

June 6, 2024

The Honorable Jeff Merkley
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on
Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Simpson
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on
Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Ranking Member, Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and
Related Agencies
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chellie Pingree
Ranking Member, Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and
Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairmen Merkley and Simpson, and Ranking Members Murkowski and Pingree:

The Forest Stewardship Program, 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% of U.S. forestland that is privately owned and managed by more than 10 million private owners, the majority of whom are families and individuals. **Today, however, the Forest Stewardship Program is facing a dire situation, leaving our farmers, ranchers, and forest owners without adequate support, and putting our nation's forests at risk. The undersigned organizations strongly recommend funding the Forest Stewardship Program at no less than \$22 million in fiscal year 2025¹.**

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 clean air and water, habitat for fish and wildlife, forest products, recreational opportunities, and climate mitigation. Yet they are at increasing risk from pests and diseases, invasive species, drought, and wildfire, all exacerbated by a changing climate. Moreover, as population growth and urbanization increase nationwide, private forest lands are also threatened by land use conversion and development. Private landowners face barriers – including unforeseen costs and insufficient technical assistance – that can prevent them from taking necessary management action. The primary purpose of 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.

Currently, there are over 20 million acres nationwide managed under the Forest Stewardship Program. In 2023, the program led to the development of 12,000 new management plans covering over 1.32 million acres. This represents only a fraction of the landowners and less than 6% of existing forested acres that could benefit from the program with additional Congressional support. **Even more critical, however, is that the Forest Stewardship Program will see close to 7 million acres leave the program over the next three years due to expiring plans, assuming continued level funding.** The result is

¹ Beginning in FY21, Congress restructured the Forest Service program budgets, separating out appropriations for cost pools, salary and expenses, and program funding. This advocacy level represents solely the program funding request for FSP.

families and individuals without the additional resources needed to meet their forest management goals. Although effective and in demand, the Forest Stewardship Program has seen a troubling 50% decline in federal funding over the last decade. As a direct result of this funding reduction, the number of acres in the program is estimated to experience a similar historical halving. 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 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 programming** like the USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), state programs, and partner programs, that can help landowners keep their forests working, intact, and creating or sustaining ecosystem services. **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.**

Following congressional direction, the National Association of State Foresters has worked closely with the Forest Service to modernize the funding allocation process to state agencies for Forest Stewardship Program, with greater emphasis placed on performance-based outcomes. Under the new allocation process, priority areas and priority resource concerns have been designated in each state and greater emphasis has been placed on providing technical assistance and implementing land management plans in those priority areas. **This means that Congress can have added assurance that increased funding to this priority program will be delivered to the locations and for the resource concerns that generate the highest public benefit.**

With all of this in mind, **the undersigned organizations recommend funding the Forest Stewardship Program for fiscal year 2025 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,

American Forests
American Forest Foundation
Forest Stewards Guild
National Association of Conservation Districts
National Association of Forest Owners
National Association of State Foresters

National Wild Turkey Federation
National Woodland Owners Association
Society of American Foresters
The Hardwood Federation
The Nature Conservancy
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership