

Decker, Denise - Washington, DC

From: Nezek, Rita [rnezek@forestfoundation.org]
Sent: Friday, March 20, 2009 9:47 PM
To: RA.dcwashing2.hfrp
Subject: American Forest Foundation Comments on HFRP Proposed Rule
Attachments: AFF HFRP cmts.pdf

A handwritten number '178' is circled in black ink in the upper right corner of the page.

Attached, please find comments from the American Forest Foundation regarding the Healthy Forests Reserve Program.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

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American Forest Foundation

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March 20, 2009

Robin Heard
Director, Easement Programs Division
Natural Resources Conservation Service
P.O. Box 2890
Washington, D.C. 20013-2890

Dear Director Heard:

The American Forest Foundation is pleased to offer comments on the Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) Proposed Rule, as contained in the *Federal Register* on January 14, 2009.

The American Forest Foundation is a nonprofit conservation organization that strives to ensure the continuation of America's family forests. Each year we train 30,000 educators and help 90,000 landowners to manage forests for wildlife, habitat, recreation and sustainable products.

HFRP has tremendous potential to help the over 10 million family forest owners (nonindustrial private forests) conserve endangered species habitat, offering financial assistance to help them recover costs associated with this activity. Family-owned forests, along with other private forests, farms and ranches are home to over two-thirds of listed endangered species.

These landowners bear the burden of conserving these species and often see little reward for providing this societal service. Surveys of family forest owners have shown that these families want to protect their forest legacies, and the habitat and other natural values that are part of their forest. Many are willing to take steps to do this, if they are given tools to help them along.

Family forest owners that agree to conserve endangered and threatened species habitat should be granted assurances that their activities won't result in additional burdens as a result of their conservation activities. We strongly support the provisions in HFRP that help landowners obtain these assurances.

We offer the following comments to help strengthen HFRP implementation as it affects family forest owners.

Priority on family forest lands. While we recognize the statute allows the program to apply to all private lands, we strongly urge at a minimum, a dedicated amount of funds be set aside for family forest lands. As demonstrated with HFRP implementation to date, projects that enroll large land ownerships, typically industrial lands, tend to be more readily accepted. This is unfortunate, since

small family forest owners, who own the majority of the forests in the U.S., often lack the resources and technical expertise to conserve species habitat on their own.

Compare appropriate projects when prioritizing based on cost-effectiveness. In prioritizing projects based on cost-effectiveness, as required in the statute, we strongly urge that projects are compared with other similar projects of similar ownership and size. We are concerned that in using the cost-effectiveness criteria, projects with family forest owners are not given adequate consideration because they are compared with large landowner projects that appear more cost-effective. While a project with a larger landowner may be less costly because of economies of scale, this disadvantages smaller landowners who will likely never be able to compare, in cost-effectiveness, to larger landowners.

Incorporate Climate Adaptation Planning and HFRP Restoration Plans. Restoration plans should be tailored to help landowners adapt their management strategies in a changing climate. It will be a significant challenge for a landowner to maintain habitat for a species that relies on a certain forest type, if that forest type will no longer survive on the landowner's property. These scenarios must be planned for and factored into contracts and easements, especially for landowners who agree to a permanent easement.

Give Increased Weight to Carbon Sequestration Benefits. As our climate changes, it is critical that federal policies encourage carbon sequestration and storage in forests, as a proven climate mitigation tool. Because of this pressing need, we urge significant weight be given to projects that increase carbon sequestration.

Application Procedures and Priority Setting. State Conservationists should be required to work hand in hand with State Foresters, State Technical Committees, and State Forest Stewardship Committees to develop their state proposals and set priorities for landowner application review. While the statute does not require this, it will be critical to ensuring cooperation and landscape scale achievements, in implementing HFRP along with other conservation programs. Additionally, we urge that in giving priority to projects based on the significance of the forest ecosystem functions and values, strong consideration should be given to priority forest areas identified in a State Forest Resource Assessment and Strategy pursuant to section 8002 of the 2008 Farm Bill. This will ensure that the various USDA conservation programs help achieve landscape scale outcomes.

The regulations should lay out a process for state conservations to submit proposals to the Chief and then solicit applications from landowners. Clarification is needed as to what a "proposal" is. Additionally we urge an open public process in proposal development and submission, to ensure that the program is truly focused on priority lands.

In reviewing proposals, we urge the Chief to solicit input from the Forest Resource Coordinating Committee, as modified in the 2008 Farm Bill. This Committee is designed to help focus federal conservation programs on national priorities for private forest conservation and should be involved, at a minimum, in establishing review criteria for the program.

Environmental Credits for the Encumbered Property. We support the approach taken in the regulations to allow landowners to retain the ownership of any environmental credits or payments

they may receive as a result of their conservation activities. This will be an important consideration when a landowner enrolls in the program, given advances in environmental service markets such as carbon and habitat credit banking.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Rita Neznak
Vice President, Public Affairs