

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, on behalf of all members of the Association of Consulting Foresters (ACF), thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and offer a consulting forester's perspective on the use of technical service providers (TSPs) to expand the delivery of technical forestry assistance on private lands.

ACF is the only national association for consulting foresters whose primary work is consulting to the public. ACF members operate in corporations, partnerships, and sole proprietorships with 1 to over 100 employees. Many are general foresters, while others have professional specialties within forestry. Clients include landowners, forest industries, investment and financial industries, attorneys, government agencies, bankers, trusts, Native American corporations, and many others. Many operate within their own localities, while others consult worldwide.

Everyone here today knows the importance of our nation's privately-owned forestlands - they supply nearly two-thirds of our nation's drinking water and they provide 60% of the nation's wood products. These working forests are vital to healthy rural economies and forest industry, these forests provide opportunities for recreation and hunting, these private forests provide immeasurable wildlife habitat and are vital to our clean air.

Providing technical assistance to owners of family forests is a challenge. Forty-two percent of the nation's forestlands are family owned and are held by over 10 million landowners. Nine out of ten family forest owners own tracts of less than 100 acres. The most recent USDA National Woodland Owner Survey describes over 105 million acres of family forests as being on farms. Studies tell us that only 3% of family forest owners have a written management plan and only 22% of them have sought professional advice prior to management activities that may degrade the quality and productivity of their lands. It is clear that there needs to be greater capacity to deliver technical assistance to the forest landowner.

As a consulting forester, I have learned how much the landowner values the ability to have a resource professional walk with them on their property and help them achieve their vision for their forest. Federal, state and private sectors all have important roles in providing the infrastructure that delivers technical assistance to the forest landowner.

ACF developed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in September of 2004. NRCS provided programs on TSPs at the ACF national meeting in 2005 and several NRCS state staff foresters have worked with consulting foresters to expand forestry assistance. This MOU may have increased awareness of the TSP process, but it did not improve efficiencies in terms of the number of members qualifying as providers.

Although there have been some improvements and local successes, I should mention some of the barriers preventing foresters from participating as TSPs and some suggestions for further improvement. Payment rates have historically been set below any realistic amount that would provide fair compensation for a forester to provide landowner assistance. We have seen a recent increase in payment rates in some states that are beginning to reflect reasonable minimum compensation. We are optimistic that payment rates can continue to increase.

While it is technically correct that a resource professional can charge more than what is listed on the "Not-to-exceed rate" for services posted on the Internet-based TechReg website, this is impractical. In reality, the landowner who sees these rates feels that this is the maximum rate anyone should ever have to pay for such services, as stated by the government. We need to look for another way of expressing the cap on the maximum government contribution for services.

TechReg is still daunting and burdensome. Part of that is because it is new to both the landowners looking for services and to the prospective providers of technical assistance. We believe that the new rule eliminating the self-certification process and requiring the approval of the State Conservationist in each state is a positive step. A simple application package should be sufficient to show that we meet the requisite professional and ethical standards. Within the forestry community, however, we are still concerned that the option of qualifying only under experience is weak and inappropriate and that qualifications should be based on education or the certification criteria in TechReg.

Although the number of forestry practices applied using TSPs has been disappointing - with forest stand improvement only used 147 times in FY2005 - it was the seventh most applied practice out of 84 practices using TSPs. As we watch the use of forestry practices increase each year in such conservation programs as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, one would expect this number to also increase.

Payments funneled through the landowner as reimbursements make the landowner sometimes unable to fund the work. Contracting directly with NRCS would provide a more direct and responsive mechanism for participation by both the TSP and the landowner. We suggest that NRCS continue to explore expansion of bundling services through cooperative agreements and requests-for-proposals. Larger consulting firms might be attracted to provide technical assistance through such requests.

Consulting foresters have also noticed more elderly forest landowners who view their land as a family legacy and are creating trusts with younger family members in order to pass the land on to the next generation. This means more owners who have to reach consensus on any management plan or conservation practice that is to be carried out, thus increasing the amount of time the provider must invest with the clients without additional compensation under current rates.

Consulting foresters are available in all forested states and there are examples of successful use of these foresters in stewardship and cost share programs. One I am very familiar with is the California Forest Improvement Program. This state program requires that a Registered Professional Forester prepare a management plan and the project plans for all cost share programs. The management plan is an important first step for any forest landowner.

The task of providing technical assistance to such a large number of forest landowners is daunting. Technical service providers must be appropriately compensated so that a collaborative delivery system with roles for the federal, state and private sectors can be effective in delivering technical assistance to landowners. ACF suggests that the best and greatest opportunity for

expansion is in the private sector.

I appreciate the opportunity to share the ACF perspective on the TSP process and on our thoughts for improvements and growth. I will gladly answer any questions that I can.