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Farm Bill Primer: Forestry Title

Forest management generally, as well as forest research and forestry assistance, is within the jurisdiction of the agriculture committees in Congress. Although most forestry programs are permanently authorized, forestry often is addressed in the periodic farm bills to reauthorize many agriculture programs. Four of the past five farm bills included a separate forestry title, including the most recent farm bill, the Agricultural Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-79; the 2014 farm bill). This report summarizes some of the forestry provisions addressed in the 2014 farm bill and issues Congress may debate in future farm bills.

Forestry in the United States

One-third of the land area in the United States is forestland (766 million acres, see **Figure 1**). These lands provide wood for lumber, plywood, paper, and other materials, as well as a host of ecological services, including recreation, clean water, and wildlife habitat, among other things. The federal government owns 238 million acres (31%) of the forestland; 230 million (30%) acres are owned by states, other public entities, and private corporate landowners (e.g., timber investment trusts). The remaining 298 million acres (39%) are owned by nonindustrial private landowners (i.e., private, noncorporate entities that do not own wood-processing facilities).

The Forest Service (FS) is housed within the U.S. Department of Agriculture and is the principal federal forest management agency of the United States. FS manages 19% of all U.S. forestlands. FS administers the 193 million acre

National Forest System (NFS), which consists of 145 million acres of forestland and 48 million acres of grasslands and woodlands. FS also provides technical and financial assistance—primarily through state forestry agencies—to nonfederal landowners. In addition, FS conducts research to advance the science of forestry and engages in international forestry assistance and research efforts. Many of FS's land management, assistance, and research programs have permanent authorities and receive appropriations annually through the discretionary appropriations process.

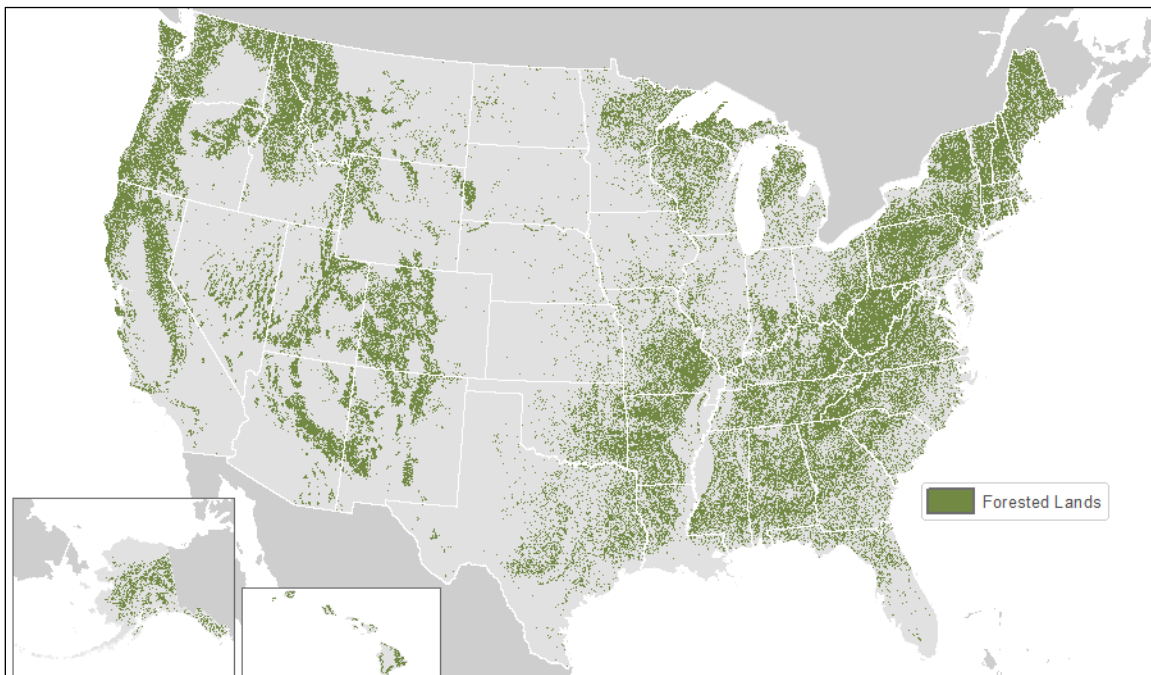
Forestry in the 2014 Farm Bill

Title VIII of the 2014 farm bill repealed, modified, reauthorized, and created several new forestry assistance, research, and federal land management programs. The following sections summarize many of those provisions.

Forestry Assistance

The 2014 farm bill repealed a number of assistance programs that had not been authorized for several years (e.g., the Forest Land Enhancement Program), had not received appropriations in several years (e.g., the Watershed Forestry Assistance Program), or had never received appropriations (e.g., the Tribal Watershed Forestry Assistance Program).

Figure 1. Forest Cover Across the United States



Source: Congressional Research Service.

Several other assistance programs were reauthorized through FY2018, such as the Rural Revitalization Technologies Program and the Office of International Forestry. The 2014 farm bill reauthorized funding, through FY2018, for FS to continue providing assistance for statewide forest resource assessments and enacted minor program modifications. The farm bill also removed mandatory funding for the Healthy Forests Reserve Program but authorized appropriations of up to \$12 million annually (through FY2018) for the program and made some changes to the program.

Forestry Research

The 2014 farm bill directed FS to revise the strategic plan for forest inventory and analysis under the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Research Act of 1978 (16 U.S.C. 1642(e)). The strategic plan outlines the methodology and goals of the Forest Inventory and Analysis Program, which describes the nationwide extent of forest resources and related data.

Forestry on Federal Lands

The 2014 farm bill established a process for designating landscape-scale treatment areas in at least one national forest in each state where there is declining forest health or the risk of declining forest health due to insect and disease infestation, if requested by the governor of the state. Approximately 47 million acres across 36 states have received this designation. The 2014 farm bill authorized FS to prioritize and perform restoration projects in those areas. The farm bill also established a Categorical Exclusion (CE) under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) that may be available for those projects under specified conditions.

The 2014 farm bill permanently authorized two federal land management programs: stewardship contracting and the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA). Stewardship contracting authorizes FS and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to enter into dual service and timber sale contracts for up to 10 years to achieve certain specified land management objectives. The GNA, which was permanently authorized and extended nationwide, allows FS and BLM to enter into agreements with state agencies to conduct watershed restoration and protection projects on neighboring national forest or BLM lands. Previously, the GNA was authorized only in Colorado and Utah.

Forestry Provisions in Other 2014 Farm Bill Titles

Forestry-related provisions also are included in other farm bill titles. For example, the Conservation (Title II), Research (Title VII), Energy (Title IX), and Miscellaneous (Title XII) titles each contain provisions related to forestry or forest ownership.

Potential Forestry Provisions in a Future Farm Bill

The need to consider reauthorizing many of the agricultural programs is a prime reason for Congress to consider periodic farm bills. Even though many forestry programs are permanently authorized, the farm bill presents an opportunity to modify existing programs and possibly

establish new options for forestry research, management of federal lands, and assistance to nonfederal forest owners.

Congress may use a future farm bill to address concerns related to forest health management on both federal and nonfederal lands. For example, this could include programs to reduce the risk of catastrophic disturbance events, such as an uncharacteristically severe wildfire or insect or disease infestations. For nonfederal forests, this may include establishing or modifying assistance programs to enhance wildfire protection, preparedness, and forest resiliency. For federal forests, this may involve establishing new authorities or expanding existing authorities to reduce hazardous fuel levels or other forest restoration activities. Congress also may use the farm bill to address issues related to funding federal wildfire suppression operations (see CRS Report R44966, *Wildfire Suppression Spending: Background, Issues, and Legislation in the 115th Congress*, for more information).

Congress may use the next farm bill to address any unforeseen issues with provisions enacted in the 2014 farm bill. For example, the GNA has an adjacency requirement that many believe is restricting the application of the program, and some support clarifying the legislative language. Similarly, many would like Congress to address issues with the stewardship contracting authority, such as contract cancellation ceilings and revenue-sharing requirements. The farm bill also may provide an opportunity for Congress to modify or expand the insect and disease treatment area authorities and designations.

In addition, the next farm bill may address other forestry and federal land issues and programs, such as the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program. This FS program provides funding for 23 landscape-scale restoration projects in priority landscapes for 10 years. Some would like to expand the program to include additional projects, whereas others would like to phase out the program. Congress also may address assistance issues, such as outreach, education, research, and market opportunities for traditional and nontraditional forest products. For example, Congress may include programs to incentivize the use of wood residue for renewable energy or to expand the use of wood in construction applications (e.g., tall wood buildings).

Several of the forestry issues that were debated but ultimately not included in the enacted 2014 farm bill could resurface in future farm bills or other legislation. For example, the House-passed version of the 2014 farm bill (H.R. 2642) proposed to eliminate the permanent authorizations for several programs (e.g., the Forest Legacy Program) by establishing a sunset date. The enacted 2014 farm bill did not include these provisions, but funding authority issues could be the subject of future deliberations.

Related CRS Reports

CRS Report R43431, *Forestry Provisions in the 2014 Farm Bill (P.L. 113-79)*; CRS Report RL31065, *Forestry Assistance Programs*.

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