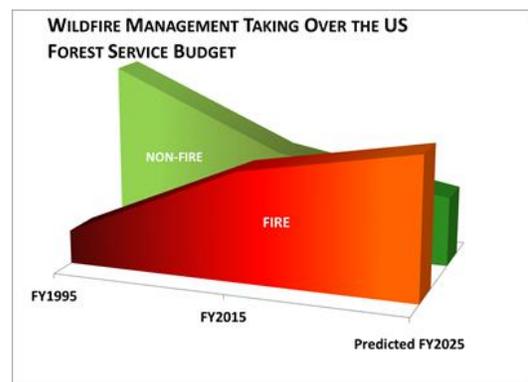
Accepting the reality that, although critically needed, significant increases in funds will not occur through increased appropriations, there is still a desperate need to increase the availability of funds to support active management on our nation's forests. We strongly encourage such increases to be achieved through wildfire suppression funding reform and improving efficiency through forest management process reforms.

1. Take immediate action to enact legislation similar to that contained in H.R. 2647 to address policy and process reforms to speed action on integrated, collaboratively developed projects at a scale and scope that truly makes a difference.
2. Take further legislative action to enact reforms that reduce incentives for filing "nuisance" litigation against proposed collaboratively developed forest management projects.
3. Create an incentive based policy framework including tax reform for the creation and development of wood based restoration industries.
4. Enact further legislation authorizing retention of receipts to be used for active forest management projects.

Reform National Wildland Fire Suppression funding to bring it in line with the mechanisms for funding other national emergencies and disasters such as hurricanes.

The increasingly deteriorating condition of our forests has led to unprecedented costs of wildfire suppression and control. Each year we see unacceptable impacts to watersheds and communities from fire not only in the west but also in other regions including southeast part of our great nation. There also have been unprecedented impacts to other programs and public services as funds are annually diverted to cover the costs of fire suppression. The Forest Service's workforce capacity in non-wildfire related programs for watershed, forest, wildlife, recreation, range, research and cooperative programs has been decimated as a result of the current process of paying for wildfire suppression activities.

It is time to recognize that the wildfire suppression funding needs to be provided in the same manner as for other federal emergencies, such as hurricanes and other catastrophic events that are unplanned. Under current budgeting processes, funding for wildfire preparedness and suppression is



consuming an ever-increasing amount of the budget of the natural resource agencies and the Forest Service in particular. Every year, the result is a decrease of funds available for active management that exacerbates the underlying problem of forest and range conditions discussed in our first recommendation. Presently wildfire suppression related funding consumes 52 percent of the Forest Service Budget, compared to 16 percent in fiscal year 1995. At the current rate this will climb to 67 percent by fiscal year 2025.

1. Reclassify catastrophic fires as national disasters and create the legislation, policy and processes to fund their suppression and recovery from the national disaster fund.
2. Change the budgeting process to discontinue use of the 10-year average as the basis for estimating wildfire suppression costs.
3. Work with insurers, communities and state governments to develop new ways to reduce the federal government's costs for wildfire suppression where increased cost is due to development within high hazard fire zones, such as increased insurer responsibility in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), assessments by local fire authorities, up front assessments within WUI zones covering projected wildfire suppression costs, etc.

Invest in new technologies and improved workforce skills to stimulate the economy of rural America by repairing infrastructure, increasing energy production, improving and sustaining recreation opportunities, and restoring the health and resilience of the nation's forests.

The economic wellbeing of rural America has suffered due to a lack of active forest management, failure to repair rural infrastructure such as roads and bridges, and not taking advantage of opportunities to increase energy production from public lands.

1. Evaluate the current situation of permitting and accessing oil, coal, and gas development throughout the National Forest System and examine how to bring efficiencies to the process in order to help the country become energy independent as well as providing strong paying jobs while increasing environmental protection.
2. Use existing federal energy tax revenue, to develop a sustainable investment program to focus on the repair of rural road and bridge infrastructure important for management and public access.
3. Reform employment practices, re-invest in increasing the workforce capacity of Forest Service and other public land management personnel, and significantly realign the existing workforce with a focus on restoring the health of the nation's forest and grasslands.
4. Increase investments in the Civilian Conservation Job Corps to develop workforce skills devoted to natural resource management.
5. Implement new research that supports creating new jobs in rural communities, restoring forest health and resilience, and expanded efficient and environmentally low impact extraction of oil, gas, and mineral resources from National Forest System lands.
6. Evaluate current examples of utilizing biomass that have succeeded versus the ones that have not and immediately implement processes and procedures to accelerate development.
7. Increase the approval of renewable energy projects associated with wind and hydro, to further meet the energy demands on a national and local basis.

Closing Thoughts

Over the past decade NAFSR has worked closely with partners concerned with a variety of natural resource issues. The coalitions that NAFSR has worked with remain active on a variety of fronts. NAFSR believes the recommendations in this document will restore the economies of rural America by restoring the nation's forest and grassland health, repairing a deteriorated infrastructure and increasing the ability of the nation to meet its energy needs. These recommendations would generally require only moderately prudent legislative reform. We strongly encourage the Administration to avoid extreme legislative initiatives that will result in excessively emotional public debate and gridlock; with the end result being that the health of America's public lands continues to degrade, rural infrastructure deteriorates further, catastrophic wildfire continues to increase, and rural communities continue their economic decline. We believe examples of potentially extreme legislation could include the divestiture of public lands, quantum changes to foundational environmental legislation, and wholesale block granting of federal funds. We encourage the Administration to work with existing moderate coalitions in developing new legislative initiatives to address the critical problems facing rural America.

We believe that Theodore Roosevelt was right. Our public lands belong to all Americans. Roosevelt defied convention and acted to save America's diminishing natural resources bringing 230 million acres of public land under protection as national forests, refuges, parks, and monuments. He and Gifford Pinchot whom Roosevelt appointed first chief of the US Forest Service are credited with establishing the modern conservation ethic by using scientific management principles that have become the bedrock of public land management policy. Today, Roosevelt's conservation ethic is in jeopardy as special interests, endless litigation, and political gridlock threaten proven best practices, balanced use, and common sense while tying the hands of our resources professionals. The result is catastrophic wildfire, destruction of critical habitat, management decisions made by lawyers, and the loss of millions of dollars in much needed local revenue.

Much work lies ahead to rebuild the capacity of the Forest Service to increase the pace of restoration, support to local communities and improve the opportunity for jobs in rural America. The efforts to respond to improving forest health and resilience will require reinvesting in skills and expertise that have become extremely thin in the agency. It will require an expedited recruitment process and utilizing short term actions such as contracting for services, and movement of personnel. It is a time for action, a time for accountability, and a time to replenish and strengthen our ability to perform and meet the country's expectations.

NAFSR firmly believes the new Administration has a unique opportunity and strong ability to change the current unacceptable condition of the nation's forests and grasslands, while improving the economic conditions in rural America, and decreasing dependence for foreign energy. NAFSR stands ready to help!