

RURAL VOICES FOR CONSERVATION COALITION



TRANSITION PROPOSAL FOR A NEW ADMINISTRATION AND CONGRESS

A RURAL AGENDA FOR STEWARDSHIP OF NATURAL RESOURCES IN THE AMERICAN WEST

November 26, 2008

“We are at that critical and urgent moment. If Washington continues policies that work against America's family farmers, our rural communities will fall further behind — and so will America. But if we reject the politics that has shut ordinary folks out, we can create a new story for rural America... The dreams of rural Americans are familiar to all Americans — to make a good living, to raise a healthy and secure family, and to leave our children a future of opportunity. It's time for real leadership for rural America to extend that American dream. That's the dream of opportunity that I've spent my life fighting for. And that's what our rural agenda will do.”

— **Barack Obama, Speech in Fairfax, IA, October 16, 2007**



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ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT:

The purpose of this document is to share ideas and actions that support long-term solutions to the economic and ecological challenges of the American West. Our country needs solutions that recognize the interdependence between ecological, economic, and social sustainability and must invest in building the capacity of rural citizens, business, local government, and other organizations to play a contributing role in implementing environmentally sound, economically equitable, culturally appropriate, and socially responsible solutions that will benefit the Nation as a whole.

This document was written collaboratively by many of the people who have signed on to its recommendations. The basis of the document has been drawn from the many issue papers written and supported by the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (www.sustainablenorthwest.org/rvcc). The RVCC 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 have also drawn from the Policy Opportunity Snapshots published by the National Rural Assembly (www.ruralassembly.org), a national coalition that many of us have joined. Further, other ideas and issues have been included that reflect the emerging issues and concerns of our partners.

RVCC focuses on policy issues that affect rural communities, public lands management, and the continuation of a natural resource-based economy in the West. RVCC is committed to finding and promoting policy solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and the well-being of rural communities. Coalition participants come from California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona. Sustainable Northwest founded and coordinates the RVCC. Sustainable Northwest is a Portland, Oregon-based regional non-profit dedicated to bridging rural and urban interests, encouraging entrepreneurship, and building trust in sustainable natural resource management and utilization in the western U.S.

Background: The values that the West's open spaces, forests, rangelands and agricultural soils provide – not only for those who use them, but for all Americans – have never been more important or more threatened. Rapid urban and ex-urban development, the proliferation of noxious species and the increase in the number and size of wildfires, are just a few of those threats. If America is going to remain a place that derives multiple societal benefits from our unparalleled natural heritage, we must be committed to the care and stewardship of our natural resources. We must therefore help all the American people understand the challenges natural resources management and invest decisively in our country's future.

Rural communities with natural resource based economies, especially those in public lands landscapes, offer a large part of the solution to our current climate crises, and, indeed, broader environmental challenges such as wildland degradation, dwindling water supplies, and decreasing wildlife diversity among others. Unfortunately, many of these communities are experiencing significant economic decline and, consequently, the infrastructure to participate in the green economy is seriously diminished. Over 14 percent of the rural population was poor in 2003, compared to 12.5 percent nationally; all but 11 of the 200 poorest counties in the U.S. are nonmetro. In the West, the federal government owns over 54% percent of the land. Nationally, the Department of Interior and Department of Agriculture control 96% of federal land.

Building an economy that will meet the triple bottom line of environmental, economic, and social sustainability will create strong linkages between urban and rural America, enable our country to meet our climate change challenges, and contribute to supporting healthy lifestyles for all Americans. Optimizing multiple outcomes from rural landscapes requires that rural communities be recognized, engaged and supported. Their contributions to the health of our societies must be held in equal esteem to the high tech and software industries, the financial and manufacturing sectors, and the health care industry. Indeed, the growing imperative to achieve much more energy and food security depends on it.



OUR VISION AND VALUES:

The rural West is positioned to play a vital role in solving some of America's biggest challenges:

- Creating sustainable rural development strategies
- Creating green jobs, infrastructure, and markets
- Combating and adapting to climate change
- Creating renewable energy economies
- Responsibly managing and restoring public land, controlling wildfire, and practicing stewardship
- Creating socially and economically equitable ecosystem services market
- Protection of working landscapes and responsible private lands stewardship

To do this we need:

- Rural innovation – policies that create and sustain real opportunities for natural resource based businesses to create green collar jobs in food, fiber, and energy production.
- Effective federal policies and land management agencies
- Strong rural economic systems that support small, local businesses and the sustainability of our natural resources.
- Commitment to the triple bottom line in all federal policy and programs.

We believe:

- The health of our rural communities and landscapes are interdependent – federal policies must not sacrifice one to advance the other.
- The natural resources, recreation opportunities, communities and cultural values of the West are valuable to the Nation as a whole for the goods and services, knowledge and skill they provide to solve 21st century challenges.
- Shared decision-making power is vital to a healthy and democratic system of management and stewardship.
- Diverse interests working together to solve problems and create positive action results in durable solutions that address the public interest.
- Long term resource, food, and energy security is dependent on investment in the sustainability of ecosystems and rural economies
- Restoring and stewarding our nation's natural resources offers significant workforce and small business development opportunities in rural communities worthy of federal investment.

Summary of Our Request: The undersigned wish to convey to the incoming President-elect Barack Obama, his administration and the Congress that the policy recommendations we make herein are keys to moving decisively into the era of collaborative stewardship for a healthy, sustainable America. This document contains:

1. A Rural Agenda for Stewardship of Natural Resources in the American West
2. Opportunities for Immediate Action
3. Contact Information

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A RURAL AGENDA FOR STEWARDSHIP OF NATURAL RESOURCES IN THE AMERICAN WEST

Sustainable Rural Development

Sustainable rural development promotes the use of local assets to create diversified economies, green jobs, clean energy, healthy food, sustainable wood products and other value-added products. These strategies recognize the integration of rural and urban systems. They emphasize the creation of local infrastructure and businesses so dollars spent circulate in the local economy. Communities look to their natural assets to power their economic development by creating rural enterprises and jobs related to the restoration and stewardship of their landscapes, and the creation of value-added products from renewable natural resources.

Current policies and practices do not support integrated sustainable rural development. Federal and state programs should be structured to provide the catalyzing funding and technical expertise to stimulate natural resource-based, value-adding businesses, as well as build local infrastructure, entrepreneurial leadership, access to markets, and related capacity to sustain natural resource management and local community benefits. Economic development policies need to be retooled to couple enterprise development with environmental stewardship.

Green Jobs, Infrastructure, and Markets

To stimulate a green, post-carbon economy, we must change federal procurement practices and infrastructure investments as well as create incentives for manufacturing, construction, and other sectors to increase the adoption of and conversion to green practices throughout the economy.

As a part of President-elect Obama's call for national service, programs need to be put in place that provide economic and social incentives for young people to either return to or join in efforts to re-build rural communities and restore their natural assets. Such incentives can include jobs programs, student loan forgiveness and training for a new suite of landscape stewardship and recreational projects.

Climate Change and Rural Communities

The potential impacts of climate change on forests and landscapes may have significant socioeconomic consequences, including loss of natural resources, ecosystem services, and livelihoods. Rural communities and landscapes have significant roles to play in preparing for and adapting to climate change as well as reducing greenhouse gas emissions. As federal policies allocate resources for adaptation and mitigation, rural communities must be included in the dialogue and be considered a critical part of the response. Rural communities have the natural capital and expertise to help formulate and implement sustainable solutions to global climate change. Investments in forest, range, and farm management offer immediate opportunities to increase carbon sequestration and decrease carbon emissions.

The role that our nation's forests will need to play in mitigating climate change is significant. In the American West, where wildfires are part of the natural processes that shape this landscape, the connections to global climate change cannot be underestimated. Restoring our forests so that wildfire can play an appropriate role on the landscape should be a national priority to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Renewable Energy and Rural Economies

To address climate change and the need for energy independence, we need to significantly reduce our energy consumption through increased efficiency and conservation, while at the same time shifting our energy production to renewable source for electricity, thermal energy (heat), and transportation fuels. Rural communities are uniquely placed to develop wind, solar, and biomass for the new generation of energy. From a carbon perspective, wood fuel, including the by-products of forest restoration efforts, can be used to displace the use of heating oil, natural gas, coal, or propane in heating public facilities in some rural towns. Rural communities are taking demonstrative steps to increase use of local, renewable fuels including solar, micro-hydro, wind, and biomass, and they are investing in strategies to increase personal and community conservation efforts. Federal policy

should provide incentives for more robust and rapid innovation in energy efficiency/conservation and renewable energy development in rural communities and in their ability to contribute to the energy needs of the entire nation.

Public Lands Restoration, Wildfire and Community Stewardship

The health and productivity of public lands is inextricably linked to the health and well-being of the rural communities adjacent to these places. There is increasing recognition that restoring our forests, rangelands, and waterways is critical to maintaining the health and vitality of rural communities, and to ensuring that the full range of ecosystem services and products are available to the American people and global marketplace. The land management agencies, communities, businesses, and workers that perform the work on public lands must have the capacity to manage our nation's forests and grasslands in a manner that ensures ecological health and productivity.

Reinvestment in public lands should be accompanied by investments in the neighboring communities. People living and working on public lands provide many vital assets, including skilled labor, technical and historical knowledge of the land and its management, businesses that add value to forest products, and an ability to leverage private sector funds. Collaborative processes to support restoration, stewardship, and monitoring of land management practices on federally managed lands need to be strengthened and supported.

Ecosystem Service Markets and Economic Equity

The development of ecosystem service markets must ensure that public land communities are able to participate and/or benefit from these emerging markets, as well as protect the interests of the American tax payer. Several of the proposed mechanisms to generate and capture revenue through ecosystem services do not currently have clear lines of benefit and access for public land communities. New policies must ensure that mechanisms that are developed function in an equitable fashion. It is essential that the most vulnerable and low-income communities, especially those located in counties where federal ownership is dominant, are able to engage in these important emerging markets. It is equally essential that policy regarding ecosystem services on public lands consider international principles and lessons of "rights-based conservation" as a means to protect and enhance the viability of public land communities.

Private Lands Stewardship and Working Landscapes

The long-term health of our rural landscapes and communities depends upon the protection and productivity of private working lands, which are increasingly under threat as land is fragmented by subdivision and related development. The burdens of delivering the technical and financial services necessary to applying good conservation practices on the landscape increase with the conversion of property to smaller and more diverse ownership patterns. Servicing the new demographic of landowner/managers will require innovative approaches to both the planning and implementation, and a significant effort to develop new outreach, data management and self assessment tools for this work. Throughout rural America, privately owned forests, ranchlands, and agricultural lands have been vital components of a working landscape, providing wildlife habitat, clean water, recreational opportunities, and other valuable ecosystem services, as well as the goods and services without which our society could not long survive. Rural communities are working to sustain local markets that keep families and small rural businesses on the land. They are also working to address the rapid divestment of corporate timberlands using conservation easements, land acquisitions and tax incentives. At the same time, those landowners, particularly families, who desire to stay on the land and remain productive, must be provided with assistance that enables them to adapt to the increasing pressures of globalization, development and increasing regulation. All of these efforts require significant investment and support. Federal policy must be re-designed to contribute to these efforts.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION

GOAL 1. Create a Green Economy for Restoration and Stewardship in rural America (Department: Agriculture. Agency: Forest Service)

Action:

A. Create and fund a \$2 billion Rural Green Economy Initiative to train and develop a workforce and rural business assistance program, accelerate restoration and stewardship on America's forests and watersheds, and invest in restoring the natural capital of the Nation. This three part initiative would be administered by the USDA Forest Service in cooperation with other agencies such as the Department of Labor, to provide career training and education to prepare a workforce to perform a wide range of restoration and stewardship oriented jobs on federal lands, create community capacity and long-duration, well-paying green jobs in our nation's rural communities, and ensure the Forest Service and other agencies have adequate resources to implement restoration and stewardship projects aimed at restoring healthy landscapes. Job and business creation and retention will be achieved by investing in hazardous fuels reduction, watershed and stream restoration, road and trail maintenance, boundary line location for federal lands, wood-bridge repair and construction, stewardship of forests and grasslands including rehabilitation and reforestation, and invasive species control and eradication, and the maintenance and greening of recreation sites and facilities.

Rural business assistance grants should be offered on a competitive basis and include start up support for wood to energy programs including appropriately scaled biomass feedstock removals, plant construction, and other utilization of restoration byproducts in value added processing opportunities. This job training and business assistance program must be done in tandem with investments in landscape scale restoration; without increased investment in restoration and management activities we will not have jobs to offer those who receive training and business development assistance and funding.

Outcomes: This initiative and investment will result in:

- Restored and maintained health, productivity, and long-term sustainability of our nation's forests, grasslands and wetlands.
- Healthy, sustainable economies in our nation's rural communities.
- Increased community and business capacity in rural America.
- Family-wage, stable, green-job careers in rural communities, allowing our rural communities to flourish and our young people to live and work in these areas.
- Reduced catastrophic wildfire and carbon dioxide emissions that contribute to global climate change.
- Contributions to America's efforts to become energy independent.
- Protection and enhancement of ecosystem services such as clean water, species diversity, and carbon sequestration.
- Increased outdoor recreation and the opportunity for physically challenging occupations that can improve the health of America's youth children.

B. Ensure that green jobs are high-quality jobs by increasing enforcement of labor and safety laws in the forest and watershed restoration sector.

(Departments: Agriculture, Interior, Labor. Agencies: Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Employment Standards Administration (Wage and Hour Division), and Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Employment Training and Administration)

The federal government spends millions of tax dollars each year on contracts for labor-intensive activities on public lands, including planting trees, thinning overstocked stands, piling brush, and fighting fires. A number of conditions have created a system that rewards contractors who cut corners and offer the lowest prices to do the work. This, in turn, leads to violations of labor laws and poor working conditions for contract forest workers.

Outcomes:

- Family-wage, stable green jobs careers in rural communities, allowing our rural communities to flourish and our young people to live and work in these areas.
- Jobs that provide dignity for workers and support families and communities

GOAL 2. Improve and Restructure Forest Service Budget Systems (Department: Agriculture. Agency: Forest Service)

Actions:

A. Reorganize the Forest Service budget, management and accountability structures for collaborative restoration, stewardship and monitoring. Forest Service structures are outdated, left over from the era of large timber sales. These old structures stove-pipe activities leading to inefficiencies in administrative procedures and difficulty linking expenditures to outcomes; these outdated structures should be integrated to achieve landscape scale restoration and stewardship objectives. The reorganization should emphasize strategies and processes that will focus on collaboration and partnerships with stakeholders and local communities adjacent to public lands.

Outcomes: Budget, management and accountability system restructuring results in:

- Improved and maintained healthy functioning watersheds.
- Internal business practices (especially in the arena of procurement) that support environmental and social objectives.
- Projects and programs that achieve their goals through collaboration with tribes, state and local governments, rural communities, and interest groups,
- Positive ecological impacts and economic benefits of forest restoration and stewardship projects over the long-term, rather than focusing short-term economic and ecological impacts.

B. Create a new line item dedicated to collaborative restoration.

Outcomes: A new line item will ensure the following outcomes can be achieved:

- Collaboratively designed and/or funded projects, increasing private sector leverage for public projects.
- Projects that achieve environmental stewardship and community economic benefit.
- Increased internal capacity for the Forest Service to work with the public through collaborative processes.

GOAL 3. Reduce the Impacts of Catastrophic Wildfire (Department: Agriculture. Agency: Forest Service)

Actions:

- A. Reform the USDA Forest Service Wildfire Suppression Budget** by establishing a flexible spending account for emergency wildfire suppression in the USDA Forest Service that provides adequate funding for all emergency wildfires that escape initial attack. A flexible spending account, with sufficient emergency funds, will prevent wildfire suppression accounts from taking over the Forest Service budget and stop the disruptive “borrowing” from regular Forest Service accounts that has become an annual event in recent years. Appropriate requirements for use of the account, cost containment controls, and incentives and accountability measures should be included with the establishment of such a fund.
- B. Fully fund Community Assistance Programs** administered through USDA Forest Service, State and Private Forestry to ensure that communities, private landowners, and local businesses are able to prepare for wildfire and to manage the impacts of wildfire.
- C. Continue top level involvement in the Wildland Fire Leadership Council.** This intergovernmental entity allows top level coordination between all levels of government (federal, tribal, state, and local) to collaboratively support efforts to successfully prevent, prepare for and recover from catastrophic wildfires.

GOAL 4. Support Landscape Scale Restoration and Community Revitalization on Public Lands. (Department: Agriculture. Agency: Forest Service)

Actions:

- A. Support passage and full funding for the Forest Landscape Restoration Act.**

Outcome:

- Passage of this legislation would create priority landscapes and ensure adequate funding to support comprehensive forest restoration and rural community benefit.

- B. Support and expand use of stewardship contracting as a tool for implementing collaborative forest restoration and stewardship.** Stewardship contracting has been one successful and critical tool for fostering restoration of our nation’s forests and watersheds while creating community benefit. The expansion of stewardship contracting should be aggressively pursued.

Outcome:

- Increased administrative efficiency, collaboration, revenue for other restoration needs, and community benefit.

Goal 5. Protect working landscapes, prevent land conversion, and create community forests. (Department: Agriculture. Agencies: Forest Service and Natural Resource Conservation Service)

Actions:

- A. Fund the new Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program at approximately \$12 million annually.** This program, established in the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, provides an important tool for maintaining working landscapes, managing pressures to develop green spaces vital to the character and integrity of many communities, and management of changing land ownership. The program provides matching

funds to help county or local governments, nongovernmental organizations, or Native American tribes acquire forest areas that are economically, culturally, and environmentally important to local communities and that are threatened by conversion to non-forest uses. Funds will also be set aside for technical assistance. This assistance will help each grant recipient to develop and implement a required forest management plan, crafted with a high level of community input.

Outcomes:

- Drive conservation activity into areas where federal conservation grants have not traditionally been directed, particularly oriented around rural communities.
- Conserve thousands of forested acres and increase carbon sequestration and storage values that would otherwise disappear as a result of development.
- Retain and revitalize rural livelihoods through conservation and maintain important positive rural character and culture that is fundamental to America as we know it.

B. Fully fund programs that provide technical assistance and financial incentives for conservation of private forest and ranch lands. This includes programs such as the Forest Stewardship Program (State and Private Forestry) and the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (Natural Resources Conservation Service).

Outcomes:

- Private forest owners have the ability to achieve long-term, sustainable forest management.
- Forests continue to be productive, and farm and ranch lands can maintain stewardship activities through the purchase of development rights.
- Private lands are effectively able to contribute to maintaining public values like clean air and water, wildlife and fish habitat, and wildfire risk reduction are protected in an economically viable manner.

Goal 6. Climate Change and Rural Communities (Department: Interior and Agriculture.
Agencies: Forest Service, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and Bureau of Land Management)

Action:

A. Establish a Rural Community Climate Change Program within the Land Management Agencies--\$200 million annually. This program would provide federal financial and technical assistance to ensure that our National Forests and grasslands, and the public land communities, will be able to contribute to solving and adapt to the nation's climate change problems.

Outcomes:

- The most vulnerable and low-income communities get priority investment and technical assistance from the land management agencies to prepare for climate change.
- Community Climate Change Action Plans are in place to determine the best course of action and outcomes for local natural resource management and empower communities to work in partnership with the land management and other federal agencies to implement their plans.
- Climate Adaptation Grants are available to ensure that communities with Climate Change Action Plans in place can rebuild and retool their community's physical

capital and facilities to help combat climate change as well as reduce their own carbon footprint.

Goal 7. Energy Independence and Innovation in Public Land Communities (Department: Energy)

Action:

A. Reform Section 201 of the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2008 to include woody biomass derived from federal lands. Despite its many merits and ambitious goals, Section 201 of the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007 (EISA) has one crucial omission: excluding woody biomass derived from federal lands as a feedstock from the Renewable Fuels Standard (RFS).

Outcomes:

- Greatly increasing the ability to meet the national standards by increasing the supply of woody biomass and decrease reliance on corn-based ethanol
- Foster the development of more community-based approaches to renewable fuel development that would provide green jobs to poorer rural communities
- Decrease costs of federal wildfire suppression by creating a viable market for the brush and small trees removed in fuels reduction project to protect rural communities.
- Spur the development of public private partnerships that will direct intellectual and financial capital at the opportunity to develop new products from federal lands.

GOAL 8. Increase Rural Access to Green Markets (Department: Agriculture. Agency: Forest Service)

Action:

A. Explore federal land certification. A new economy is emerging in the American West that links green building with ecologically based forest management. There is an increasing demand for certified wood, but a limited supply. To date, the Forest Service has not engaged in forest certification, despite having some of the highest forest management standards in the world. The Forest Stewardship Council is internationally regarded as the most credible forest certification system. Public and private lands, large and small, around the globe have embraced FSC-certification as a means to gain recognition for their exemplary forest practices, and thus achieve a market advantage for the materials they produce.

Outcomes: Certification of national forests has many potential benefits, among them:

- Equitable access to “green market” opportunities for the forest-reliant rural communities that are adjacent to national forests.
- Improved revenue for critical forest restoration work and related management activities.
- Enhanced credibility and persistence of demonstrated exemplary forestry supported by multiple stakeholders.



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