

RURAL VOICES FOR CONSERVATION COALITION

Working together to find solutions to the ecological and economic challenges of the rural West.

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Introduction to Community Forests

Community members, conservation organizations and local, state and federal government officials are seeking opportunities to maintain large parcels of land as contiguous forest. Increasingly, forward thinking communities are pursuing an exciting and challenging option: acquiring these lands to manage as community forests. Community forests give residents greater control and self-determination in how their communities grow and develop, keep economic benefits from the land in local hands, preserve and enhance local traditions, and allow the community to invest in long-term resource protection.

Community forests are a powerful response and solution to forest loss and fragmentation caused by large-scale sales of private timberlands. Across the country, millions of acres of private forestlands are being sold as forest products companies find cheaper sources of supply elsewhere, or as profits from land sales outpace timber receipts. In addition, non-industrial forests held in ranches and farms are being split into smaller parcels and sold. Much of this land is at risk of being developed for residential or commercial use. When this happens, nearby communities lose the critical economic, environmental, recreational, social, cultural, and aesthetic values and benefits those forests have traditionally provided.

Key Recommendations for a Federal Role

- Expand funding for the Forest Legacy Program, which helps community forest projects by funding purchase of a conservation easement and reduces the purchase price of land to a community.
- Enact a Community Forests Working Lands/Open Space Conservation Program to provide funding for acquisition of community forests through grants or a revolving loan fund.
- Enable existing Forest Service authority to offer technical assistance to municipal governments through programs such as the Forest Stewardship Program and Forestland Enhancement Program. These programs are currently open only to private landowners.
- Expand access to lower cost capital for purchasing community forestlands by passing legislation that clarifies the tax-exempt status of revenue bonds for qualified private buyers and constituted authorities to purchase working forestlands.

Background:

Changing patterns of ownership in industrial forest land and growing demand for residential and commercial real estate development are causing significant fragmentation of forests and wildlife habitat. As forestlands are parceled and sold, local access to forests for outdoor recreation, hunting, forestry and other traditional uses are closed off, denying forest residents the jobs and related community benefits these uses can generate.

- Since 1978, 20-25% of all privately-owned forest land has changed ownership.
- Approximately half of industry-owned private forestland has changed hands since 1996.
- Estimates suggest that another 20% could change hands in the next ten years.

- Research by the USDA Forest Service shows that forest land converted for development uses reached 1 million acres per year in the 1990s.
- Projections show that in the next 30 years, another 44.2 million acres, over 11% of private forest land, will experience “dramatic increases in housing development.” (Forests on the Edge).

Impact on Communities

The consequences of changes in private forest ownership are significant for communities in and near these forests.

Land development:

- As timber companies and other forest landowners continue to divest large portions of their land holdings, much of this land is converted to non-timber uses, including residential and commercial development.

Loss of public access:

- Traditionally, much of the forestland in private timber company ownership has been open to public access. As timber companies sell their lands to other private owners, this access is discontinued.
 - o According to the Forest Service, the number of acres of private forest land open to outdoor recreation has been declining in recent years.

Economic loss:

- Communities are at risk of losing forest-based businesses and jobs, in both forestry and recreation-based industries.

Community Forests and Their Benefits

Community forests are different from other private or government-owned forests in that both the authority to manage the forest and the benefits that come from the forest stay primarily in the local community. Community forests support local self-determination, resource protection, and economic stability.

Characteristics of community forests:

- Residents have access to land and resources
- Benefits from forest go to local residents
- Local residents make decisions or participate substantially in decision-making
- Local knowledge of the forest and its history influence management
- Forest stewardship is important
- Forest is managed for multiple values, including restoration and protection

Community forests protect forest land from unwanted development and help keep rural communities viable and thriving economically, socially and ecologically through:

- Protecting water sources
- Providing wildlife habitat
- Outdoor recreation and jobs and income from recreation-based businesses
- Opportunities to observe and connect with nature
- Jobs and income from forestry activities
- Educational opportunities
- Demonstration of sustainable forest management practices

Research on town forests in California and New England shows that forestry activities in many town forests provide enough income to cover management costs, and often produce revenue for the town.

- Arcata Community Forest, CA (2 tracts, 1,822 total acres) – Forest Stewardship Council certified and generates \$500,000-\$700,000 of revenue per year from timber harvesting, of which \$245,000 covers management costs and \$20,000 goes toward salary for a ranger; forest is self-supporting, no tax revenues are used for management, and excess net revenue is used to purchase and maintain other city parkland and open space.
- Enosburg Town Forest, VT (120 acres) – a recent sale of 92,729 board feet of timber, 45 cords of wood and 238 tons of chips generated \$11,324 in income.
- Conway Town Forest, NH (1,840 acres) – timber sales generated \$81,171 in revenue between 1978 and 2003; revenues go toward additional land acquisition.
- Hillsboro Town Forest, Starksboro, VT – the Town of Starksboro is conducting a pilot project to use wood chips from its town forest to generate energy for its local high school.
- Mount Washington Valley, ME and NH – a study of 12 town forests showed that they generated \$3.6 million over five years, in taxes, payments in lieu of taxes and forest land reimbursement.

Federal Role:

The Federal government can play a significant role in helping communities establish community forests by increasing access to funding sources, both public and private, and access to technical assistance. The following are some suggestions of how this could happen:

- Expanding funding for the Forest Legacy Program, which has helped several community forest projects by funding purchase of a conservation easement, would reduce the purchase price of the land to the community.
- A Community Forests Working Lands/Open Space Conservation Program would provide funding for acquisition of community forests through grants or a revolving loan fund.
- Existing Forest Service authority could be used to offer technical assistance to municipal governments through programs such as the Forest Stewardship Program and Forestland Enhancement Program, which are currently open only to private landowners.
- Legislation clarifying the tax-exempt status of revenue bonds for qualified private buyers and constituted authorities to purchase working forestlands would expand access to lower cost capital for purchasing community forestlands.

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.

For more information visit: www.sustainablenorthwest.org/programs/policy.php