

Private Working Lands Issue Paper

Throughout most of America's history, the West's privately-owned forests and rangelands have been vital components of a large, working landscape supporting rural economies and providing wildlife habitat and other valuable ecosystem services. Today, however, these landscapes are rapidly unraveling as land is subdivided, sold for real estate development and criss-crossed by infrastructure corridors. Western rural communities are too quickly losing the many public benefits private lands have long provided, including forest-based enterprises, recreational access, wildlife habitat, and watershed protection, and with these our rural heritage and local knowledge.

RVCC believes that the long-term health of our western landscape and communities depends largely upon the protection and productivity of private working lands. We believe that federal policies must work towards a balanced conservation-based approach to sustain the West's working landscapes.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRIVATELY-OWNED WORKING LANDS

Western forests are 31% privately owned, comprising 113 million acres. Moreover, almost half of western grazing lands are in private hands, much of it supporting livestock production. Many of these private forests and rangelands are adjacent to or interspersed with our public lands and are important for the overall health of western ecosystems and communities.¹

1. **Public and private lands are interdependent.** In the western United States, important land management problems are cross-boundary by nature. Invasive weeds, forest pests, and wildfires easily cross between public and private boundaries, particularly in checkerboard ownership patterns. Wildlife and weather-related impacts also ignore jurisdictional borders. Cross-boundary stewardship is essential for addressing these sorts of complex issues.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Fund existing programs that provide technical assistance and financial incentives for conservation of private forest and rangelands.
 2. Include in the final Farm Bill reauthorization, currently under debate in Congress, a permanent extension of an important tax incentive provision for private land conservation.
 3. Fund existing programs for acquisition and long-term stewardship of working forests.
 4. Pass legislation supporting new and innovative authorities that allow for acquisition of landscapes facing high development pressure.
2. **Private lands are "working landscapes," vital to sustainable rural communities and economic well-being.** Western private lands are an economic anchor – sustaining local mill infrastructure critical for both private and public land management, supporting value-added enterprises and contributing to the local workforce and the survival of rural communities – that would be difficult to replace if lost. Private forest and rangelands also represent some of the nation's best examples of sustainable land use.
 3. **Private lands provide important ecosystem services.** Western private lands are crucial in providing key public benefits, such as the protection of water quality and supply and carbon sequestration for climate change mitigation. In addition, working lands can be an ideal arena for exploring renewable energy through opportunities such as woody biomass, cellulosic ethanol, and staging for wind, solar, geothermal and small-scale hydro-power.

¹ Smith, Brad and David Darr. *U.S. Forest Resource Facts and Historical Trends*. USDA Forest Service. 2004

WHO WE ARE

The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition is comprised of western rural and local, regional, and national organizations that have joined together to promote balanced conservation-based approaches to the ecological and economic problems facing the West. We are committed to finding and promoting solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and well being of rural communities. We come from California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, New Mexico, Montana, Arizona and Colorado.

4. **Private lands are vital for wildlife habitat.** Certain critical habitat types are primarily found on private lands. For example, 94% of the remaining redwood forests are in private ownership.² Additionally, in the arid West, private lands tend to occupy lower elevation areas that supply water and forage for irrigation and livestock and critical wintering grounds. Private lands are also home to river, lake, riparian and wetland habitat that support the critical lifecycle stages of over 75% of all terrestrial species.³
5. **Private lands provide open spaces, scenic views, and recreational access.** Private lands serve as buffers between highly-developed towns or cities and nearby public lands. Open spaces and the rural character afforded by working farms, ranches and forests are key components of a diversified and stable economy. Rural economic activity such as tourism, guiding, and outfitting business are directly tied to open space and contiguous landscapes that sustain healthy wildlife populations and intact ecosystems.

THREATS TO WESTERN PRIVATE FORESTS AND RANGLANDS

Private forests and ranchlands are facing enormous development pressures in communities throughout the West. This new and escalating dynamic is creating unprecedented costs and challenges to the West's rural landscape.

1. **Development of private lands fragments landscapes and compromises conservation values and the integrity of adjacent public lands.** In many parts of the West, intact ranches and forestlands that provide open space are being sold and broken up into smaller parcels. Almost 2 million acres of forestland—an area the size of Yellowstone National Park—are broken into ranchettes each year.⁴ The associated network of roads, fences, cleared areas, and human traffic threaten wildlife, watershed integrity and rural livelihoods. Fragmentation also greatly increases the number of landowners and land managers, exponentially multiplying the difficulty of implementing uniform conservation measures at the landscape scale. Indeed, loss of open space on private land is listed on the U.S. Forest Service's "Four Threats" list, which constitutes the agency's

strategic agenda for dealing with threats to healthy forests and grasslands. According to the U.S. Forest Service, "Development of open space affects the Forest Service's ability to manage the National Forests and Grasslands, as well as our ability to help private landowners and communities manage their land for public and private benefits."⁵

2. **Development of private lands increases fire risk and cost to federal, state and local governments.** As housing pushes further and further into fire-prone forests and away from the firefighting infrastructure, the potential for life and property losses increases. The meteoric rise in fire suppression costs is in large part due to the high cost of protecting recently-built structures in the wildland-urban interface (WUI). Approximately 85% of the Forest Service's fire suppression budget is spent on 2% of the fires, primarily in areas where millions of people have moved into forestlands to live.⁶ Wildland fire management activities (the largest component of which is suppression) rose from 13% of the agency's budget in fiscal year 1991 to a staggering 48% projected for fiscal year 2009.⁷ This will rise even further as development encroaches in the WUI, thus reducing the firefighting agencies' ability to address other priority areas.
3. **Deep declines in Federal assistance to private landowners threaten the protection of public benefits.** Funding for stewardship and assistance programs for private landowners and communities has declined for several years in a row.

CASE IN POINT

Only 14% of forested western private land adjacent to public land is currently developed for residential use. Based on current growth trends, there is tremendous potential for future development on the remaining 86%.

If homes are built in 50% of the forested areas where private lands border public land, annual federal firefighting costs could range from \$2.3 billion to \$4.3 billion per year. Currently, the USDA Forest Service annual budget is approximately \$4.5 billion.

Source: Headwaters Economics (www.headwaterseconomics.org)

² Best C. and L. Wayburn, 2001. *America's Private Forests: Status and Stewardship*. Covelo, CA: Island Press.

³ Thomas, J.W., et al. 1979. "Riparian Zones" in *Wildlife Habitats in Managed Forests: The Blue Mountains of Oregon and Washington*. US Forest Service Agric. Handbook No. 553, Washington DC, 40-47.

⁴ Best C. and L. Wayburn, 2001. *America's Private Forests: Status and Stewardship*. Covelo, CA: Island Press.

⁵ USFS 'Four Threats' website: <http://www.fs.fed.us/projects/four-threats/>

⁶ From comments made by USDA Undersecretary of Agriculture, Mark Rey, quoted on the American Recreation Coalition website, <http://www.funoutdoors.com/node/view/1808>

⁷ Issue brief by the Wilderness Society: "About the FLAME Act Bill" http://wilderness.org/OurIssues/Wildfire/flame_act.cfm

The budget presented by the Administration for fiscal year 2009 reduces those budgets even further. State and Private Forestry programs, within the USDA Forest Service, provide critical technical and financial assistance to private landowners and communities, ensuring that public values like clean water, wildlife and fish habitat, wildfire risk reduction, among others, are protected, and technical assistance for active management is provided. Loss of these programs threatens our nation's ability to protect, restore, and maintain healthy landscapes and communities.

4. ***Corporate divestment of timberland creates an uncertain future.*** In the last ten years Timberland Investment Management Organizations (TIMOs) and Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) have purchased most of the former privately owned industrial forestland in the United States.⁸ TIMOs and REITs are operating with high return expectations and without investment in local mills, which may result in accelerated conversion of land to non-working forest uses.
5. ***The next generation of private forest owners lack knowledge and experience in forest management.*** According to 2005 data, 60% of family-owned forestlands belong to people age 55 or older. In many cases the new

generation was not raised on the family land, lives out of state or far from their family's land, and has not been involved in the management of family lands. The next generation, lacking sufficient knowledge and incentives to hold onto the land, is increasingly choosing to sell their family lands off for development to satisfy the tax burden.⁹

SOLUTIONS FOR MAINTAINING PRIVATE WORKING LANDS

The federal government plays a critical role in ensuring the maintenance and conservation of private working lands across the United States. The federal government provides a variety of resources for private owners of working lands including technical and financial assistance, tax incentives for land conservation, and land acquisition programs to stem development pressures. The following recommendations highlight programs the RVCC believes are most in need of immediate Congressional action.

1. ***Fund existing programs that provide technical assistance and financial incentives for conservation of private forest and ranchlands.***

Technical and financial assistance programs help private landowners to enhance restoration and sustainable land management activities on their lands, ensuring that public values like clean water, wildlife and fish habitat, and wildfire risk reduction, among others, are protected.

Existing technical and financial assistance programs:

- The USDA Forest Service, State and Private Forestry Forest Stewardship Program, which assists non-industrial private forest owners in achieving active long-term forest management should be funded at \$31 million in FY09.
- The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program, which provides matching funds to help purchase development rights to keep productive farm and ranchland in agricultural uses should be funded at \$97 million in FY09.

2. ***Include in the final Farm Bill reauthorization, currently under debate in Congress, a permanent extension of an important tax incentive for private land conservation. Section 12203 of the Senate's Farm Bill would reinstate the 2006 tax incentive for voluntary conservation donations.***

LAND CONVERSION FACTS

- Everyday, America loses more than 4,000 acres of open space to development. That's around three acres per minute.
- Over the past decade there has been a 1.6 million acre decrease in ranchlands per year.¹ Roughly 1.5 million acres of private forests are lost each year to development and other non-forest uses.
- According to the U.S. Forest Service, more than 40 million acres of rural land could be converted to urban/developed uses by 2050.²
- Between 1995 and 2004 half of the nearly 70 million acres of private industrial ownership (timber industry) in the U.S. changed hands.³

¹ Sullins, Martha J., et al. "Without clear vision and support, ranches turn into subdivisions." *Headwaters News*, Jan. 8, 2003. Online at <http://www.headwatersnews.org/p.010803.html>

² Stein, Susan, et al. *Forests on the Edge: Housing Development on America's Private Forests*. U.S.D.A. Forest Service. 2005

³ Speech by Sally Collins, Associate Chief of the U.S.D.A. Forest Service, June 21, 2007. <http://www.fs.fed.us/news/2007/speeches/06/ecosystem.shtml>.

⁸ Fernholtz, K., J. Bowyer, and J. Howe. 2007. TIMOs and REITs: What, why, and how they might impact sustainable forestry. A report for Dovetail Partners, Inc. Available online at: <http://dovetailinc.org/reportView.php?action=displayReport&reportID=78>. Last accessed: March 13, 2008.

⁹ Mater, Catherine (Pinchot Institute and Mater Engineering). "Family Forests: What Will the Next Generation Do?" Presentation to National Association of State Foresters. October, 2005. www.pinchot.org/?module=uploads&func=download&fileId=52.

Tax incentives encourage private landowners to donate conservation easements on their land, helping families stay on their land and providing an alternative to selling for commercial development.

The 2006 change enables family farmers, ranchers, and other moderate-income landowners to get a significant tax benefit for donating a conservation easement on their land, which often was impossible under prior law. The increased incentives for working lands made a substantial difference in the utilization of voluntary conservation easements in the West and across America by farm and ranch families. These tax incentives are voluntary and land-owner driven, market-based, and maintain the local tax base. They help protect historic landscapes while allowing the land to remain in private ownership.

3. *Fund existing programs for acquisition and long-term stewardship of working forests.*

Land acquisition programs such as the Forest Legacy Program and the Land and Water Conservation Fund, prevent fragmentation and development by allowing federal, state, and county agencies to acquire land and/or development rights. In turn, these programs then also prevent the rate of expansion of the WUI, thus helping to stem risks and costs related to wildfires.

Existing land acquisition programs:

- The USDA Forest Service, State and Private Forestry Forest Legacy Program assists states in conserving threatened private forestlands through public acquisition or purchase of development rights.
- The DOI National Park Service Land and Water Conservation Fund provides money for the acquisition of lands for parks, wildlife refuges, and other conservation lands.

4. *Pass legislation supporting new and innovative authorities that allow for acquisition of landscapes facing high development pressure.*

The Community Forests and Open Space Conservation Program should be included in the final Farm Bill reauthorization. This program, currently included in the Senate version of the Farm Bill reauthorization, is an important tool in dealing with development pressures,

changing land ownership, and maintaining working landscapes. It would provide matching funds to help county or local governments or nongovernmental organizations acquire forest areas that are economically, culturally, and environmentally important to local communities and that are threatened by conversion to non-forest uses. Funds would also be provided for technical assistance to develop a management plan with community input.

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