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June 26, 2006

Mr. Clayton Furukawa
ECP Program Manager
Conservation and Environmental Programs Division
Farm Service Agency
STOP 0513 1400 Independence Avenue, SW.,
Washington, DC 20250-0513

Dear Mr. Furukawa:

The Society of American Foresters (SAF), representing over 15,000 forestry professionals in all segments of employment, strongly supports the rehabilitation of forestlands after catastrophic events and assistance to family forestland owners to help meet this goal. The Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) (7 CFR Part 701), as amended by the Public law 109-149 and the subsequent interim final rule published in the *Federal Register* on May 26, 2006, provides incentives for families to retain their lands in the midst of the devastation caused by the 2005 Hurricanes and the pending development pressures, and will assistance in restoration and long-term forest health.

According to current estimates, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have caused a loss of more than 19 billion board feet of timber across 5 million acres of mostly private forestland in the South. The Hurricanes also damaged uncounted acres of species habitat, forested watersheds, and rural communities and their associated economies. Forests play a crucial role in the economies and environments of this region. SAF believes forest recovery and reforestation is critical to restoring communities and way of life in the region. The following are suggestions for improving the interim final rule to better address family forestland concerns in the damaged region.

Prioritization based on Forest Type

The ECP rule summary implies that priority will be given to landowners planting certain forest types and provides a list with longleaf pine plantings given priority. The rule text does not mention these specific forest types but states that requests for assistance will be prioritized based on whether the trees to be planted are best suited to the site based on the forest management plan. This creates confusion for those implementing the program and those wishing to enter into the program and should be clarified.

While we agree that some prioritization should be adopted, placing priority on one tree species/forest type over another can be problematic. SAF recognizes the ecological significance of longleaf pine ecosystems as well as the other species/forest types listed in the rule summary. These species and forest types provide valuable habitat for threatened and endangered species and tend to be resilient in strong winds

and severe storms such as hurricanes. However placing priority on certain forest types or species in regulations may encourage landowners to plant the species in areas that are not suitable and could also limit options for landowners who are struggling to keep their land in forests after suffering severe economic hardship. The ECP should focus on reforestation of the species appropriate for the site and pertinent to the family forest landowners goals and objectives. In doing so, the program will help landowners get back on their feet and recover from the economic as well as ecological damage caused by the hurricanes. First and foremost, the program should address immediate landowner needs to ensure forestland remains as forestland. Prioritization should be placed on landowners' economic needs as well as the potential for the reforestation to have a lasting effect—and stay forested.

Forest Management Plans

Forest management plans are a vital component in ensuring good stewardship of forestlands. SAF approves of the ECP's requirement for forest management plans. However, we feel the rule should be adjusted to clarify that the development of these plans is eligible for cost-share assistance. In developing and approving these plans, we encourage the use of Certified Foresters®-- foresters that meet the profession's educational requirements, have at least five years of professional forestry experience, adhere to standards of professional practice, pass a rigorous competency exam, and participate in continuing education.

Definitions

The definition of commercial forestland should also be adjusted to eliminate ambiguous language. Sec 701.51 of the rule defines commercial forest land as having a productivity potential greater than or equal to 20 cubic feet per year of merchantable timber. The language should be adjusted to 20 cubic feet *per acre* per year of merchantable timber. While we are disappointed that this program applies specifically to “commercial” forestland rather than a broader definition of non industrial private forestland, we recognize this is a limitation of the law, not a limit the agency has placed on the program and we will work to address this issue through other means.

Landowners in the hurricane damaged region, many of whom own small, family woodlots, will need assistance for many years to help them restore and manage their forests and maintain an income stream to retain their land in forest cover. Because of the extreme losses these landowners have suffered, development pressures will be magnified unless incentives such as those in the amended ECP are provided to retain and manage forestland.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Michael T. Goergen, Jr.
Executive Vice-President, CEO