

## **Society of American Foresters**

### **Conserving Private Forest Lands: Partnering with Landowners to Keep Forests as Forests**

Approximately 57% of our nation's forests are privately owned, and these forests provide myriad public benefits: approximately 2/3 of the nation's drinking water comes from forests; over half of our endangered species rely on private lands; forests contribute to clean air and stable climate; and 92% of trees harvested in the U.S. come from private forests. Yet, forests face the constant pressure of sprawl, and there are 27 million acres of private forests at risk of insect and disease damage, including invasive pests, and an estimated 90 million acres are at risk to catastrophic wildfires.

Government policies must foster the long-term economic, social and ecological needs of both the forest owner and the Nation. Policies must foster economic incentives that promote forests remaining as forests. This can be done principally through appropriate taxation, adequate technical and financial assistance, healthy markets for forest products and developing new markets (i.e. bioenergy) and payments for ecosystem services these lands provide all of us.

Federal tax policies affecting the nation's private forests must recognize: the challenges and issues associated with forest management and ownership; the need for equitable tax treatment among the various types of private forest land owning entities; the legal, institutional, and economic setting within which timber harvesting and forest management is practiced; the importance of continuously improving forestry and timber harvesting practices to protect and enhance ecological, economic, and social forest values; the impact that tax policy can have on international competitiveness and the influence tax policy has on the retention of forest lands.

Forest landowners often find themselves without needed technical and financial assistance. Fortunately, these programs were included in the 2008 Farm Bill for forest landowners, but they must be supported. These include: improving opportunities for forest landowners to participate in conservation programs like the Environmental Quality Incentive Program; affording forest landowners cost-share assistance to forest resources damaged in natural disasters; developing a state-based process for assessment and planning to identify critical forest resource areas and address threats to those areas; and improving coordination of programs and actions at the federal level related to the national conservation priorities for forests.

The primary tool for landowners to improve forest health and address threats of catastrophic fires is the economic incentive from forest products and potentially from ecosystem services. New markets, such as carbon sequestration and renewable bioenergy, need to include private forests.

Working forests are vital to our economy. It is in our Nation's interest to help ensure that family forest landowners can afford to keep their land in forest management where they choose to do so, and that millions of acres of forested land remain forested and managed to provide jobs and timber, clean water, opportunities for fishing, hunting and enjoyment of the outdoors, habitat for fish and wildlife and defense against changing and more unpredictable climate.