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Farm Bill Primer: Forestry Title

Forest management generally, as well as forest research and forestry assistance, is within the jurisdiction of the agriculture committees in Congress. Although most forestry programs are permanently authorized, forestry often is addressed in the periodic farm bills to reauthorize many agriculture programs. Five of the past six farm bills included a separate forestry title, including the most recent farm bill, Title VIII of the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-334; the 2018 farm bill). This In Focus summarizes some of the forestry provisions addressed in the 2018 farm bill and issues Congress may debate in future farm bills.

Forestry in the United States

One-third of the land area in the United States is forestland (765 million acres; see **Figure 1**). These lands provide ecological services, including air and water resources; fish and wildlife habitat; opportunities for recreation and cultural use; and timber resources for lumber, plywood, paper, and other materials, among other uses and benefits.

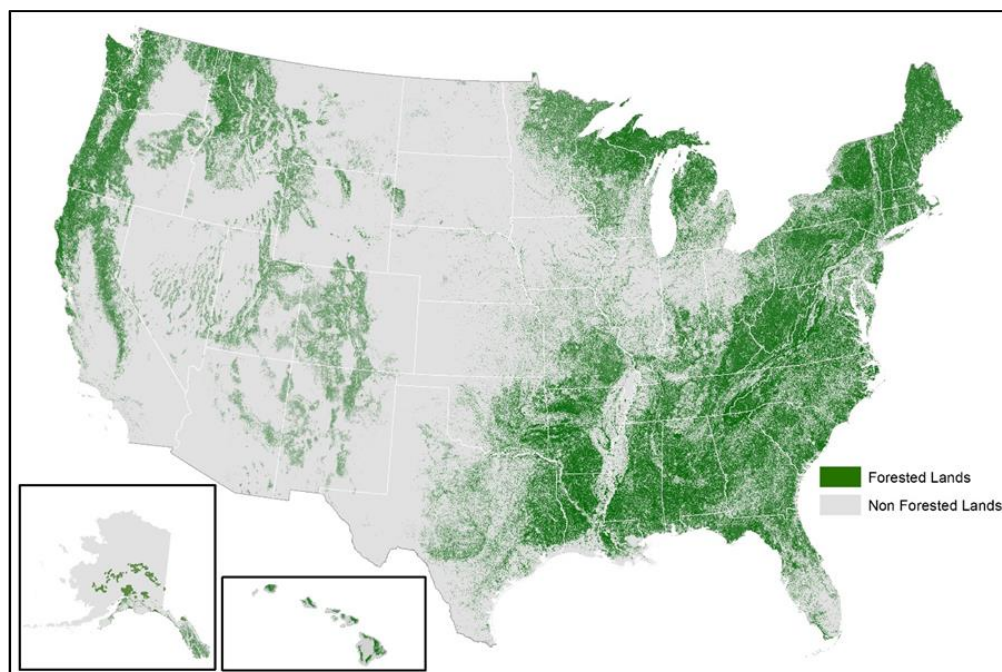
Most forestland in the U.S. is privately owned (444 million acres, or 58%). Nonindustrial private landowners (i.e., private, noncorporate entities that do not own wood-processing facilities) own 288 million acres; private corporate landowners (e.g., timber investment trusts) own the remaining 156 million acres. The federal government

owns 238 million acres of forestland, and states and other public entities own 84 million acres of forestland.

The federal government engages in four types of forestry activities: managing federal forests; providing financial, technical, or other resources to promote forest ownership and stewardship and the forest products industry generally (referred to as *forestry assistance*); sponsoring or conducting research to advance the science of forestry; and engaging in international forestry assistance and research.

The Forest Service (FS, within the U.S. Department of Agriculture) is the principal federal forest management agency. In addition to administering most forestry assistance programs, conducting forestry research, and leading U.S. international forestry assistance and research efforts, FS also is responsible for managing 19% of all U.S. forestlands (145 million acres) as part of the National Forest System (NFS). Many of FS's land management, assistance, and research programs have permanent authorities and receive appropriations annually through the discretionary appropriations process. Other federal agencies also manage forestlands, including the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service.

Figure 1. Forest Cover Across the United States



Source: Congressional Research Service, using data from the U.S. Forest Service and the State of Alaska.

Notes: The conterminous United States, Alaska, and Hawaii are presented at different scales.

Forestry in the 2018 Farm Bill

Title VIII of the 2018 farm bill repealed, modified, reauthorized, and created several forestry research, assistance, and federal land management programs.

- **Research.** The forestry title of the 2018 farm bill modified one and repealed several forestry research programs, including repealing a grant program to support minority and female students studying forestry and a project demonstrating wood bioenergy.
- **Assistance.** The 2018 farm bill repealed, modified, and reauthorized some forestry assistance programs. This included providing explicit statutory authorization and congressional direction for programs that had been operating under existing but broad authorization, such as the Landscape Scale Restoration Program. The law also established, reauthorized, and modified assistance programs to promote wood innovation for energy use, building construction, and other purposes to facilitate the removal of forest biomass on both federal and nonfederal lands and to mitigate wildfire risk.
- **Federal Forest Management.** The 2018 farm bill included provisions related to federal and tribal forest management, such as provisions modifying planning requirements; establishing two watershed protection programs; expanding the availability of agreements to perform cross-boundary projects; reauthorizing and extending the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program; and adding or modifying FS's authorities to lease, sell, or exchange NFS lands.

Forestry-related provisions also were included in other 2018 farm bill titles. For example, the Conservation (Title II), Research (Title VII), Energy (Title IX), and Miscellaneous (Title XII) titles each contained provisions related to forestry or forest ownership.

Considerations for a Future Farm Bill

Congress may use a future farm bill to modify existing programs or funding authorizations, or to establish new options for forestry research, assistance to nonfederal forest owners, and management of federal forestlands. In addition, Congress may use a new farm bill to address any unforeseen issues with provisions enacted in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA; P.L. 117-58). The IIJA authorized, provided program direction, and appropriated funding for several FS assistance and research programs and activities. Alternatively, Congress may elect not to address forestry issues in a new farm bill if, for example, Congress determines existing authorities and programs adequately address the nation's forestry needs.

Congress also could use a new farm bill to address any concerns related to forest health management generally on both federal and nonfederal lands. For example, this could include programs to reduce the risk of catastrophic disturbance events, such as an uncharacteristically severe wildfire or insect or disease infestations. For nonfederal forests, this may include establishing or modifying assistance programs to enhance wildfire protection,

preparedness, and forest resiliency. For federal forests, this may involve establishing new authorities or expanding existing authorities to reduce the accumulation of vegetation—often referred to as *hazardous fuels reduction*—or other forest restoration activities.

Because many forest risks span multiple ownership boundaries, Congress may use a future farm bill to consider new approaches to expand or facilitate cross-boundary forest management activities. This could be done by authorizing and/or incentivizing various federal and nonfederal partnerships and collaborations. In contrast, Congress may want to restrict those activities, for example, to target more specific concerns or areas.

Congress also may use a new farm bill to continue facilitating the development or advancement of wood products. In previous farm bills, and in other legislation, Congress established several programs to promote new markets and uses for woody biomass, in part to encourage forest restoration and reduce wildfire threats. A new farm bill might extend, expand, alter, or terminate these programs or could replace them with alternative approaches.

Forests have the potential to mitigate climate risk but also may be impacted by changing climatic conditions. Forests sequester and store large amounts of carbon and have the potential to mitigate future greenhouse-gas emissions. The effects of changing climatic conditions on forests is uncertain but include potential impacts to the range and distribution of tree species, changes in wildland fire behavior, and uncertainties related to future carbon sequestration potential, among others.

To address some of the uncertainties regarding climate impacts to forest management, Congress may consider using a new farm bill to modify existing research programs or establish new ones, domestically and internationally. Additionally, Congress could use a new farm bill to establish programs to increase or optimize carbon sequestration on both federal and nonfederal lands, through market or nonmarket mechanisms. Relatedly, Congress may consider modifying the amount or type of resources invested in forest inventorying and monitoring, which could provide benefits related to the establishment and implementation of programs to promote forest carbon sequestration. In particular, advancements in forest carbon lifecycle accounting may improve understanding of the carbon footprint of wood products relative to other products.

Related CRS Reports

CRS Report R45219, *Forest Service Assistance Programs*.

CRS Report R46976, *U.S. Forest Ownership and Management: Background and Issues for Congress*

CRS Report R45696, *Forest Management Provisions Enacted in the 115th Congress*

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