

Response to Chief Tidwell from the National Joint Forestry Team

What is essential to realize the Secretary's vision for the private forests of America?

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America's private forests do not exist in a vacuum – they are part of the larger landscape, important to local communities, valuable to all people for the services they provide, and obviously very important to their owners. Secretary Vilsack has articulated his vision for the Nation's forests and has charged the Forest Service and other USDA agencies with implementing that vision. The following are the ten components that the National Joint Forestry Team feel are essential for attaining the Secretary's vision for private forests:

1. Voluntary Approaches
2. Working Across the Landscape - All Ownerships
3. Economic Viability
4. Market Incentives
5. Government Incentives
6. Legislation and Policies
7. Information Dissemination and Effective Communication
8. Planning, Monitoring, Evaluating
9. Community Engagement and Support
10. Inventory and Research

Each component is described in greater detail below:

1. Voluntary Approaches

USDA has a long tradition of working with private landowners on a voluntary and cooperative basis. State forestry agencies, who have the principal responsibility for delivering private forestry assistance in partnership with the Forest Service and other USDA agencies, also work with landowners on a voluntary basis when it comes to education and technical assistance. Conservation districts promote voluntary approaches to forest resource conservation. The American Tree Farm System, Sustainable Forestry Initiative and Forest Stewardship Council all offer voluntary third-party sustainable forestry certification that is recognized domestically and internationally. Private consulting foresters are hired by forest landowners to provide expertise in managing their forests. Voluntary approaches are a core value in private forestry and private property rights must be respected.

2. Working Across the Landscape - All Ownerships

Private forests are bounded by other private lands, local, state, federal and tribal ownerships. These ownerships comprise watersheds, political subdivisions, and ecological units. To make a difference at these larger scales, resources must be managed in a coordinated fashion by many of the owners. Planning must be done at the landscape level through efforts such as that currently underway by State forestry agencies as required by the 2008 Farm Bill.

3. Economic Viability

Private forests are an economic asset and the owners have some expectations of a financial return on that investment. For certain private owners, such as timber and real estate investors, a return on investment is essential. Finding ways for owners to earn a reasonable return, without converting their forests to other uses such as development, is a huge challenge. Urbanization and conversion of forests are well-documented as the major threats facing private forests. When the development value of the land exceeds the value of the working forest the pressure to convert becomes much greater.

4. Market Incentives

Markets for traditional forest products have resulted in many acres of tree planting and active management of native forests across the country. These markets continue, but with the deep recession they are currently weak. Global markets have developed for many forest products, forcing Americans to compete with regions of the world where sustainable forest management is not the norm. New markets may develop for carbon, water, and other ecosystem services. Markets for woody biomass for energy production are developing in some areas. Strengthening existing markets and promoting new markets will greatly benefit private forests and their owners.

5. Government Incentives

Government programs at the federal, state and local levels provide a patchwork of incentives, some of which come and go over the years, for private forest owners. A number of States provide for property tax relief for managed forestlands enrolled in State programs. Federal incentives are offered through programs like the Forest Stewardship Program of the US Forest Service, which works with State forestry agencies in providing planning assistance to private forest owners. Technical and financial assistance for carrying out conservation and forest management practices are available through the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Permanent protection of forests through conservation easements are taking place

through the Forest Legacy Program of the US Forest Service and State partners as well as efforts by the Natural Resources Conservation Service and private land trusts. These efforts are making a difference, but the magnitude of the need far outstrips the capacity and longevity of these programs.

6. Legislation & Policies

Legislation and policies could be made more “forestry friendly” by focusing on keeping working forests working and maintaining community trees. Elevating forests as a national priority through developing a national framework for sustainable forests, and then implementing it, would go a long way towards removing barriers and creating needed incentives. Tax policies should promote continuing long-term ownership and management of private forests.

7. Information Dissemination and Effective Communication

There are over 10 million private forest owners in the United States and reaching them is a huge challenge. In addition, the public that receives the benefits from private forests is largely unaware of where these benefits – including clean drinking water – originate. Forest owners can teach each other a lot about managing and sustaining their forests –but they need help getting organized. More emphasis on conservation education in the school systems will help to develop a more conservation literate citizenry. There are many success stories to be shared that can inspire others to take similar actions and develop needed communication and education infrastructure.

8. Planning, Monitoring, Evaluating

How will we know if Secretary’s vision is succeeding if we don’t develop plans, monitor implementation and evaluate success? State forestry agencies are all undertaking statewide assessments and developing strategies for the forests within their State. As these strategies are implemented, success needs to be measured, focusing on meaningful outcomes that make a difference at the landscape level.

9. Community and Partner Engagement and Support

Many communities are dependent on their forests and are actively engaged in supporting sustainable forestry. There are numerous land trust and conservation organizations that support sustainable forestry and the restoration of areas that are not currently in a sustainable condition. All interested parties and stakeholders need to be engaged in the future of our private forests. The Forest Resource Coordinating Committee created in the 2008 Farm Bill could be used to advise the Secretary on private forests. A national summit on private forestry could be convened to share ideas and develop common goals, frameworks and strategies for private forests. 2011 is the International Year of the Forest and affords many opportunities to raise the profile and garner more attention for these important natural resources.

10. Inventory and Research

Accurate and up to date forest inventory data is crucial for supporting decisions by businesses and governments as well as for developing policies for private forests. Research on private forests, their owners, and their importance at the landscape, state and national levels guide policy development and program responses. Everything from sustainable biomass harvesting levels to carbon accounting methods to strategies for conserving open space is addressed by timely and high-quality research studies and reports. Understanding threats to forests from insects, disease, fire, and land-use conversion are all critical areas of current and future research. Documenting the benefits provided by private forests helps to inform the public and decision-makers about these important working lands.