

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack

Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

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Thanks so much for the kind introduction, Congressman Dicks. I want to thank you for your leadership on behalf of America's forests. You have been the most important champion of forests in the House of Representatives on providing the Forest Service funds to fight fires, and on funding stewardship activities on federal, state and private forests.

I also want to acknowledge Lieutenant Governor Brad Owen and appreciate his leadership on environmental issues in Washington State.

It's a pleasure to be here in Washington State, home to 6 of our National Forests and to millions of acres of state, tribal and private forestlands. It is particularly appropriate that we are in the home state of the forest named for the first Chief of the Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot. He gave us a guiding principle still relevant today when he defined conservation as "foresighted utilization, preservation and/or renewal of forests, waters, lands and minerals, for the greatest good of the greatest number for the longest time."

A healthy and prosperous America relies on the health of our natural resources, and particularly our forests. America's forests supply communities with clean and abundant water, shelter wildlife, and help us mitigate and adapt to climate change. Forests help

generate rural wealth through recreation and tourism, through the creation of green jobs, and through the production of wood products and energy. They are a source of cultural heritage for Americans and American Indians alike. And they are a national treasure – requiring all of us to protect and preserve them for future generations.

A new Administration offers an opportunity for a new vision: a vision that will guide both the policies and approach of the US Department of Agriculture and the US Forest Service towards forest conservation and management; a vision to address the challenges we face and make the most of the opportunities to conserve and restore them.

Our National Forests are an enormously important environmental and economic asset. So too are our non-federal forests – state, tribal and private forest lands. The President has made clear his interest in conserving our natural environment. I intend to take that responsibility very seriously and to devote the time and attention it deserves. I also know that Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell shares that commitment.

I like to call USDA an Every Day, Every Way Department because we do so many things to touch Americans' lives: from helping farmers, to providing affordable housing, to promoting clean energy. As an 'Every Day, Every Way' Department, USDA works to help America's farmers and ranchers produce a sufficient, safe and nutritious food supply for all Americans. But, our farmers and ranchers are also vitally important as stewards of our working lands, in ensuring that in addition to food and fiber, those lands provide clean water and preserve wildlife habitat. Likewise, our forests and our forest

landowners provide more than wood products. Our forests are a source of clean water and a home for wildlife habitat.

Let me give you just one measure, often overlooked, of how important America's farms, ranches and forests are to every American. America's forests, farms and ranches provide 87% of the surface supply of drinking water in America. When Americans turn on a faucet, most don't realize the vital role that our rural lands – and especially our forests – play in ensuring that clean and abundant water flows out of that faucet. So, while some may think it odd that I would give a speech on forests in a major urban area like Seattle, doing so emphasizes an important point. That is, while most Americans live in urban areas, most of us also depend on rural lands, particularly forest lands, for clean water, and a healthy climate.

**For all these reasons, conserving forests isn't a luxury – it's a necessity.** Yet, America's forests are threatened like they've never been before. Climate change, catastrophic fires, disease and pests have all led to declining forest health. We are losing our privately-owned working forestlands to development and fragmentation at an alarming pace. All of these changes have enormous potential impacts on drinking water, greenhouse gas emissions and the climate, local economies, wildlife and recreation. Notwithstanding these trends, we have enormous opportunities. One example, climate change, will create new markets for carbon storage and biomass energy that ought to significantly bolster sustainable forest management and forest restoration.

Unfortunately, the debate around the future of our forests and forest policy has been highly polarized for a long time. I don't need to remind anyone in Washington state about the debates around spotted owls, clearcutting and other forestry issues. But, given the threats that our forests face today, Americans must move away from polarization. We must work towards a shared vision -- a vision that conserves our forests and the vital resources important to our survival while wisely respecting the need for a forest economy that creates jobs and vibrant rural communities.

Our shared vision begins with restoration. Restoration means managing forest lands first and foremost to protect our water resources, while making our forests more resilient to climate change. Forest restoration led by the dedicated people at the Forest Service opens non-traditional markets for climate mitigation and biomass energy while appropriately recognizing the need for more traditional uses of forest resources. Importantly, this vision holds that the Forest Service must not be viewed as an agency concerned only with the fate of our National Forests, but must instead be acknowledged for its work in protecting and maintaining all American forests, including state and private lands. Our shared vision adopts an "all-lands approach," requiring close collaboration with the NRCS and its work on America's private working lands.

## RESTORATION AND COLLABORATION

Why restoration as a driving principle in forest policy? There is no doubt that we are facing a health crisis in our forests. Climate change places them under increasing stress

that exacerbates the threats of fire, disease, and insects. Throughout the west – but in other parts of the country as well -- a legacy of fire suppression has resulted in forests that are over-stocked and much more susceptible to catastrophic fire and disease.

Restoring forest ecosystems, particularly in fire-adapted forests, will make forests more resilient to climate-induced stresses and will ensure that our forests continue to supply abundant, clean water. In many of our forests, restoration will also include efforts to improve or decommission roads, to replace and improve culverts and to rehabilitate streams and wetlands. Restoration will also mean the rehabilitation of declining ecosystems. One example is the Longleaf Pine ecosystem in the South, a forest that has been reduced from 90 million acres to 3 million acres.

Yet, the Forest Service faces a number of barriers in pursuing a restoration agenda. The Forest Service has struggled for years with a budget that has forced management funds to be shifted to fire fighting. We must do better. The Obama Administration is already working with Congress to ensure that the Forest Service has the funds it needs both to fight fires and to manage forests. This is an important issue for our forests, but it also important to the men and women who make up our Forest Service. We must give them the resources they need to succeed.

A second barrier to accomplishing restoration is a history of distrust between environmentalists, the Forest Service and the forestry community. The result has been seemingly countless appeals of forest management activities and subsequent litigation. Certainly, litigation and appeals have served as a useful backstop against misplaced

management decisions. But, given the scale of restoration that must occur, a shared vision built on collaboration will move us beyond the timber wars of the past. Litigation and conflict should become less prevalent because they are viewed as less necessary. Fortunately, that process has begun. In many regions today, the Forest Service charts a path forward by building trust among diverse stakeholders through collaboration and engagement.

A third barrier revolves around a loss of forest infrastructure represented by those who work in the forest industry. In large parts of the west, we've lost timber mills and those who worked in them have left. As a result, we are losing the capacity to perform important kinds of restoration work, from thinning for habitat or watershed function, to reducing hazardous fuels, to removing trees to prevent the spread of insects and disease. Without a robust forest industry that includes both traditional markets and new markets like biomass energy, it will be much more difficult and much, much more expensive to improve the health of our forests.

The Colville National Forest right here in Washington is a terrific example of the sort of collaborative effort that here allows for appropriate forest management while providing timber supply to local mills. The Colville was the first National Forest to engage a diverse group of stakeholders in the most recent revision to their forest plan. Individuals and groups including elected officials, timber interests, motorized recreationists and conservationists got together to discuss common goals for the forest. As a result, general acceptance was reached about where to concentrate future recreation and timber

harvesting. And tens of thousands of additional acres in Colville were recognized for their roadless character and potential for wilderness designation. It is no small testament to this effort and the energies of those involved that Colville has avoided litigation for more than 5 years since this process was initiated.

The experience on the Colville is not unique, but it can still be more broadly applied. If we are to undertake restoration of our National Forests at a scale commensurate with the need, we need more Colvilles.

The Forest Service's forest planning process provides an important venue to integrate forest restoration, climate resilience, watershed protection, wildlife conservation, the need for vibrant local economies, and collaboration into how we manage our National Forests. Our best opportunity to accomplish this is in developing a new forest planning rule for our National Forests. As many of you know, in late June a federal court overturned the 2008 planning rule put forward by the Forest Service – this comes on the heels of a similar court decision overturning the 2005 planning rule. As a result, USDA has decided not to seek further review of the latest court decision overturning the 2008 rule and I have asked Chief Tidwell to develop a new planning rule to ensure management and restoration of our National Forests with a goal to protect our water, climate and wildlife while creating local economic opportunity.

An integral part of our shared vision must be adequate protection of roadless areas. President Obama was quite clear during the campaign in emphasizing his support for

protecting roadless areas. He understands the important role they play in preserving water, climate, and recreational opportunities. Just last week, the 9<sup>th</sup> circuit court of appeals upheld a lower court's decision reinstating the 2001 Clinton Roadless Rule. I view this as a very positive development. Yet, the Forest Service is still subject to a court injunction from a Wyoming District Court Judge in the 10<sup>th</sup> Circuit enjoining the Forest Service from implementing the 2001 rule. We will seek to lift that injunction in light of the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit decision. If the courts remain conflicted or if it's not possible to protect roadless areas through the courts, we will initiate a new rule-making process to do so. Some states are taking action on their own. Colorado is moving forward with its own roadless rule, as Idaho already has. We believe Idaho's rule is strongly protective of roadless areas. Wisely, Governor Ritter in Colorado has asked for additional public input on his draft roadless plan for Colorado. He understands as I do that Colorado needs strong roadless protections.

## CONSERVING WORKING LANDSCAPES

The threats facing our forests don't recognize property boundaries. So, in developing a shared vision around forests, we must also be willing to look across property boundaries. In other words, we must operate at a landscape-scale by taking an "all-lands approach."

The reality is that 80% of the forest area in the United States is outside of the National Forest System. And many of our National Forests are adjacent to state and private lands;

management decisions both on and of the National Forests have important implications for the forest landscape.

More broadly, privately-owned forests across the country face a daunting set of challenges. The Forest Service estimates that over 40 million acres of private forest could be lost to development and fragmentation over the coming three to four decades. Americans tend to think of deforestation as a problem in tropical countries. Well, I'm here to tell you we have our own deforestation problem right here in the United States and this has enormous implications for the climate, our drinking water, rural economies and wildlife. Just "keeping forests as forests" is a significant challenge on our private working lands.

The good news is that conservation groups, forest industry and government agencies are increasingly uniting to address the common threat of forest loss on private lands. I want the Forest Service and USDA to be partners with these stakeholders in protecting our privately-owned forests. I believe – and I know Chief Tidwell agrees – that the US Forest Service and USDA can play an important role in working with these stakeholders to address forest loss.

Indeed, the Forest Service has a long history in working with private landowners through its partnership with State Foresters and others in addressing the stewardship of privately-owned forests. USDA has other existing strengths in this area as well. The 2008 Farm Bill provides new opportunities to use existing conservation programs and to focus those

resources to the most pressing problems facing family-owned forests. Many of our farm programs and conservation programs have much greater potential than USDA has realized to date to protect, rehabilitate and conserve family forest lands. An important goal of USDA will be to integrate the work of the Forest Service and of our Natural Resources Conservation Service. This is vital if we are to embrace an “all-lands” approach.

Government programs provide only part of what is needed to realize our shared vision. For forest ownership and stewardship to remain viable, it must remain economically rewarding for landowners. Markets for wood will remain important to landowners and local communities. Private and public landowners need access to new markets for both low and high value products and forest uses to underwrite stewardship activities.

Emerging markets for carbon and sustainable bioenergy will provide landowners with expanded economic incentives to maintain and restore forests. The Forest Service must play a significant role in the development of new markets and ensuring their integrity.

Carbon and bioenergy aren't the only new opportunity for landowners. Markets for water can also provide landowners with incentives to restore watersheds and manage forests for clean and abundant water supplies. These markets can also create jobs in rural communities near forests. By generating rural wealth, we can make it possible for landowners to sustain our forests and working landscapes.

I hope we will also examine other policies and approaches outside of USDA and the Forest Service that can address both the management and loss of private forest lands. I know Chief Tidwell and his counterpart Chief Dave White of the Natural Resources Conservation Service will seek out opportunities to work with conservation groups, forest industry, State Foresters and others to ensure we maintain private forests as forests and utilize this “all-lands” approach. The loss of our private working lands deserves constant attention.

## ENGAGING THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

I have offered a broad vision today to guide the Forest Service and the Department of Agriculture in setting a course for America’s forests. I recognize that there is a great deal of work to be done to make it a reality. And so I am tasking the Forest Service and USDA in partnership with all stakeholders to make this vision a reality.

In the short term, I have asked Chief Tidwell to initiate a process to develop new planning rules to guide the management of our National Forests consistent with the vision I have outlined today. Secondly, we will monitor progress towards protection of roadless areas in the courts and will act to protect roadless areas as necessary.

When it comes to restoring forests, I want the Forest Service to improve its existing authorities and to take advantage of new tools to restore all our forests in order to protect our water and to make forests more resilient to climate change. I am asking Chief

Tidwell and Chief White to work together, in partnership with State Foresters, conservation groups, forest industry and others to develop a broad agenda for protecting our privately-owned forests. And, I want the Forest Service and other parts of USDA to play an even more prominent role in developing new markets – carbon, bioenergy and water – as a means to conserve our forests.

The path ahead is challenging but full of opportunity. We must encourage, catalyze and expand the collaborative solutions that hold the most promise to protect our public lands and our working lands. We must dramatically accelerate the scale and pace of forest stewardship activities on both public and private lands. On our National Forests, we must restore more acres more rapidly if we are to prevent catastrophic fires, insect outbreaks and other threats, particularly as climate change makes these threats more potent. On private lands, we also must move quickly to protect forest landscapes before they can no longer function to support watershed health, biodiversity conservation and viable wood markets.

Americans often assume that our health and well-being are separate from the health of the natural world. But, I return again to the simple act that we Americans take for granted everyday: turning on our water faucets. The clean water that emerges is made possible in large part by stewardship of our rural lands, and of our forests in particular. My hope is that together we can foster a greater appreciation for our forests and that all Americans, regardless of where they live, see the quality of their lives and the quality of our forests as inseparable.