

**Statement of Tom L. Thompson
President, Society of American Foresters**

**H.R. 5263
Forest Landscape Restoration Act**

**Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Committee on Natural Resources
United States House of Representatives**

Thank you! Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Bishop, and distinguished members of this Committee, I am Tom Thompson President of the Society of American Foresters, and I honored to have the opportunity to testify on behalf of the more than 14,000 forestry professionals that we represent across the country. We are pleased to be able to offer our input on the Federal Landscape Restoration Act, and I hope that the perspective of our professional foresters from the private, public, not-for-profit, and academic sectors will be valuable in moving the Forest Landscape Restoration Act forward to becoming law.

I would first like to compliment you Chairman Grijalva and the members of your committee on your efforts to tackle national forest land management on a scale that is best suited for addressing the problems and challenges federal lands face in the 21st Century. The goals of the Forest Restoration Landscape Act are thoughtful, ambitious, and reflect an appropriate approach to forest restoration. SAF applauds your willingness to include what we perceive as a series of pilot projects to gauge where improvements to the management of our national forests might occur. Our goal, as I'm sure is yours, is to ensure the successful implementation of this bill should it become a law.

With that objective in mind, we would like to offer the following suggestions that we believe would help achieve our collective goal:

SAF's foremost concern is that appropriate financing for various projects be included with this bill. We suggest that the restoration approach be supported by adequate authorizations and appropriations, and that the approved projects not divert funds from existing Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management programs ----many of which already suffer from serious funding shortfalls. Without a new funding stream dedicated to the process described in the bill, we see very little likelihood for its successful implementation.

We also suggest that before any additional agency processes and procedures are integrated into the development and approval of projects under this program, we urge full consideration of the impacts such processes may have on the timely implementation of those projects.

For example, while advisory panels may provide the decision-maker with additional

perspectives on a project's merits, the panels may also add delays and paperwork to agencies already facing considerable documentation and time constraints to fulfill requirements imposed by NEPA and other existing statutes.

If this bill retains the use of advisory panels, SAF encourages the mandatory establishment of the technical panel, and the inclusion of panel members with specific expertise. Preferred field of expertise for panel members would include silviculture, harvesting techniques, and industry infrastructure in addition to the panel expertise criteria already in the bill. It would be inconsistent to otherwise require the establishment of the use of woody biomass, and the provision of economic benefit.

SAF members also understand the focus on and the importance of the wildland fire mitigation projects contained within the bill. However, we would note that this emphasis only on restoration of fire-driven ecosystems will largely overshadow other worthy and important restoration projects from consideration. Insect and disease infestations, overall forest health, and undesirable species and age-classes distributions are all worthy subjects of restoration efforts. Therefore we suggest an expansion of the selection criteria to include provisions for national forests and bureau lands that meet all of the other criteria, but are not located in areas where wildfire resiliency is the dominant management objective.

SAF is also concerned with some terms not clearly defined in the act. Terms that lack clear definitions do not provide unambiguous guidance to the agency, to panelists review of proposed projects, and if need be, to a reviewing court.

SAF urges the Committee to refine the definitions of these terms:

- Landscape- apart from the size criteria of 50,000 acres, how can this term be determined?

- "A collaborative process with an established record of successful planning and implementation." defining a successful collaborative process remains a matter of professional and academic debate, and what will distinguish an adequate "record?"

SAF also has reservations about how the process described in this bill will fit within the forest planning process contained in the existing National Forest Management Act and its already established implementing regulations. The bill would be strengthened if attention is paid to clarification about how the two planning processes will interact to avoid misunderstandings by both the agency in its implementation and by the interested publics.

Our members are also apprehensive about the timing of the application process as described in the bill with the environmental analysis procedures under the National Environmental Policy Act. While we do not believe a NEPA analysis begins until a project receives approval and funding, our members do not wish to see this question unresolved in the face of conflict over a national forest project. Clarification of the timing and application documentation requirements would be an important addition to the bill.

We would highly recommend that the Committee consider language similar to that of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (H-FRA): Sections 105 and 106 dealing with pre-decisional appeals and expedited judicial review, also be included in this bill. The use of pre-decisional reviews is preferable from a collaborative perspective, and also these reviews attempt to address issues of concern before a final agency decision is reached. Likewise: timely resolution of any judicial disputes is exceptionally important when dealing with wildfire mitigation projects. The bill already references the H-FRA provisions of Section 102 for the retention of old growth and large trees, and the inclusion of language similar to Sections 105 and 106 would contribute to a greater likelihood of successful implementation.

Finally, while we understand the pilot nature of these projects, it may be highly desirable to provide for the consideration of one or two projects annually that meet all of the selection criteria except having a record of successful collaboration. With an opportunity to at least consider a limited number of "riskier" projects, there is a greater potential to learn from the manner in which such projects might develop collaboratively and likewise how they might be uniquely implemented on the ground.

I appreciate this opportunity to represent the members of The Society of American Foresters in front of this distinguished committee, and I hope the suggestions will be valuable to the Committee as the bill progresses. SAF looks forward to working with you and your staffs to see that the final product has the greatest chances for passage and agency implementation, and achieves its goals.