

The Honorable Harris Sherman
Undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Mr. Tom Tidwell
Chief
United States Forest Service
1401 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250-0003

January 5, 2012

Dear Undersecretary Sherman and Chief Tidwell,

We are writing to express our strong support for the Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program (“Community Forest Program”) that was authorized in Title VIII, Section 8002 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008. The Community Forest Program will provide matching funds to help local government entities, Indian tribes, and non-profit organizations create new community forests that foster deep, close to home connections between people and the great outdoors. We appreciate your successful efforts over the past year to get this program implemented through rulemaking. Now we eagerly await the release of a Request for Proposals from U.S. Forest Service State and Private Forestry for already appropriated funding, and urge that this move forward as quickly as possible.

We are also grateful for the strong support for the Community Forest Program in the President’s FY2012 budget request for the U.S. Forest Service. We urge you to continue this support by including at least \$5 million for the Community Forest Program in the President’s FY2013 budget request for the agency. This should include funding for the states to administer the program and to provide technical assistance as directed in the program’s authorizing language.

As the Obama Administration implements the America’s Great Outdoors Initiative (AGO), the Community Forest Program can help meet the AGO goal to increase opportunities for Americans to connect with forests in their own communities. The widespread loss of private forests to non-forest uses is working against this goal: the U.S. Forest Service report *Private Forests, Public Benefits* projects that 57 million acres of America’s private forests could experience a substantial increase in housing density by 2030.

The Community Forest Program will help conserve threatened forestlands that meet locally-identified community needs for natural resource protection, economic development, and public connections to the land. Community forests, whether owned by a local government, Indian tribe, or non-profit organization, have a strong track record of engaging a broad range of citizens in forest conservation, stewardship, and governance.

Where situated near federal and state lands, establishment of community forests can foster new collaboration across boundaries to achieve landscape-level management objectives.

We share the strong commitment in AGO to reconnecting young people with our forests. Community forests are in many areas situated close to schools and community centers, creating convenient access to forests that can become a natural classroom and playground. Establishing new community forests will help develop a broader appreciation for the importance of our country's forests among youth and citizens of all ages.

A strong investment in the new Community Forest Program as part of the President's FY2013 budget request for the U.S. Forest Service will help local governments, Indian tribes, and non-profits to play a larger leadership role in conservation and stewardship of the forested landscape. We expect very strong demand for the already appropriated funding and anticipated FY2012 appropriations. This new funding in FY2013 would help continue to meet demand, and build future interest. Thank you for your consideration of this request, and please do not hesitate to contact any of us for more information.

Sincerely,

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