

**Statement by Robert Bonnie, Nominee for Under Secretary of the U.S. Department of  
Agriculture for Natural Resources and the Environment**

**Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry**

**July 23, 2013**

Madame Chairman and Members of the Committee, I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and for your consideration of my nomination to be Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment at the US Department of Agriculture. I want to thank President Obama for nominating me to serve in this role and Secretary Vilsack's confidence in me to serve as Under Secretary. If confirmed, I look forward to working with Secretary Vilsack to build upon this Administration's commitment to rural America through the conservation of our working lands and National Forests.

I want to thank my wife, Julie, and my daughter, Lilly, both of whom see a little less of me than they might otherwise as a result of my government service over the last four years. If confirmed, I suspect that won't change and, so, I appreciate their love and patience. I also want to thank my mother, father and brother who have encouraged and supported my career in natural resource conservation.

My commitment to conservation began at an early age. I grew up on a farm in Kentucky and, as a kid, spent a lot of time outside fishing, hunting, and helping out around the farm. We raised both horses and cattle, and grew corn, oats, and hay. My family has also managed forestland in South Carolina for over a century. This land is actively managed for wildlife, recreation and timber production. From these experiences, I understand the challenges associated with managing and maintaining family-owned farms and forests while being good stewards of the land.

Over the last four years, I have had the pleasure of working for Secretary Vilsack as a senior advisor on environment and climate change. USDA has a critical role to play in the conservation of America's natural resources. Our working lands and our National Forests provide significant benefits to the American people, including production of food and fiber, clean water, wildlife habitat, and recreation. Under Secretary Vilsack's leadership, USDA has enrolled record acres in conservation programs demonstrating that given the right incentives, farmers, ranchers and forest landowners are eager to invest in conservation. Partnerships and collaboration are critical. If confirmed as Under Secretary, I will continue to emphasize the importance of partnerships and collaboration with farmers, ranchers, forest owners, conservationists, forest industry, and local communities to conserve our working lands and our forests.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) plays a key role in the conservation of America's working lands. The agency provides financial assistance and technical assistance to farmers, ranchers, and forest owners to conserve soil and water, improve rangeland for cattle and wildlife, and protect habitat to promote outdoor recreation. In a budgetary environment where resources are limited, focusing NRCS resources on important conservation challenges will

remain important. A key mission of NRCS will remain helping landowners put the right practice, or suite of practices, on the right acres.

Under Secretary Vilsack's leadership, NRCS is pioneering new approaches to conservation. For example, Working Lands for Wildlife combines financial and technical assistance with regulatory assurances so that landowners preserve wildlife while also maintaining an economically viable agricultural operation. NRCS's Sage Grouse Initiative has garnered landowner support while demonstrating that voluntary conservation works. And, NRCS's Mississippi River Basin Initiative is working with states and farmers to protect water quality through targeted stewardship activities.

Initiatives like these demonstrate the importance of leveraging additional expertise through partnerships with states, universities, conservation groups, other government agencies and the private sector. Secretary Vilsack has championed tools that provide landowners regulatory certainty in exchange for conservation commitments and environmental markets, and, if confirmed, I will continue his work in developing these initiatives with NRCS, Forest Service, other agencies, States, and landowner partners.

Reauthorization of a comprehensive Food, Farm and Jobs Bill is central to USDA's work, including its conservation successes. This Committee and the US Senate have passed strong, bipartisan legislation to reauthorize farm programs. If confirmed, I will work with Secretary Vilsack to highlight the importance of passing long-term legislation and when such legislation passes, I will work with the Department, NRCS and the Forest Service to implement the legislation in a timely manner.

Like our working lands, America's forests – both public and private – are vital to the economic prosperity of rural America. Forests provide clean water, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and a host of other benefits. But, America's forests face significant threats. On our public lands, catastrophic wildfire, insect outbreaks, and disease threaten our forests, our watersheds, and our communities. On private lands, we are losing forests to urbanization and fragmentation.

For too long, we have fought over the fate of our forests. But now, the threats facing our forests require that we lay down our swords and work together. Secretary Vilsack has called for a shared vision for America's forests that moves us away from the timber wars of the past and towards a shared commitment to restore and manage forests on both public and private lands for the benefit of all Americans.

On our National Forests, this means increasing the pace and scale of restoration and management. If confirmed, I will work with the Secretary and Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell to treat more acres on National Forests, to produce more timber and biomass, and to improve the ecological health of our forests. There are ample areas where restoration can improve the health of our forests while also providing jobs and economic opportunity.

The most significant challenge facing the Forest Service is catastrophic wildfire. Since the 1970s, average acreages burned have doubled from 3-4 million acres per year to over 7 million

acres per year. These numbers are expected to double again by 2050. Fire seasons are now 60-80 days longer than a few decades ago and fire behavior is more extreme. The combination of a warming climate, increased fuel loads, and housing construction in the wildland-urban interface has increased the loss of lives, homes, watersheds and forests.

The growth in catastrophic fire has had an enormous human toll as we witnessed with the recent loss of 19 members of the Granite Mountain Hot Show Crew in the Yarnell Hill fire in Arizona. Though these firefighters weren't federal employees, they are part of a close-knit firefighting community and the Forest Service and the Department of Interior are deeply saddened by the loss of their colleagues. As with every firefighting fatality, we must ensure that we learn from this incident so that we can prevent future tragedies such as this one. The Forest Service continues to strive to make safety a bedrock value. If confirmed, I will support these efforts and work with Secretary Vilsack and Chief Tidwell to ensure the safety of our firefighters and communities remains paramount.

Both the President and the Secretary have spoken about the substantial budgetary challenges created by the growth of catastrophic wildfires for the Forest Service. Whereas the Forest Service use to spend 10-15% of its budget on fire preparedness and suppression, today it spends closer to 40% or more during bad fire years. Since 1998, Forest Service fire staff has more than doubled, while forestry, biologists, and recreation staff has been reduced over 35%. Budgeting for fire has forced the Forest Service to make difficult budgeting decisions, including reducing funding for management activities that might otherwise prevent catastrophic fires. If confirmed, I look forward to working with the President, the Secretary, this Committee and Congress to address both the budget challenges and the land management challenges presented by catastrophic wildfire.

Our National Forests play a critical role in the economies of local communities by providing opportunities for all types of outdoor recreation, including hunting and fishing, hiking, camping, skiing, motorized sports, canoeing, and many others. The President and the Secretary have underlined the importance of outdoor recreation for local economies and to reconnect Americans to the outdoors through the America's Greater Outdoors initiative. If confirmed, I will continue to work with the Forest Service, NRCS, and other agencies across the federal government to promote outdoor recreation on our public and private lands.

Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Committee, in closing, I want to again thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I appreciate the opportunity given to me by the President to work on these important issues. Conservation of our natural resources is closely linked to the prosperity and well-being of rural and urban Americans alike. If confirmed, I look forward to working with President Obama, Secretary Vilsack and this Committee to contribute to the conservation of our working lands and forests. I look forward to answering any questions from the Committee.