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Envisioning Healthy Forests for Families and Communities

Interim Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen
Family Forest Landowners and Managers Conference
Moscow, ID—March 26, 2018

It's a pleasure to be here today. Thank you for inviting me! It's an honor to speak before one of our country's most important groups of people when it comes to forest conservation: family forest landowners.

- Thank you for your support of Fire Funding Resolution and Forest Management Reforms
- One of the highlights of my career is visiting family forest landowners and helping them write a forest stewardship planh

Value of Forests

We share common values and goals. The Forest Service was founded more than a century ago at a time of rampant deforestation across the United States. At the time, most people thought of America's ancestral forests as inexhaustible. Trees were there to be cut and sold, with no thought to the future, and forests were obstacles to progress.

Then a generation of visionary American leaders came along, leaders like President Theodore Roosevelt. Unless we practice conservation, they said, those who come after us will pay the price. And the price will be misery, degradation, and failure for the progress and prosperity we have today.

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So we decided as a nation to leave a legacy of forests for our children and grandchildren. We developed methods and models for the sustainable use of America's forest resources across landownerships ... on state and federal lands, on tribal lands, and on private lands.

Today, we share a belief that forests are vital to families and communities ... that forests are a broad social good, vital to our national prosperity ... to our well-being as Americans. All Americans, whether they own forest land or not, benefit from our nation's rich forest resources.

Forests are part of our cultural heritage. Forests are places of privacy, of peace and seclusion and great natural beauty. Forests are home to many Americans, part of their family legacy, places where they can enjoy friends and family, places where they can indulge in the great American traditions of hunting and fishing.

Forests also provide sustenance, including 53 percent of the nation's runoff for drinking water. In fact, private forests alone supply 30 percent of our nation's drinking water. And let's not forget—forests are the indispensable source of green energy and green building materials. Private forests alone supply 90 percent of our nation's domestically produced forest products.

All this is possible because America's forest landowners and land managers long ago embraced the conservative use of forest resources. Thanks to Theodore Roosevelt and other early conservationists, a third of our nation's land area is still

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forested today. In fact, we have the world's fourth largest forest estate.

And most of our forest estate, about 56 percent, is privately owned, unlike in most countries around the world. Private forest land makes up about 445 million acres, more than twice the size of the entire National Forest System. America has more than 10 million private forest landowners, and most of them are family forest owners, including 6,100 forest landowners here in Idaho alone.

Cohesive Strategy

The mission of the Forest Service is to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands for current and future generations. All forests in the nation are a great national asset.

So the Forest Service is vitally interested in the future of family-owned forests in the United States because the conservation of family-owned forests is so vital to our national heritage and to our national prosperity and well-being. Across our nation's landscapes, landownerships are typically mixed; as you know, national forest land is often intermixed with state, private, and tribal forest lands. We share many forested landscapes and watersheds, and that means we share the challenges to forest health. In many ways, we are all in this together.

The challenges to forest health are growing. Today, they are as great as any the Forest Service has faced in our 113-year history. One challenge in particular, especially here in the West, is the growing severity and duration of wildfires and

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fire seasons. As you know, we have also had insect and disease epidemics in many parts of the West, including 4 million acres affected by mountain pine beetle here in Idaho. About 80 million acres on the National Forest System overall are at risk, and about a third of that area is at high risk.

Last year, we had one of the most severe fire seasons in recent history, with more than 10 million acres burned nationwide. Fire activity was much higher than normal in many parts of the West, including the Northern Rockies. About 12,000 structures were destroyed nationwide by wildfires, including more than 8,000 homes. That is more than five times higher than the annual average of about 1,500 homes destroyed by wildfire.

At the national level, we have changed our language to talk about the fire year instead of the fire season. Over the last few decades, the western fire season has grown at least two-and-a-half months longer, and we have seen the frequency, size, and severity of wildfires increase. Primary drivers are climate change, drought, hazardous fuel buildups, and the spread of homes and communities into fire-prone landscapes.

As you know, the risk of wildfire is rising for family forest owners. We are in a “new normal of fire activity,” where a full suite of environmental, social, political, financial, and cultural factors drive outcomes in the wildland fire environment. I call it the Wildland Fire System, and it is so incredibly complex that no single entity can do it alone—not the Forest Service, not the states, not any given fire department. We are all in this Wildland Fire System together.

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So we need to change the conversation. We need to spend our energy finding collective solutions, not pointing fingers about who has the most responsibility for the wildland fire problem in this nation. This hit me when I was State Forester in Washington state and later in Arizona. We needed a new paradigm of working together to create resilient landscapes and fire-adapted communities.

Congress gave us a big leadership push with the 2009 FLAME Act when it required the creation of a national cohesive strategy. That caused us to act. The stakeholders all came together to develop a truly shared national approach to wildland fire management. It's called the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, and it has three national goals:

1. restoring and maintaining resilient landscapes;
2. creating fire-adapted communities; and
3. safe and effective wildfire response, with decisions based on risk analysis for all ownerships.

The vision for the Cohesive Strategy is, *“To safely and effectively extinguish fire when needed; use fire where allowable; manage our natural resources; and as a nation, to live with wildland fire.”*

The first pillar is restoring healthy fire-adapted landscapes. That includes both thinning and prescribed fire treatments, and it means getting more fire on the land, not less. If we don't, then our fires are only going to get bigger, more explosive,

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and more dangerous to homes, communities, and family forests.

We also need homeowners and communities in fire-adapted landscapes who are prepared to mitigate risks from wildfire. Today, the number of homeowners in fire-prone landscapes is growing, and the people in those landscapes include family forest owners. We need to find ways to help landowners and communities expand hazardous fuels treatments and increase the resilience of their own homes and infrastructures. The Idaho Department of Lands is encouraging counties to consider wildfire risk as they plan for future growth and development.

And we also need an efficient and effective response to wildfire. Keeping people safe from wildfire is a central part of our job. Nothing is more important. We are committed to making sound risk-based decisions that do not place the lives of firefighters at needless risk. Our goal is to commit emergency responders to operations where they can succeed in protecting lives and values at risk and then safely go home at the end of the day.

National Priorities

Our Cohesive Strategy for wildland fire management is part of being good neighbors. Rather than pointing fingers, it creates opportunities for joint stewardship of the landscapes we all share.

The Forest Service is ready to act on those opportunities, and we have adopted a series of national priorities to help move forward.

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One of our national priorities is *being good neighbors and excelling at customer service*. We are committed to working with efficiency and integrity, with a focus on the people we serve, through a broad, diverse coalition for conservation. We envision working across boundaries, leveraging resources with our partners, and using all the tools and authorities we have.

Another priority for the Forest Service is *promoting shared stewardship by increasing partnerships and volunteerism*. We need others to help us make a difference across the landscape, so we are committed to working with partners and volunteers to accomplish work on the nation's forests in the spirit of shared stewardship. We believe that joining together across shared landscapes and around shared values is critical for the future of conservation.

By being good neighbors and sharing stewardship, we can achieve another national priority for the Forest Service: *improving the condition of forests and grasslands*. The condition of forests and rangelands is at the very core of our Forest Service mission, and we are committed to using every tool and every authority available to us to make a difference for healthy, resilient forests and grasslands. To that end, we are using a whole range of active management tools, including prescribed burning, timber sales, stewardship contracts, managed natural wildfire ignitions, herbicides, and noncommercial mechanical fuel treatments. With 80 million acres at risk across the National Forest System, the challenge at hand is vast, and it demands a bold response.

But we have momentum. Over the past two years—in 2016 and 2017—we've seen more active management results on the National Forest System than in any two-

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year period in well over two decades. Over 6 million acres were treated on the National Forest System and 5.9 billion board feet of timber were sold.

We are also gaining momentum with prescribed fire in the West, which is one of our most effective management tools. The area prescribe-burned in the West has been steadily growing since the 1990s, as has the entire area of hazardous fuels treatments, including mechanical thinning. This year, we are looking to increase the area of hazardous fuels reduction nationwide through prescribed fire and mechanical treatment by 15 percent, and I think we'll get there.

But we can't do it alone. The landscapes we manage at the Forest Service are often in the same watersheds as other ownerships, whether private, tribal, state, or federal. We face the same challenges across landownerships, and we have many of the same goals. To be truly effective, we have to share stewardship across ownership boundaries. That's part of being a good neighbor.

Being a good neighbor means working with others, working with our partners across entire landscapes to meet shared needs and goals. It means recognizing the rights, values, and needs of stakeholders across the spectrum, including states, tribes, counties, communities, and private landowners. Above all, it means working with our neighbors through partnerships. Here in Idaho, we've had good success in working with coalitions, collaboratives, and other partners across landownerships. Together, we have more than 35 current and planned large-scale restoration projects, including lands on every national forest in the state.

We are also using new authorities to expand our forest restoration work with partners, such as our Good Neighbor Authority under the 2014 Farm Bill passed by

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Congress. We now have 128 GNA agreements in over 31 states, including 3 here in Idaho, with another 7 in the works. As a good neighbor, the Idaho Department of Lands worked with private landowners to expand the Coeur d'Alene National Forest's fuels reduction efforts on private lands north of the national forest.

Through GNA, we can pool resources for all kinds of fuels and forest health treatments on federal lands and adjacent lands as well as for projects related to wildlife habitat, soil and water, and data collection. Last year, the Forest Service made more than \$3.6 million in cash and noncash contributions to GNA projects. For their part, the states and other partners made more than \$1.8 million in contributions.

Under GNA, we have master agreements as well as agreements for specific projects. About half of the GNA project agreements have forest health or timber harvest as their main objectives. The other half are for managing hazardous fuels, improving habitat, treating invasive weeds, or otherwise improving watersheds.

Unfortunately, we face barriers to shared stewardship. Some of those barriers have to do with the way we do environmental analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act and other environmental laws and regulations. To increase our capacity to improve the condition of forests and rangelands, the Forest Service has launched an effort to improve our environmental analysis and decision-making processes. We have six major change efforts underway to increase the amount of work we accomplish by improving our processes and procedures and by increasing the number of acres covered by environmental analysis and decisions.

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Our work will stay grounded in sound science, using good data and keeping our commitments while also raising the scale of our work.

Land Use Conversion

Conservation started more than a century ago in response to deforestation. Now we have come full circle. Again, we are losing forest land, mainly due to land use conversion to developed uses. A Forest Service study released in 2009, called “Private Forests, Public Benefits,” estimated that 57 million acres of forest land would see rising housing density between 2000 and 2030. That’s an area greater in size than the entire state of Idaho. We estimate that about 600,000 acres of forest are lost to land use conversion every year.

What can we do to help stop the loss?

One way is to help forest landowners keep their forests working by finding new markets for wood and other forest products. A promising new technology is cross-laminated timber, which allows buildings 12 stories tall or higher to be constructed almost entirely from wood. Mass timber buildings are going up in Portland and other parts of the country, and mass timber production facilities are starting up as well. At the Forest Service, we are working with partners to promote mass timber, wood-to-energy projects, and other new technologies for using wood.

As you know, family forest landowners can also get technical and financial assistance from their government agencies, and we strongly urge landowners to

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take advantage of these opportunities. Through our partnerships with state agencies, conservation districts, and others, we can help private landowners manage their working forests and profit from their forest land. Our Forest Stewardship Program can help anyone develop a good plan for active forest management.

We also work with the Idaho Department of Lands through our Forest Legacy Program to help private forest landowners enroll their lands in a conservation easement program. The landowners keep managing their own private lands as working forests, providing public benefits for all. Since 2004, we've spent more than \$34 million to help landowners conserve more than 91,000 acres of working forests in Idaho. Our goal is to help willing forest landowners find the means to keep their forests as forests rather than converting them to other uses.

Not least, we work with state agencies to stop vectors that can damage and devalue the property of family forest owners. Working with our state partners, we deliver technical assistance to help stop the spread of forest insects and disease as well as of invasive species. We are in the business of protecting all forest lands, whether federal, state, tribal, or private, because ultimately every American benefits from a healthy, vibrant forest estate.

In closing, family forest owners are the backbone of private forest landownership in the United States. We all share the same values and hopes for the future of forestry in the United States. We share a commitment to being a good neighbor—to recognizing the rights, values, and needs of stakeholders across the

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spectrum. Above all, we share a vision of healthy, resilient forested landscapes for the benefit of families and communities across our nation, for generations to come.