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**Written Testimony on “Forestry in the Farm Bill: The Importance of America’s Forests”
U.S. Senate, Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Conservation, Climate, Forestry and Natural Resources
March 30, 2023**

Chairman Bennet, Ranking Member Marshall, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on forests in the Farm Bill. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a nonprofit conservation organization working around the world to protect ecologically important lands and waters for people and nature. Our mission is to conserve the lands and waters upon which all life depends. We are grateful to this committee for its longstanding commitment and investment in the future of America’s lands, water and wildlife and addressing the many timely challenges that face our forests.

The Nature Conservancy has engaged in the reauthorization of the Farm Bill and implementation of many of its programs since the Conservation Title was created in the 1985 Farm Bill. Since seventy percent of the land in the lower 48 states is privately owned, the Farm Bill presents the greatest opportunity to impact conservation on private lands. The national forest system covers 193 million acres of forests and grasslands, while more than half of the forestland in the United States (475 million acres) is in private ownership. TNC continues to engage in implementation of Farm Bill programs that benefit both private and public forests. While we enumerate our experience with programs largely enshrined in the Forestry Title (Title VIII), our interests span the conservation of forests broadly impacted and incentivized by the Farm Bill, across other titles, to ensure continued improvement in stewardship on private non-industrial forests, address forest management needs in our public forests, and combat challenges including climate change, insects and diseases, drought, and catastrophic wildfires that plague both forests and communities all over the country. Our hope is that the next Farm Bill builds on the successes of its forestry programs and delivers strong, just, equitable and inclusive outcomes while advancing conservation and community interests.

My name is Sally Rollins Palmer, and I am a native of the Appalachian foothills in Tennessee. Growing up in this beautiful region gave me an appreciation for nature and all the different people who have tended to these places as their home for centuries. Professionally, I have worked for The Nature Conservancy for over two decades, first as an ecologist – which is my academic training – and in later years on a variety of conservation planning and natural resource policy efforts. I currently serve as the External Affairs Advisor for our Central Appalachians program. Over my career, I have always been drawn to focus on how we can all work together – sharing our different expertise and experiences – to conserve our natural resources and promote our healthy co-existence with nature. My testimony will convey the perspectives of my colleagues in the Appalachian Region and across the country who share this same devotion.

Our nation's forests provide much of the clean air and water, wildlife habitat, forest products, and recreational opportunities that every American enjoys. They also produce over \$200 billion in products annually, aid in rural economies and provide almost one million direct jobs. As an organization that relies on a science-based, collaborative approach, the science is clear that climate change poses a significant threat to our communities, our economy, and to nature itself. Despite efforts to improve conservation and management, the health and vitality of our land and water is under greater stress than at any other time in human history. Climate change has brought hotter, drier conditions to many places, exacerbating the risk of many conditions across North America, including extreme wildfires and associated smoke emissions, spread of invasive species, and deteriorating forest health. There is an urgent need to increase the pace and scale of ecologically-beneficial forest management on national forests and provide incentives for state and private land managers to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and improve forest health.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, several global entities – public and private – had turned their attention to steep declines in nature that risk destabilizing the very systems we depend on for our survival. This trend is expected to continue. According to the most recent findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), three-quarters of the world's land and two-thirds of its marine environment have been significantly altered by human actions. We have lost half of the world's forests, half of coral reefs, 70 percent of wetlands and dammed two-thirds of the world's main rivers. We are witnessing this ecological crisis right here at home. It threatens the stability of the entire planet and requires bold and urgent action.

The need for more investment to halt biodiversity loss and address climate change has never been greater. The Farm Bill is a critical part of the solution, being the single largest driver of conservation investment in the United States. The Farm Bill provides the opportunity to continue to support our national, state and private forests by improving existing and developing new policies that would bring them to a healthier state. We stand ready to aid you in prioritizing key investments impacting conservation and forestry programs as you consider the 2023 Farm Bill.

At the outset, we offer The Nature Conservancy's guiding objectives for prioritizing forests in the next Farm Bill that we hope will align with your interests:

- Sustain and grow Farm Bill programs for private forests and dependent communities and promote watershed-level conservation across relevant federal agencies.
- Promote more ecologically beneficial forest management policies throughout the Farm Bill.
- Advance more climate resilience incentives and investments for forests.
- Protect the integrity of bedrock environmental laws that help govern the management of national forests.
- Ensure just and equitable outcomes in the Farm Bill also benefit minority foresters, forest landowners and workers, and enable Tribal management and/or co-management of forests alongside federal agencies.

We hope the next Farm Bill can prioritize providing maximum flexibility and access to forestry programs, particularly those also funded by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and Inflation Reduction Act with high match requirements, that create barriers for financially

strapped partners and local communities needed, to make program implementation successful. The USFS has taken steps to waive match requirements where they have the authority to do so, but there are match requirements that require legislative intervention. Ensuring adequate funding for key forest programs was a challenge for federal land management agencies. For decades, these agencies were experiencing flat budgets as suppression costs increased and were making the difficult decision shifting funds towards the more immediate emergency of addressing active wildfires. This resulted in less funding for all other activities. In 2018, Congress enacted one of the most transformative policy solutions the USDA Forest Service (USFS) had received to date in the form of the “Fire Fix”, which stabilized the USFS and the Department of the Interior budgets from rising wildfire suppression costs. We continue to be grateful to Congress for taking this pivotal step, which has enabled agencies to also focus on wildfire mitigation and other important forest management functions. We are also grateful for the many enhancements and new authorities that were created in the 2018 Farm Bill.

The following are key forestry programs authorized in the 2014 and 2018 Farm Bill where TNC has either had direct engagement as an implementing partner or is keen to engage and offer recommendations on ecologically meaningful modifications to programs for consideration in the next Farm Bill.

Forest Legacy Program

The Forest Legacy Program (FLP) is an important conservation program that has fostered federal-state partnerships to facilitate protecting more privately owned forest land. By providing economic incentives to landowners to keep their forests as forests, FLP is encouraging sustainable forest management and supporting strong markets for forest products. The program is a critical tool that invests in natural infrastructure by conserving forests that sequester carbon dioxide and protecting drinking water supplies that reduce the need for costly, human-made filtration and treatment systems. According to the USFS, 180 million people in over 68,000 communities rely on forested lands to capture and filter their drinking water and forested lands sequester 14 percent of annual U.S. carbon emissions.

The Nature Conservancy and our partners have been able to steward more private land conservation efforts in several states thanks to FLP-enabled conservation easements or land purchases. For example, located at the southern end of the Appalachians, the Dugdown Corridor spans 100,000-acres and 50 miles between the Talladega National Forest in Alabama and the Sheffield-Paulding Wildlife Management Areas in Georgia—a region which contains some of the most biodiverse and climate resilient forests in North America, including the last remaining vestiges of the globally rare montane longleaf pine ecosystem. The Nature Conservancy and the state of Georgia’s goal here is to acquire two tracts as a part of a larger initiative to protect and restore the Dugdown Corridor and increase the amount of publicly accessible recreation land in Northwest Georgia. Deliverables of this project include protection of 2,351 acres benefitting multiple threatened and endangered species including the federally endangered gray and Indiana bats and federally threatened fine-lined pocketbook mussel; creation of the first and only public recreational land in Haralson County; and expanded opportunities to restore the montane longleaf ecosystem.

The Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) ensured the permanent funding of the Land & Water Conservation Fund which has enabled durable funding for the FLP and thanks to the Inflation Reduction Act, FLP is currently funded at \$700 million and allocated through FY27. We respectfully ask Congress to consider providing maximum flexibility on the program's non-federal cost share to enable more conservation outcomes and increasingly equitable access to utilize the program in the next Farm Bill.

Collaborative Forests Landscape Restoration Program

Congress created the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) in 2009 to enhance forest and watershed health, reduce risk from catastrophic megafires, and benefit rural economies through collaborative, science-based approaches to forest management. In its first 10 years, the CFLRP projects generated nearly \$2 billion in local labor income, supported an average of 5,440 jobs annually, and engaged over 400 organizations in local collaboratives. More importantly, it has attracted and generated over \$450 million in leveraged funding and in-kind contributions.

The 2018 Farm Bill authorized \$80 million for CFLRP. This has been critical to allow for the program to strategically advance the USFS 10-year Wildfire Crisis Strategy and inspire infusion of new investments such as those granted in the IJA. Funding made available through IJA, IRA, and annual appropriations, enables 17 active projects in ten states.

The Nature Conservancy has a long history of partnering with the USFS and working in collaboratives to implement CFLRP. Across the West, CFLRP projects are helping to build wildfire resilience and support rural America. From Washington State to Arizona, and from California to Colorado, projects have advanced forest and watershed health, and making important contributions to reduce risks from uncharacteristic wildfire. Colorado has had four projects –in the Front Range, Umcompahgre Plateau, Southwest Colorado and in the Rio Chama –all focused on enhancing the resilience of communities, wildlife, forest conditions, and economic drivers. For example, these four CFLRP projects advanced treatments across over 130,000 acres to reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire, enhanced 50 miles of stream habitat, and maintained 860 miles of trails, provided job training opportunities for local youth, and helped to protect critical watersheds. On the Colorado Front Range CFLRP, for example, The Nature Conservancy and other partners have treated 32,000 acres over 10 years and additionally leveraging millions of dollars for fuel reduction thinning and post-fire recovery. The currently active Southwest Colorado CFLR project spans 1.9 million acres and is now in its second year. And a fourth CFLR project, the Rio Chama is a cross-boundary collaborative effort with New Mexico. Such projects have allowed TNC to engage deeply in high-priority landscapes to complement the down payment on long-term landscape resilience and wildfire risk reduction.

As the committee considers the next Farm Bill, we respectfully request CFLRP to remain a priority. We seek:

- Long-term reauthorization of CFLRP with a call out on climate resilience as one of the eligible activities;
- Increased the authorized funding level;
- Extend sunset period from 2023 to 2029; and

- Increase the number of projects in every administrative region, particularly in meeting the greatest needs for wildlife resilience in the West.

Water Source Protection Program

Congress took an important step by authorizing a new investment through the Water Source Protection Program (WSPP) in the 2018 Farm Bill at \$10 million annually to encourage partnerships between USFS and agricultural producers, businesses, and municipalities. This provided USFS with stand-alone authority/funding to partner with water users to develop water source protection plans and implement source watershed protection and restoration projects. The intent of this program was to encourage public-private partnerships with end water users to invest in forest and watershed health.

We recognize and appreciate that if fully manifested as intended, these partnerships would improve forest health and benefit downstream communities, often bringing in significant new investments from non-federal partners. Despite widespread interest in WSPP across the country, it has not received dedicated funding. As growing populations and climate change place additional stress on our forests and watersheds, it is critical to invest in programs that support local, collaborative solutions to these challenges.

The Colorado River Basin impacts 36 million people in the West who rely on the Colorado River for water, food, recreation and energy, but the current 22-year drought in the Colorado River Basin points to a future of increasing challenges to forest and watershed resilience and uncertain water supplies. Well-managed forests serve as natural reservoirs, enhancing drought resilience and water-related outdoor recreation and sustaining river base flows in the summer when crops, boaters, and fish need water. Given TNC's longstanding commitment to restore and conserve the Colorado River, we are eager to utilize the authorities of WSPP and see great promise to address watershed-level conservation challenges.

In the next Farm Bill, we respectfully request a closer examination of this program and urge you to consider the following modifications:

- Reauthorize WSPP, and at a higher funding level. WSPP is scheduled to expire in 2023, and the current authorization level does not provide sufficient funding to broadly attract potential partners, nor adequately meet partner restoration needs across a watershed. We recommend reauthorizing the program for ten years at \$50 million per year. Allocating a portion of annual funds to be used by partners for planning should also be considered.
- Ensure WSPP is user-driven. WSPP should emphasize the leadership role of partners in assessments, planning, project design and project implementation, i.e., equal partners with USFS in achieving user outcomes.
- Expand eligible entities. To attract greater participation, and increase the amount of non-federal funding potential, eligible partners could include acequias, wastewater treatment providers, community land grants, and smaller agricultural water providers such as private mutual ditch companies (and potentially others).
- Expand eligible lands. Given the primary focus of WSPP should be on USFS managed lands, expanding eligible lands to include adjacent and nearby non-federal lands within a watershed would allow for a more comprehensive approach to planning and restoration.

- Reduce the non-federal match requirement. The existing 50% non-federal match requirement is a high bar for participation in the program, particularly for small, rural, and disadvantaged communities and tribes. Reducing the non-federal match to 20%, while allowing the Secretary to waive the match entirely for watersheds and infrastructure critical to rural and economically disadvantaged communities, Tribes, Pueblos, and acequias could greatly increase participation in the program.
- Establish Clear Priorities. To ensure WSPP funding goes towards partners/projects that can provide measurable outcomes, priorities should be incorporated into the program such as, 1) providing quantifiable benefits to water supply and/or quality, 2) utilizing nature-based solutions such as restoring wetland and riparian ecosystems, 3) that build broader climate, watershed and fire resilience, and 4) leverage other public and private funds to support investments in source water protection and restoration. Program funding should be aquatic-focused efforts, designed to complement broader forest restoration/wildfire risk reduction efforts.
- Reduce Redundancy. Existing watershed plans, e.g., Watershed Restoration Action Plans (WRAPs) completed under WCF, or other applicable watershed planning documents should be considered/allowed to serve as the basis for a WSPP implementation plan rather than requiring the development of a new plan.

Landscape Scale Restoration Program

The Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) program supports projects that align with the U.S. Forest Service’s priorities to reduce the risk of uncharacteristically severe wildfires, maintain, or improve forest and rangeland ecosystem resilience, improve fish and wildlife habitats, maintain or improve water quality and watershed function, and mitigate invasive species, insect infestation, and diseases.

The Landscape Scale Restoration Program, and private forestlands. in Colorado, funds 12 projects to support planning for and implementation of activities such as addressing invasive pests, wildfire resilience, controlled fire training and research and more. In Kansas, this program has supported six projects addressing under-utilized wood product use, addressing invasives and re-establishing grasslands and cottonwood, and urban forestry, among others projects.¹

The 2018 Farm Bill established a state and private forest landscape-scale restoration fund at \$20 million annually allowing for more projects to be eligible for funding. TNC has a long history of implementing the LSR program particularly in USFS Regions 8 and 9. Recently, LSR awarded funding to a ‘Treesilience’ project in northern St. Louis County, MO for work on private properties. This is a unique geography comprised of 24 municipalities, and one that is particularly hard hit by the emerald ash borer. This investment is providing much-needed resources to municipalities and homeowners for necessary removal and replacement of dead or dying trees that pose risks to homes and people, and is supporting planting of new trees in neighborhoods with the most need. In Maryland and West Virginia, spanning 10 counties and in coordination with the Monongahela National Forest, the LSR program has enabled TNC and partners to conduct ecological departure analysis, innovative “on-demand” controlled fire and

¹ USDA Forest Service Landscape Scale Restoration Map Viewer:
<https://usfs.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=9d13b1a1e79e452cab6331c95e369a76>

invasive species management. Through the Inflation Reduction Act, Congress appropriated \$450 million for competitive grants for climate mitigation and forest resilience, to include emerging market participation. As the committee considers the next Farm Bill, we respectfully request:

- Expand the Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) program to increase the authorization for climate mitigation practices and support landowners entering voluntary forest carbon markets.
- Expand the annual investment in the program, particularly to urban environments;
- Provide maximum flexibility for the program’s non-federal cost share to enable more conservation outcomes.

Other Key Considerations

Investing in Wildfire Resilience: As mentioned earlier, Congress took a major step toward stabilizing USFS and Department of the Interior budgets with the 2018 “Fire Fix”. We continue to urge Congress to ensure the fire fix remains durable and comprehensive. USFS released the Wildfire Crisis Strategy in January of 2022 and estimated 50 million acres are in critical need of wildfire resilience treatments across all forests due to the impacts of these challenges.² Through the strategy, the agency will work with states, Tribal Nations and other partners to address wildfire risks to critical infrastructure, protect communities, and make forests more resilient. As of January 2023, there are 21 landscapes receiving focused investment as part of this effort.

The Nature Conservancy has over 60 years of on-the-ground experience across the country, working with public and private partners to deliver prescribed fire programs as an ecologically based mechanism to reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health. Cross-boundary funding mechanisms such as the Hazardous Fuels Reduction projects authorized by the Farm Bill support these efforts. A TNC report³ recommends an investment surge of \$5-6 billion per year over the next 10 years for the highest priority work of increasing wildfire resilience and providing communities with much-needed resources for infrastructure and adaptation.

Many areas of North America are adapted to and shaped by fire, meaning that periodic burning is a natural process that is necessary to sustain many forests, woodlands, grasslands, and other landscapes in a healthy condition. At the same time, many of these areas are becoming more populous and developed, emphasizing the need to address the interconnected crises of climate change and damaging wildfire with diligence and urgency. Therefore, TNC is working to help communities become more resilient to wildfires and to restore altered landscapes and maintain them in a condition that can sustain a broad suite of ecological, social, cultural, and economic benefits. As we work to reduce emissions, we must also seek ways to support biodiversity, address wildfire risk, and consider the disproportionate effects of air pollution and climate change on historically marginalized or underserved communities. As the risk of damaging wildfire is increasing, the need to use beneficial fire also increases to restore and maintain landscapes and reduce the risk of extreme wildfire—and wildfire smoke—on people and communities. Beneficial fire includes controlled burning (also known as prescribed fire), cultural burning, and wildfire management, where and when appropriate and safe.

² USDA Forest Service Confronting the Wildfire Crisis: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/wildfire-crisis>)A

³ https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/WildfireResilienceFunding_TNC_6-30-21.pdf

The next Farm Bill can advance wildfire resilience through many specific actions, to include an emphasis on controlled burning, including:

- Increase the availability of hazardous fuels funding for cross-boundary work for states, Tribal Nations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Establish a new or improved cost-share authority to allow states, Tribal Nations, and federal partners to use available funding to enter cooperative agreements for fuels projects to be implemented and funded in accordance with a cost-share formula based on a project's ownership profile and treatment types.
- Establish a compensation fund/program for burn damages to third-parties that can quickly provide financial relief in instances where burn practitioners adhered to identified best practices. Such a fund could offer discretion to the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to respond to unforeseen circumstances. Eligible damages could be capped, the fund could cover a share of first losses, and/or federal resources could be augmented by other state or private resources.
- Establish a pilot authority clarifying the ability for land management agencies to use appropriations to streamline participation agreements aimed at overcoming high transaction costs of complex and multi-party agreements, including with non-traditional partners by (e.g., pay-for-performance contracts or bonding instruments).
- Creating a new State Prescribed Fire Assistance Program and budget line item within the USFS Private Forestry program designed to provide financial assistance to state foresters in support of workforce, planning, and implementation of prescribed fire programs, which should be incentivized to be interoperable between states.
- Provide dedicated funding and expand authorities to utilize Section 638 contracts to better support Tribal Nation wildfire resilience efforts, including hazardous fuels reduction and controlled burning.
- Incentivize and promote sustainable use of wildfire resilience treatments byproducts to support all aspects of research and development, commercialization, business development, and financing, and workforce and demand, modeled after existing interagency efforts.
- Authorize a new contracting mechanism for fuels treatments to use and dispose of hazardous fuels byproducts unsuitable for traditional markets and treating hazardous fuels byproducts as a waste material.
- Establish a new or improve cost-share authorities to allow states, Tribal Nations, and federal partners to use available funding to enter cooperative agreements for fuels projects to be implemented and funded in accordance with a cost-share formula based on a project's ownership profile and treatment types.

Forest Management and Environmental Safeguards: Title VIII of the Farm Bill has shaped forest management policies to address some of the challenges that face large forest landscapes. We look forward to engaging in a dialogue on finding ways to increase the pace and scale of restoration and reducing risks posed by climate change, severe megafires, drought, insects and diseases, while also ensuring public processes and environmental protections are strengthened.

Importantly, as the Congress examines the necessary mix of incentives and investments for forest management, we seek to ensure agencies have sufficient resources and the flexibility to use available authorities and more efficient processes while maintaining environmental safeguards.

These will be essential conditions for success, as will be collaboration among federal and state government agencies, Tribes, Indigenous peoples, scientific experts and other relevant stakeholders. The Nature Conservancy has demonstrated that collaborative planning efforts can achieve efficiencies of scale for management implementation, such as the recent authorization of over 60,000 acres of ecologically-sound forest treatment across the South Zone of the Cherokee National Forest. Key actions in this respect would also need to include ensuring every USFS region has adequate resources and capacity dedicated to comply with processes enshrined in bedrock environmental laws such as the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and access to a minimum of two NEPA strike teams for each USFS region.

Natural climate solutions (NCS): Natural Climate Solutions are actions to protect, better manage and restore nature to avoid the emission of greenhouse gasses, or to capture and store emissions already in the atmosphere. . Combined with innovations in clean energy and other efforts to decarbonize the world’s economies, NCS offer some of our best options in the response to climate change, , and are cost-effective and readily available. Photosynthesis is the oldest carbon-capture technology on Earth. Proven pathways, such as improving the way working forests are managed, planting cover crops and restoring tidal wetlands, can be implemented now.

Large-scale global reforestation goals have been proposed to help mitigate climate change and provide other ecosystem services. In the United States, forests offer the biggest opportunity for capturing or avoiding harmful emissions through nature-based solutions. There are up to 146 million acres of opportunity in the United States to restore forest cover for climate mitigation. Reforesting these areas with approximately 75.3 billion trees could capture 372 million tons of CO₂ per year, equivalent to removing 80.33 million cars from the road. To meet the need for reforestation, we need to invest in more trees, more nurseries, more seed collection, and a bigger workforce. In return we will get carbon storage, clean water, clean air, and habitat for wildlife according to a new report by scientists at The Nature Conservancy and other experts ⁴To this end, we request Congress to consider supporting increased authorizations for and investment in natural climate solutions. We recommend the following priorities:

- Increase capacity for seed collection and storage, tree nursery expansion, workforce development and improvements in pre- and post-planting practices.
- Incentivize/guarantee low-interest or forgivable loans in addition to long-term contracts to expand nursery expansion.
- Support more reforestation-friendly outcomes from programs such as Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).
- Reduce the barriers for rural landowners to participate in voluntary markets for forest carbon such as those proposed in provisions of S.1107 Rural Forest Markets Act.
- Address the national shortage of seedlings needed for reforestation efforts such as those proposed in provisions of H.R. 2562 the Solving Our Shortages for Seedlings Act.

⁴ <https://www.nature.org/en-us/newsroom/challenges-reforestation-pipeline/>

- Support funding for the Tree Assistance Program (TAP) and investing in more monitoring and research assistance.
- Authorize a new competitive grant program to support seed collection, nursery infrastructure, and workforce among state, private, Tribal Nation, and land grant university partners to augment federal infrastructure investments made through proceeds from the National Seed Strategy and the Reforestation Trust Fund.
- Provide additional Tribal, state, and private forestry funding for post-fire reforestation and revegetation project implementation and monitoring programs.
- Authorize and fund new authorities for relevant U.S. Department of the Interior bureaus to create similar capacities to the Reforestation Trust Fund capabilities.

As climate resilience is further strengthened in Farm Bill programs, we respectfully request the Congress to ensure that such actions also provide ecological benefits, as originally intended, and programs such as Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) which helps landowners restore, enhance and protect forestland resources on private lands through easements and financial assistance are expanded for their community benefits and incentivized for climate resilience.

Watershed Scale Restoration: Conservation programs and other policies in the Farm Bill are key drivers of water use and management decisions and, therefore, a primary source of solutions to our shared water challenges. The Farm Bill has the unique opportunity to enable forest restoration and fire protection efforts to improve the hydrologic function of headwater systems and strategically connect improvements with downstream flow and riparian restoration efforts.

One important mechanism for enabling watershed scale prioritization and implementation has been the Statewide Forest Resource Assessments and Strategies. These plans are important mechanisms for supporting state decision-making regarding forest management, and they promote collaborative stakeholder engagement in the process. In recent years, TNC has partnered with different states to assist with the scientific data and priorities identified by stakeholders in these strategies.

Based on our science expertise and field experiences, we request the Congress to consider innovative mechanisms to advance watershed scale restoration which strategically advance forest health efforts including the following recommendations:

- Enable Farm Bill programs such as the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and EQIP to advance forest restoration to benefit downstream flow and riparian restoration.
- Require strategic integration of Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and restoration programs such as Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and CRP, alongside EQIP and RCPP to prioritize funding to landowners that both maintain agricultural and/or forest production and increase drought resilience by implementing appropriate activities, projects, and use of innovative measurement technologies.
- Support the creation of a Forest Conservation Easement Program (FCEP) while also ensuring durable investment in longstanding easement programs.

- Authorize funding for the Watershed Condition Framework (WCF) to provide a consistent, comparable, and credible process for improving the health of watersheds on national forests and grasslands.
- Alleviate match requirements and implementation barriers to programs in the IIA to further forest health and watershed restoration. Some examples of implementation barriers include IIA funding requiring its own agreements and a lack of clarity within USFS regarding eligibility for IIA funding for waiver requests.

Community and Urban Forests: Given their ability to reduce the urban heat island effect and energy demand, retain stormwater, and absorb and store greenhouse gases while providing habitat for biodiversity, urban forests can help urban environments and their residents address the challenges of rising energy costs, water shortages and climate change.

The Nature Conservancy has deep experience in delivering urban forest conservation together with the Forest Service and partners in several parts of the country—from New York City to Orlando and beyond, we are advancing urban forest conservation by aiding with technical and science expertise and delivering nature-based solutions to ensure a resilient and equitable tree canopy where a majority of Americans live.

In the next Farm Bill, we respectfully request the Congress to consider ways to drive more support and investment for urban and community forests including:

- Permanently authorizing the National Urban Community Forestry Advisory Council.
- Establishing provisions for private homeowner assistance (technical and financial) for conservation actions taken to enhance tree canopy on private property, prioritizing mature tree maintenance activities and “underserved” urban communities.
- Investing in a green infrastructure tree planting and maintenance program for communities to improve air and water quality; reduce storm water flooding, water treatment costs, and consumer energy costs; and enhance property values, public safety, and quality of life.
- Expanding key Farm Bill programs such as the Landscape Scale Restoration to include urban environments.
- Amending the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act and Healthy Forest Restoration Act to include urban landscapes.

Forest Products and Markets: The 2018 Farm Bill authorized a research, education and technical assistance program for expanding wood energy and wood products markets. The Nature Conservancy generally supports strategies to develop forest products and markets. Such strategies should be designed to restore forests to a more natural condition, correcting the harmful cumulative impacts of past fire suppression and ecologically harmful logging practices, and to enhance resilience to a changing climate.

In certain situations, ecological thinning can help to facilitate the responsible use of prescribed and managed fire as part of efforts to restore fire to its proper role in fire-adapted forest ecosystems. In these places, facilitating development of, and fostering local markets and utilization strategies for, new value-added products from low-value material (small diameter timber and woody biomass) removed from forests during restoration projects may be necessary.

Programs like the Wood for Life partnership in the western U.S. (which delivers unmerchantable logs to Indigenous residents for firewood) offer another avenue to support such utilization.

As the Congress turns its attention to wood energy and the wood products markets, we respectfully request that all such efforts are conducted with proper environmental sideboards that ensure that the overall outcome is ecologically beneficial. Importantly, the lack of, or limitations within existing forest product markets should not serve to discourage the Forest Service from engaging in critical forest management activities to build resilience.

Addressing deforestation and curbing importation of illegally harvested commodities: The Farm Bill has made meaningful contributions to addressing the importation of illegally harvested timber. In 2008, thanks to the Farm Bill, the United States—the world’s largest consumer of forest products—became the first country to ban trafficking of products containing illegally sourced wood. The Lacey Act Amendments of 2008 were adopted with bipartisan support in Congress and have contributed to reduced imports of illegally sourced wood products by 32%–44%. The amendments have demonstrated their potential for impact, yet significant delays in full implementation and sporadic enforcement continue to limit their effectiveness. Congressional oversight is vital to overcome these delays. We respectfully request the Senate Agriculture Committee to ensure that USDA implements the requirements of this law, phasing in enforcement of the import declaration requirement for key product categories including furniture, pulp, and paper by the end of this year.

Global forests and other important biomes—such as the tropical rain forests of the Amazon, Congo Basin, Southeast Asia and the Pacific, and Central America and the Cerrado savanna and Pantanal wetlands of Brazil—are critical for human well-being and livelihoods, biodiversity, and carbon sequestration. A comprehensive U.S. approach backed by programs, policies, funding, and diplomatic engagement is needed to ensure the long-term conservation of these ecosystems. This includes specific initiatives to eliminate commodity-driven deforestation, forest degradation, and habitat conversion; halt bad actors from engaging in illegal timber extraction and illegal deforestation; promote sustainable livelihoods and the rights of Indigenous peoples and local communities; and protect and restore forests and other natural landscapes.

The next Farm Bill provides opportunities to curb global deforestation by leveling the playing field for American ranchers, producers and other businesses competing in the global economy, and through specific bipartisan proposals that directly address commodity-driven deforestation.

As the Congress considers its next Farm Bill, we respectfully ask that bipartisan proposals such as the FOREST Act (Fostering Overseas Rule of Law and Environmentally Sound Trade Act) are incorporated. The FOREST Act would establish a new mechanism to remove illegal deforestation from agricultural commodity supply chains by creating a risk-based due diligence and reporting framework for key imported products; establish incentives for U.S. businesses and partner countries to reduce deforestation; and update financial crime statutes to apply to criminal enterprises engaged in illegal deforestation.

In conclusion, we appreciate your leadership in examining the status of forestry programs authorized by the Farm Bill and providing us with an opportunity to share recommendations to strengthen and scale up efforts to reduce challenges such as catastrophic megafires, pests and drought – all impacts exacerbated by climate change – in support of our forests, as well as the local and Indigenous communities and economies that rely on them to thrive. We support substantial reinvestments in programs that increase forest resilience, specifically those that support collaboratively developed, science-based, climate-informed and ecologically focused activities across all forests, and help Congress advance a zero-global deforestation policy agenda. Backed by significant investment, these policies would be an ambitious and important down payment to ensure the future of forests and the role they play in achieving U.S. farm and food policy goals. We look forward to working with you and your staff to advance these aspirations.