

Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee. On behalf of the National Association of State Foresters, I am pleased to have the opportunity to testify today on implementation of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, landmark forestry legislation which was enacted last year. As Mississippi State Forester, I also serve as the immediate Past President of NASF.

The National Association of State Foresters is a non-profit organization that represents the directors of the state forestry agencies from all fifty states, eight U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia. State Foresters manage and protect state and private forests across the U.S., which together encompass two-thirds of the nation's forests.

In partnership with the USDA Forest Service, State Foresters have an active and important role in assisting communities to develop Community Wildfire Protection Plans, defined in Title I of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act. We will also be responsible for providing technical assistance to communities and landowners to protect water quality under Title III of the Act. We have been working with the Forest Service to develop guidelines to implement the Watershed program, and we are working with the Administration and Congress to secure funding for the full implementation of the Act.

As NASF testified before this Committee last year, our organization is committed to implementation of the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy for the National Fire Plan. The Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) will help federal and state agencies and communities achieve the four goals of the 10-Year Strategy:

1. Improve Fire Prevention and Suppression
2. Reduce Hazardous Fuels
3. Restore Fire-Adapted Ecosystems
4. Promote Community Assistance

The HFRA also supports the guiding principles of the 10-Year Strategy, emphasizing priority setting for the protection of communities and other high-priority watersheds at risk; collaboration among governments and stakeholders; and accountability for performance. Consistent with the 10-Year Strategy, we must now ensure that the HFRA retains this focus on improving forest health nationwide and on all land ownerships.

Community Wildfire Protection Planning is a Critical First Step

To begin the collaborative process for reducing hazardous fuels under Title I of the Act, NASF worked with the National Association of Counties, the Society of American Foresters, the Communities Committee of the Seventh American Forest Congress, and the Western Governors' Association to develop guidance for preparing Community Wildfire Protection Plans. The Southern Governors' Association has also endorsed this effort. While our handbook was primarily designed to help communities prepare the plans authorized by the Act, our goal is also to ensure its applicability to all communities facing wildfire risk, regardless of their proximity to federal lands.

This document is now posted on the web, and with our partners we have distributed more than

4,000 copies of the handbook to the states, U.S. Territories, counties and communities around the country, as well as to all Members of Congress. We are currently working with communities across the nation to develop new or modify existing protection plans to identify and prioritize actions needed to reduce hazardous fuels and improve community safety.

I would like to briefly highlight some activities underway in Idaho as just one example of work that is going on across the West.

The Idaho Department of Lands 2003 Annual Report, completed in March this year, describes the continuing collaborative efforts in the state to implement the National Fire Plan. The state has organized an Idaho State Fire Plan Working Group to provide further guidance for the National Fire Plan and to prioritize projects at the State level.

Today, the partners in every county in the state are engaged in or have completed a County Wildland Fire Assessment and Mitigation Plan. In each county, varied combinations of County Commissioners, local fire chiefs, citizens, local emergency planning committees, Resource Conservation and Development Associations, and state and federal land management and emergency preparedness agencies are assessing their local threats and vulnerabilities to wildland fire. Working together, with county governments taking the lead, the teams are finding solutions to mitigate those threats.

The Idaho State Fire Plan Working Group consists of 14 agencies, organizations and tribes that have a responsibility for delivery of the National Fire Plan. This group is chartered and has developed a statewide fire risk assessment to provide a scientific foundation for consideration as they prioritize projects.

As State Forester Winston Wiggins wrote in the Idaho Department of Lands 2003 annual report, as a result of the National Fire Plan and now the HFRA, "people in Idaho are working together like never before to identify threats from wildland fire and to create local solutions." To see the full Idaho report, I encourage you to visit the interagency Idaho website at www.idahofireplan.id.gov.

Community fire planning is also underway in Eastern states. In another example, outbreaks of spruce budworm in the forests of Minnesota have caused widespread accumulations of dead trees, greatly increasing the risk of catastrophic wildfire and putting communities in jeopardy. In response to these forest health conditions, the Minnesota Division of Forestry is working with the Forest Service and local communities to develop Community Wildfire Protection Plans to identify areas of federal land around communities that are most in need of treatment.

The new authorities under Title I of the HFRA will allow on-the-ground treatments to be performed quickly for more effective control of spruce budworm infestations. Without the HFRA, administrative processes created many delays so that projects were no longer effective in controlling budworm outbreaks. Foresters at the Superior National Forest are now planning several projects under the HFRA to be implemented within the next year, demonstrating the effectiveness of the new authorities.

Implementation of the HFRA is a Long-Term Responsibility

As communities and state and federal agencies implement fuel reduction activities under Title I of the Act, we will make important progress towards reducing the risk of fire to communities and surrounding forest lands. However, with millions of acres at high to moderate risk of catastrophic fire, it will take many years to carry out the treatments needed. In addition, we are dealing with living ecosystems that change with time, so follow-up treatments and ongoing management activities will be needed in many places to retain that reduced risk.

In the South, we have been using prescribed fire for many years to annually control the growth of fine fuels. This repeated treatment is essential to prevent the growth of excess fuels that would put many more of our communities and forestlands at risk.

As an example, in Mississippi our goal is to use prescribed fire to burn 450,000 acres annually. To accomplish this, we have used National Fire Plan funding to burn 16,000 acres this year and will use these funds for another 50,500 acres before the end of the season. We have also been able to use "Stevens amendment" funds to accomplish 5,100 acres of prescribed burning, with a total of 18,500 acres planned for the year. While we have had a wet spring in much of the South, by using these federal programs together with our state funds we should come close to meeting our goal of almost half a million acres prescribed burned in 2004.

Wildfire prevention is also a continuous and essential component to reducing risk to communities. Without a strong focus on prevention, funds invested in wildfire suppression and preparedness become less effective, not only in the South, but across the U.S. In Mississippi a large part of our prevention focus is devoted to the Firewise program, which helps homeowners learn actions they can take to reduce hazardous fuels around their home and make their property more fire safe. Mississippi now has one full-time and two part-time employees devoted to the Firewise program. With these staff we are able to focus on the high-hazard wildland-urban interface areas, and we are making good progress in this effort.

In Mississippi we also have a major effort underway to prevent the spread of the Southern pine bark beetle. Tree mortality from the pine beetle is a major cause of increased fire risk to forested communities. Our work is focused on maintaining pine stand vigor through mechanical thinning followed by prescribed burning. To accomplish this, however, we need markets for the thinned material, both to help cover the cost of the work and to utilize the material that must be removed from the forest.

Most of our pine beetle work is currently being accomplished with state funds, which are becoming harder and harder to maintain. To meet the need, the federal assistance programs in both the HFRA and the Farm Bill are essential. Our situation is not unique - states across the nation are unable to implement these federal programs without federal funding.

Full Implementation of the HFRA is Needed

Titles II through VI of the HFRA will also help to reduce hazardous fuels by providing additional tools for land managers. These authorities will provide improved rapid detection and treatment of forest pests, increased utilization of woody biomass, and community and

landowner assistance for improvement of forested watersheds. Together with Title I of the Act, these programs will, over time, lead to improved forest health on all lands.

The Watershed Forestry Assistance Program (Title III) will be an important tool to improve the health of forested watersheds across the country, and will be of great value to us in the South. This program is designed to protect and improve watershed health by forming partnerships among State Foresters, communities, nonprofit organizations, local watershed councils, and private forest landowners. These partnerships will be the mechanism for protecting and improving water quality for the benefit of human communities and natural ecosystems. NASF has been working with the Forest Service to develop the guidelines needed for implementation of this program. We now seek your support to ensure that the program can be funded and implemented.

Titles IV and VI should provide timely assistance to address emerging forest health threats, such as sudden oak death. Arriving on nursery stock from California, sudden oak death has now been confirmed in thirty-nine states. Scientists have already identified sixty different plant species that host the disease, and foresters are worried that sudden oak death could rival the damage done years ago by the chestnut blight.

As just one example, half of the forest cover in West Virginia is believed to be susceptible to sudden oak death. With forest products manufacturing being the second largest industry in the state, the spread of sudden oak death from the diseased nursery stock would be devastating to the state's economy. The potential impacts of the disease on the ecology of Eastern hardwood forests across the region are equally staggering.

NASF thanks the Committee for your work to include Titles II through VI in the HFRA. While these programs are important nationwide, they have particular importance in many eastern states where there is little federal land. We now ask for your support to ensure that these programs will be funded and implemented.

Assistance for Communities and Landowners Will Accelerate Achievement of Forest Health Goals.

Title I of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act places an emphasis on reducing hazardous fuels around communities. Two of the best tools to help communities and family forest landowners achieve the goals of the HFRA are authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill. These include the Community and Private Lands Fire Assistance Program and the Forest Land Enhancement Program, both in the Forestry Title (Title VIII) of the Farm Bill. The community assistance program (CPLFA) was originally funded under the National Fire Plan, but it has not been funded under the Farm Bill.

NASF greatly appreciates the work done by this Committee to enact the Forestry Title of the Farm Bill. In 2003 State Foresters successfully implemented the FLEP program for one year. As you know, however, last fire season the USDA Forest Service diverted half of the funds assigned to the program to help pay for fire suppression, and Congress repaid only \$10 million to the fund. Now the President's budget recommends the balance of the program be "cancelled." On behalf of all State Foresters and the landowners we serve, I urge you to help

ensure this language is not adopted in the FY 2005 Interior Appropriations Act. FLEP is the only federal cost-share program targeted to family forest landowners to help them implement stewardship plans and achieve better forest health on their lands. Healthy family forests benefit all of us by providing clean water, habitat for wildlife and fish, and improved air quality.

Conclusion

NASF is committed to work with our federal partners to achieve the goals of the HFRA on state and private lands. We are assisting in the development of Community Wildfire Protection Plans, and we are ready to implement landowner assistance programs authorized in the HFRA and the 2002 Farm Bill. We have already laid the groundwork for implementation of the Farm Bill programs, and we are prepared to complete the work needed so that we can implement the HFRA programs as soon as funding is made available.

We appreciate the Committee's support for all of these programs and we look forward to continuing our work with you to ensure that we can deliver the programs to landowners. These important tools will help reduce losses from insects and disease, reduce the risk of fire, and make our communities safer.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.