



September 10, 2024

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**This letter was sent to –**

**Senators Stabenow, Boozman, Merkley, Murkowski  
Representatives Thompson, Scott, Simpson, Pingree**

We want to commend the hard work that has gone into the new Farm Bill and look forward to its final passage with the inclusion of language authorizing USDA to implement an Experienced Workers Program through the entire Department. However, given that negotiations on the new Farm Bill are ongoing, we wanted to call attention to an important existing authority that should not be allowed to lapse.

Authorized by the 2014 Farm Bill and amended in 2018, the Agricultural Conservation Experienced Services (ACES) program provides the Forest Service a cost-effective opportunity to obtain services of non-federal, experienced ACES enrollees ages 55 and older. Meeting mission critical needs, this program fills employment gaps, mentors and trains new hires and employees transitioning into new roles.

We strongly urge that you not let this important program expire, as occurred last year when the Farm Bill wasn't extended on September 30. This caused major disruptions to vital Forest Service programs. Because of the lapse in authority, nearly 700 enrollees nationally had to be deactivated, causing a loss in productivity as well as an administrative burden on both the agency and both nonprofits.

Significant and immediate impacts of terminating the authority last fall included:

- De-activation of all enrollees.

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- Interruption of mission critical work as for example engineers and program managers were forced to shut down work and travel.
- Closure of approximately 270 ACES agreements, by one partner, with \$8.5 million remaining in funds.
- Considerable work for the Forest Service and grantee staff to dismantle business support processes put in place to run the program.

The agency administers the program through Master Umbrella Agreements with two non-profit partners. The Master Agreements are with the Center for Workforce Inclusion, Inc. (CWI) and the National Experienced Workforce Solutions, Inc. (NEW Solutions). The partners provide administrative support through recruitment, hiring, orientation, pay and other administrative services.

A few Examples of ACES contributions include:

- Technical support to Deputy Chief of SP&T for the Wildfire Commission work this past year.
- Wildfire Crisis Strategy – Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) funding is concentrated across 22 Priority Landscapes. Large innovative agreements support the Stanislaus, Klamath, Trinity, and Monument Priority Landscapes.
- Advisory services to the National Wildfire Risk Reduction Infrastructure Team.
- Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) and BIL engineering and landscape architect support.

To date, NEW Solutions' enrollees have filled over 900 positions in nearly every Region, Research Station, Job Corps and Deputy Area.

Due to the extension of the current Farm Bill, the Authority to implement the ACES program is extended through September 30, 2024. Currently all Supplemental Project Agreements (SPAs) under the extended Master Agreement (authorized by the extended Farm Bill) will expire on **9/30/24**. Now there are nearly 500 enrollees working in the program across the United States in mission related work from wildfire crisis strategy support, mentoring new leaders, as well as performing field work to accomplish priority projects.

A Farm Bill extension will likely lead to a Master Agreement extension, as it did last Fall, once ACES authority was included in the CR.

Should the Farm Bill not pass by 9/30/24, we advocate for a full Farm Bill extension, to not leave valuable programs such as ACES without authorization. Alternatively, temporary authorization through a CR would be effective as well.

Sincerely,

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*Steve Ellis, Chair*

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National Association of Forest Service Retirees

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