

**Testimony of Salem G. Saloom, M.D.**  
**On Behalf of the American Forest Foundation and the National Wild Turkey Federation**  
**Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry**

**June 29, 2017**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Stabenow, members of the Committee, I'm pleased to join you today to provide testimony on the Farm Bill's forestry and conservation tools from the perspective of a family Tree Farmer, certified by the American Tree Farm System® (ATFS), a Board member of the American Forest Foundation (AFF), which houses ATFS, and an avid sportsman and Diamond Life Member of the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF).

My wife Dianne and I own and care for 2,200 acres of forest Conecuh County, Alabama. We are one family out of the 22 million people in America who own forests. When most people think of forests in America they think of our National Forests and other public lands—when in fact, more than one-third of America's forests are owned by people like Dianne and me. Families and individuals own more of America's forests than the federal government or private companies.

Both the American Forest Foundation, a non-profit conservation organization that helps families manage our land and provide benefits like clean water, wildlife habitat, and sustainable wood supplies for all Americans, and the National Wild Turkey Federation, a non-profit wildlife conservation organization dedicated to the conservation of the wild turkey and the preservation of our hunting heritage, have been essential to my success as a Tree Farmer.

Unlike some landowners whose land was passed to them through multiple generations, Dianne and I started out by buying 158 acres of forest in 1983 because we wanted a place to enjoy both the outdoors and the wildlife we love to hunt. This dream, what some would call the "American Dream," was nearly destroyed when Hurricane Ivan made landfall in 2004, wiping out most of our standing pines and leaving only a few older, longleaf pine trees on the land.

After this devastating feeling of loss, Dianne and I made a conscious effort to manage proactively. As we began envisioning the new beginnings of our ruined forest, we also made plans for its future welfare. Many of the loblolly pine trees were either uprooted, twisted, or snapped-in-two due to Ivan. Compared to the other tree species, we were surprised to see that some of the larger longleaf on the property made it through the storm intact. This provided us an opportunity to learn about longleaf, and to change our management plan by incorporating longleaf pine in our restoration efforts.

Dianne and I began the hard work of recovering our forest with the help of the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, which has since been merged into the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, which helped us to prepare the site and plant 156 acres of longleaf pine. It is because of the work of this Committee, in its efforts to allow forest owners to participate in these programs, that this was made possible. Today, we have our land enrolled in the Conservation

Stewardship Program, which helps us continuously improve our land. We have also been blessed to have the support of the state service foresters from the Alabama Forestry Commission, some of which is funded through the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Stewardship Program.

Today we have planted about half of our now-2,200 acres in longleaf pine, with the other half a mix of loblolly, shortleaf, and slash pines, as well as some mixed hardwoods-- A diverse array of species that helps us manage for a variety of risks.

We actively manage our land, produce timber that fuels local mills and regularly initiate prescribed burns to maintain the stands in healthy condition. With our forest management alone, we provide jobs to many in our community and, with landowners throughout our state, help fuel \$23 billion economy in Alabama alone. I can say, without a doubt, that we would not have been able to get back on our feet were it not for these Farm Bill programs.

As we began learning more about longleaf and managing the ecosystem, we began seeing significant improvements in the habitat for not only deer, turkey, and quail, but also for the gopher tortoise—an at-risk species that could be listed under the Endangered Species Act in my area. The gopher tortoise is already listed as threatened in areas of southwestern Alabama.

I had, of course, heard the worries from other landowners who were afraid of having at-risk wildlife (endangered, threatened, or candidate species under the Endangered Species Act) on their land. Those warnings made me think long and hard about whether I wanted to do more of the proactive management that would eventually bring these species onto my property, and how that would affect our land management plans.

I ended up becoming more excited about the prospect as I learned more about these incredible creatures. I thought not only about how I could get value from my woods from timber and hunting, but also how little of me could be a part of saving species from extinction—how cool is that?

I also learned about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and how I could proactively work with them to reduce the risk of future regulatory restrictions on my land while still performing the management my lands required.

In July, 2013 we signed a 30-year Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with USFWS and the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) that allows me to continue the management I've outlined for my land, while also creating more habitat for the at-risk gopher tortoise. In exchange, USFWS gave me two guarantees: First, if I "take" a species during this management, I won't be held liable; and second, if my management results in additional wildlife on my property, I won't be responsible for their protection in the future.

While I've worked well with USFWS, along with Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the state forestry agency, I recognize that I'm very unique landowner. The worry and fear of species listings, and the impact that can have on Tree Farmers' ability to manage their land,

is a very real fear. Truth be told, if I hadn't been forced to reforest my land because of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Ivan, I would be in a very different place.

These fears are well founded. AFF's recent report, *Southern Wildlife At-Risk: Family Forest Owners Offer Solution*, points to the growing number of at-risk wildlife in the South. With 224 forest-dependent species listed today, and the potential for another 293 candidate and petition forest-dependent species to be listed in the future, these species listings are becoming one of the most pressing issues for family Tree Farmers in the South.

But even as landowners are worried, they're still committed to helping maintain our nation's forests and associated wildlife habitat. Last year, AFF surveyed family woodland owners asking about their interest in doing more for wildlife on their property and 87% of landowners surveyed in the South say protecting and improving wildlife habitat is a key reason they own land. AFF's survey, highlighted in the above noted report, also found that landowners who are actively managing their land and harvesting timber are doing more for wildlife than landowners who aren't.

Forest owners want to do the right thing; they want to help wildlife. This tells us we have an opportunity, but we must find ways to protect landowners from the additional regulatory burdens that penalize them for doing the right thing. If I'm doing all I can to manage for at-risk wildlife, I shouldn't be saddled with extra regulations that tie my hands.

While USFWS can work with landowners like me to provide regulatory protections, the mechanisms in place now are extremely inefficient. Successfully navigating the labyrinth of federal regulations takes time, and it takes landowners who really know how to work within the system, which prevents many from doing what I did.

This leads me to both AFF and NWTF's suggestions for the upcoming Farm Bill reauthorization. This Committee has done so much work in the past few Farm Bills to help Tree Farmers like me. As a result of our management, we are helping all Americans by providing not only products, but also the countless non-timber benefits all Americans enjoy every day. Tree farmers play an integral role in stronger rural economies, the forest products industry, hunting and fishing businesses, wildlife habitat, clean water, and many other social benefits.

To continue and build on this great work, I'd like to offer the following recommendations on behalf of AFF, NWTF, and the millions of family forest owners and sportsmen in America these two organizations represent. Many of these recommendations reflect priorities of a broader coalition, the Forests in the Farm Bill Coalition (FIFB) that AFF and NWTF co-lead with the National Association of State Foresters (NASF) and The Nature Conservancy (TNC). While the FIFB Coalition has not yet come to consensus on our recommendations, nor has the coalition endorsed all the recommendations below, we expect to have those ready to share, with input from dozens of organizations, in the near future.

Maintain Funding and Support for Forest Owners in Forestry and Conservation Programs

- We know that budgets are tight. For those programs that need reauthorization in the next Farm Bill, we ask that you prioritize funding for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), which provide support for forest owners and wildlife habitat.
- We also ask that you consider funding the Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP) with \$12 million in annual mandatory funding, or other strategies to help address the growing at-risk wildlife concerns.
- In the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), we asked that you continue to support tree enrollment in the program and continue to improve mid-contract management on forested CRP acres to require, where feasible, proper thinning, prescribed fire and other management on CRP acres and continue funding incentives for this management at \$10 million annually.
- Additionally, we strongly support the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and authorities that encourage targeted application of conservation program funding to priority landscapes to achieve measurable outcomes. While individual landowners taking action is important, if many landowners in a landscape take action, our individual actions are amplified. For example, if I implement a wildlife habitat practice and my neighbors do the same, our combined action can reduce the need to list species because we're providing sufficient habitat. This helps all of us.

#### Improve Technical Assistance and Program Implementation for Woodland Owners

Both the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) should be applauded for making significant progress including forest owners in these programs. However, we still have challenges with forestry technical assistance and program implementation for forest owners. Tackling these challenges will result in more efficient delivery of program resources in ways that increase the benefits produced on issues like at-risk wildlife habitat. To do this we recommend the following:

- Encourage stronger forestry and wildlife agency partnerships with NRCS in implementing working lands programs such as EQIP and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) in states with limited forestry capacity, similar to state forestry agencies' relationships with FSA.
- Streamline forest management plan requirements for EQIP and CSP by recognizing state approved Forest Stewardship Plans (FSP), developed based on national FSP guidelines, as equivalent to the requirements laid out in the NRCS CPA-52 evaluation form (i.e. when a landowner has an FSP plan, the CPA-52 evaluation would not need to be completed, eliminating duplicative processes.) We also request that landowners who utilize an area-wide or landscape-scale multi-ownership plan, developed by or in partnership with state forestry or wildlife agencies, qualify for EQIP without also needing an individual forest management plan or FSP.

- Increase ability to use Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for “unengaged landowners.” Currently, because EQIP technical assistance and financial assistance funds are linked, and Conservation Technical Assistance is limited, the tendency of NRCS staff and Technical Service Providers (TSPs) is to work with landowners that are ready to implement conservation practices and ready to sign contracts, as opposed to landowners that might need more coaching or assistance before an EQIP contract can be designed. To address this, and ensure that landowners that need more upfront assistance and are essential to conservation outcomes are engaged, we ask that you encourage NRCS to use technical assistance funds flexibly to support assistance through TSPs and other partners that get landowners “in the pipeline” for EQIP financial assistance and practice implementation.
- Increase payment limitations on Conservation Title programs to reflect changing economic conditions in agriculture and forestry and allowing more landowners who contribute to priority conservation objectives to participate.

To solve some of these challenges noted above, AFF and NWTF have been working alongside NRCS and many partners, including state foresters in targeted landscapes, to reach woodland owners, educate them on the need for active forest management, and get them access to technical and planning assistance. The idea is to get landowners engaged, interested in management, and (if and when they are ready) to implement management practices. NRCS can then work with them to develop a contract. This work is highly targeted and focused on lands with the best opportunity to deliver on water, wildlife, or other goals; but this is the exception, not the rule. Funding for this work is limited. Aligning resources with this important up-front work with landowners will enhance the important conservation outcomes achieved through federal financial assistance.

#### Provide Support and Regulatory Assurance for At-Risk Wildlife

In addition to the above mentioned program improvements, there are two important policy improvements that we believe will significantly increase landowners’ ability to manage for wildlife, especially at-risk wildlife, and avoid the need for listing.

- Increase tools for prescribed burning. Often to maintain habitat for wildlife, especially in Southern longleaf and shortleaf pine forest ecosystems that are home to significant at-risk wildlife populations, prescribed burning is necessary. Unfortunately, even as we’re seeing increased interest in restoring these habitats, landowners are not conducting the burning that’s needed to maintain and improve the habitat in the long-term. While liability insurance is certainly an issue, the biggest barrier is lack of burning professionals that can do the work. We ask that you consider new approaches to help tackle this barrier.
- Provide landowners with regulatory assurance. As I noted earlier, landowners want to do the right thing and manage for wildlife, but often lack the tools and assurances that

we won't face costly future regulations as a result. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has been working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to provide landowners in some instances with such regulatory assurances if they are participating in NRCS programs. We see significant opportunities for expansion and improvement in this work to provide landowners who undertake conservation actions, with protection from further regulatory burdens for both listed and at-risk wildlife. The Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) offers safe harbor protections and could be expanded and other programs could adopt similar protections.

### Support Cross-Boundary, Landscape-Scale Efforts to Tackle Forestry Issues

All landowners will be better off if we aren't the only ones in our landscape that are actively managing our lands. Whether we're trying to reduce wildfire risk or protect at-risk wildlife populations, because forests are often a patchwork of small parcels and different public and private ownerships, it won't be enough if just one or two landowners in a landscape are managing. New tools for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) agencies are needed so they can more efficiently work across ownerships boundaries, in targeted landscapes and with willing landowners and partners, to address these issues. We ask that the following new tools be included in the next Farm Bill:

- Landscape-Scale Restoration Program: currently the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), using a mix of statutory authority, is implementing a Landscape-scale Restoration Program in partnership with various state forestry agencies. This program is targeting landscapes identified in both state forest and wildlife action plans, helping improve management on both public and private land in a way that measurably addresses key outcomes. Rather than just working on one parcel here or there, this is allowing the agencies to scale the work and fully address management problems. We ask that you clarify and create permanent direction and authority for USFS and state forestry agencies to continue this work and to carry it out in partnership with Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA), including with the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).
- Cross-Boundary authority in USFS Hazardous Fuels Program: currently, the USFS has limited authority to work with nearby landowners, when doing wildfire mitigation work. With the patchwork of public and private lands in the West, for example, to fully protect communities, water supplies, homes, and lives, work is needed on all these lands, not just federal lands. Expanding the USFS' ability to work with adjacent landowners will better enable the scaled wildfire mitigation that's desperately needed. Our intention is not to reduce funding for work on federal land but, as funding increases for hazardous fuels, for proportionately more funds to be used on private lands.
- Continued support for landscape initiatives. NRCS has developed a number of very successful landscape initiatives, like the Longleaf Pine Initiative and the Working Lands

for Wildlife Program. We ask that you support continuation of these landscape scale efforts, especially in partnership with organizations like AFF and NWTF.

### Support a Strong, Diverse Forest Products Industry

As noted above, markets are essential for landowners, good forest management, and growing rural jobs and economies. Landowners need a diversity of markets to sell their wood into: markets for both high quality trees and for low-grade pulp wood as well as residual tops and limbs.

Markets can be one of the biggest tools for tackling issues like wildlife management. As noted above, not only can harvesting timber help landowners stay on their land and afford good management, but the harvest itself can help create the types of habitats needed for a variety of species, including wild turkey!

To strengthen markets for forest products:

- Support the Timber Innovation Act (S.538). Many of you have already agreed to cosponsor the Timber Innovation Act, and thank you. This legislation clarifies authority and directs the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to conduct research and development into new and improved forest products, such as products for building tall buildings out of wood. New and improved forest products mean more landowners can sell their wood and afford good stewardship.
- Modify and expand the Community Wood Energy Program (CWEP), with \$50 million in annual mandatory funding to focus on not just community facilities but enabling capital investment in both public and private facilities that use wood, especially low value wood.
- Ensure Rural Development programs sufficiently support forestry businesses: Maintain funding for rural development business, housing, and utilities programs and make the programs more accessible to forest-related entities and businesses by broadening the categories of eligible matching funds and clarifying that logging equipment is eligible for loan guarantees.

### Federal Forest Management

While I'm not an expert in federal forest management by any means, both AFF and NWTF support better federal forest management and reforms that enable more active management:

Like this committee and the House Committee on Natural Resources next door, we place a very high priority on better management of the National Forests. We know good management reduces wildfires, generates revenue for counties, greatly improves wildlife habitat, and creates early successional habitat that wild turkeys love. In fact, NWTF is the 18th largest purchaser of federal timber, a testament to NWTF's focus on collaboration and better management. But

management of National Forests has been in decline for far too long. We support legislation to require better management of these forests.

The Natural Resources Committee continues to try and move Congressman Westerman's legislation, the Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017 (H.R. 2936), which NWTF strongly supports. AFF does not get directly involved in federal forest management legislation, but overall believes improved management is essential.

The Senate has been active as well, having worked on comprehensive bills before both the Committees on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry and Energy and Natural Resources that would improve federal forest management. I won't go into detail about all of the bills, as each is different, but all would improve management compared to the current approach. Again, while AFF does not get directly involved in federal forest management legislation, NWTF urges all stakeholders to do what it takes to merge the best or most palatable elements of those bills into something that can gain bipartisan support and address forest management, improve collaboration, increase prescribed fire, improve wildlife habitat, generate local revenue from a renewable resources, and reduce wildfires.

### **Wildfire Funding Fix**

In addition to enacting the above recommendations in the upcoming Farm Bill, there is one other policy issue that we ask for your support on. Although largely outside the jurisdiction of the Agriculture Committee, if not addressed, this issue could impact the success of improvements you enact in the Farm Bill.

As you all know, wildfire fighting is literally consuming the U.S. Forest Service budget. While it may seem tangential to today's hearing discussion, it is far from it. As more and more of the USFS budget is used for wildfire fighting, less funding is available for the needed land management, technical assistance, and research that USFS delivers. This support is fundamental to successfully implementing the Farm Bill programs. We respectfully ask that you continue to work with the relevant committees and enact a wildfire funding fix that stops the erosion of the agency's budget and stops the persistent "borrowing" that USFS must do when they run out of funds for firefighting.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.