

State Foresters Furious Over 60 Percent Cut in Federal Funding

WASHINGTON, DC, February 7, 2008 (ENS) - State foresters across the country reacted angrily this week to deep cutbacks in federal funding for state and private forestry programs within the U.S. Forest Service. The president's FY09 budget proposal cuts nearly 60 percent from current levels, with funding for some priority programs slashed as much as 80 percent.

The cuts are contained in the President George W. Bush's Fiscal Year 2009 budget released Monday by the White House.

Two-thirds of the forested land in the United States is in private or state ownership. "The drastic reduction of funding for State and Private Forestry programs threaten vital forestlands that improve air and water quality, provide essential wildlife habitat, reduce global warming and enhance the quality of life for all Americans," said the National Association of State Foresters, NASF.

This year, the State and Private Forestry program budget is \$262.7 million but it was cut to \$109.5 million for the upcoming fiscal year, a 58.3 percent reduction, said NASF communications director Sarah McCreery.

Since 1911, state forestry agencies and the U.S. Forest Service have worked together to assist private landowners in "achieving some of the most successful forestland conservation in the nation's history," said the association.

"This partnership has been the essence of what this administration has lately touted as 'Cooperative Conservation,'" said Leah MacSwords, NASF vice president and Kentucky State Forester. "However, these outrageous budget cuts put our tradition of partnership in jeopardy, and could have disastrous effects on the forest resource."

The cooperative conservation movement has been a hallmark of the Bush administration, which has proposed a bill to strengthen cooperative conservation efforts, held conferences and 25 listening



Today, Kentucky has 11.9 million acres of forestland, of which 87 percent is privately owned. (Photo courtesy [Kentucky Division of Forestry](#))

sessions across the country on cooperative conservation. In 2004, President Bush signed an executive order facilitating cooperative conservation.

But without funding on the government side, the private sector is left without a cooperating partner. "We don't know what impact this will have on overhead, staffing levels of the U.S. forest service," said McCreery.

Some of the steepest cuts are in the urban and community forestry budget where the current \$27.7 million is reduced to \$5 million in the president's budget - a reduction of 81.5 percent.

The state foresters association had requested a budget increase in the Urban and Community Forestry Program to \$45 million.

McCreery says this program provides technical and financial assistance to existing local efforts to manage, maintain, and improve tree cover and green spaces in urban areas and rural communities.

The budget cuts will affect community tree planting, connecting people to forests in urban areas and in the urban-suburban interface, said McCreery, who adds that it will affect water quality, and the cooling of urban heat islands.

In the past three years, at least 7,000 communities have participated in stewardship of natural resources in urban areas, where 80 percent of the U.S. population lives.



A newly planted tree in a Dallas, Texas residential area.
(Photo courtesy [Dallas Urban Forest Advisory Committee](#))

The urban trees and green spaces "emphasize the vital connection between human and natural environments," reduce energy consumption, reduce the prevalence and extent of flooding, and help address social-environmental justice issues in urban areas, the association said.

Now the association is looking to Congress to rescue its programs.

"NASF urges Congress to again illustrate its commitment to State and Private Forestry programs by restoring funding to S&PF programs," said Kirk Rowdabaugh, the association's president and Arizona State Forester.

And it is possible that the Democratic-led Congress may restore some funds to these programs.

Congressman Nick Rahall of West Virginia, who chairs the House Natural Resources Committee, said the president's budget proposal for natural resources programs "merely repeats the same failed policies of past budgets that shortchange our ability to preserve and protect America's heritage for future generations."

"This budget axes forest programs, undercuts our wildlife refuges, puts programs to save endangered species under the knife, neglects the needs of our National Parks, and puts a stopper in important water programs," Rahall said.

In a tight budget climate, federal funding for state and private forestry is a wise investment, the NASF argues, saying, "It supports cost-effective programs that yield high benefit for a low investment by providing financial and technical assistance for wildland fire management, slowing the spread of exotic insects, plants and diseases, and imparting numerous environmental benefits that belong to all Americans."

Said Maryland State Forester Steven Koehn, "This budget undermines the very mission of the Forest Service, in that it neither cares for the land, nor serves the people."

Instead, the White House requested a seven percent cut in the budget of the U.S. Forest Service, from \$4.45 billion in fiscal 2008 to \$4.1 billion, and wildfire-related spending accounts for 48 percent of that total.

Spending on fire suppression is increased by \$148 million to just under \$1 billion, a figure based on the 10 year average of fire suppression costs.

In 2007, the Forest Service spent \$1.4 billion fighting fires nationwide, according to the National Interagency Fire Center. The Interior Department spent an additional \$450 million.

The state foresters say that if the Bush administration would support state and private forest programs, they would be able to prevent many wildfires, reducing the overall cost.

State forestry agencies help manage activities on state and private lands right alongside federal lands," McCreery explained. "If there's a fire, it's usually the state agencies that are the first to get there. They help with fire suppression, rehabilitate burned lands, treat fuels, keep



Fire on the Kisatchie National Forest in Louisiana. (Photo courtesy U.S. Forest Service)

the forests healthy, protect against insects and disease - all essential to collaborative efforts with federal programs."

The new Agriculture Secretary Ed Schafer, whose agency includes the U.S. Forest Service, said Tuesday, "The budget continues implementation of the President's Healthy Forests Initiative to mitigate the threat of catastrophic wildfires. Resources proposed in the budget will reduce hazardous fuels on almost 2.5 million acres of land."

Schafer said, "By the end of FY 2009, federal agencies, including the Department of the Interior, will have treated hazardous fuels and accomplished landscape restoration activities on 29.9 million acres of the nation's forests and wooded rangelands since the beginning of FY 2001."

For more information on the Cooperative Forestry Program of the U.S. Forest Service, visit: <http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/coop/>

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