



**Statement of Howard Gross
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Before the
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate**

Hearing to consider S. 2593, a bill to establish a program at the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior to carry out collaborative ecological restoration treatments for priority forest landscapes on public land, and for other purposes

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Good morning Chairman Bingaman, ranking member Domenici, and other members of the Committee. I thank you for the opportunity to testify today about S. 2593, the Forest Landscape Restoration Act. My name is Howard Gross and I am the Executive Director of the Forest Guild.

The Forest Guild is a national organization of more than 600 foresters, allied professionals, and supporters who manage our country's forestlands and advocate for ecologically sound forest practices. Our mission is to practice and promote ecologically, economically, and socially responsible forestry—"excellent forestry"—as a means of sustaining the integrity of forest ecosystems and the human communities dependent upon them. The Forest Guild's roots in New Mexico go back 24 years in building, developing, and managing forestry-related programs with rural, forest-based communities and partners. In addition to our headquarters in Santa Fe, we maintain staff in Massachusetts, California, and Tennessee, and have volunteer coordinators in five other states.

The Forest Guild is also a member of the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC). RVCC is a coalition 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. Other RVCC partner organizations that endorse this testimony are Sustainable Northwest, American Forests, Watershed Research and Training Center, Wallowa Resources, and Northwest Connections.

On behalf of the Forest Guild and these organizations, I want to thank Senators Bingaman and Domenici, as well as other co-sponsors of S. 2593, for their leadership on forest restoration issues, for their hard work and thoughtfulness in developing this legislation, and for recognizing the connections between forest restoration, a sustainable small-scale timber-based economy, and the well-being of rural communities. Addressing complex ecological forest issues, improving agency effectiveness and efficiency, and promoting rural well-being are not easy tasks. We

appreciate the opportunity to provide our input into this process and look forward to working with you to further develop this legislation to ensure it achieves its worthwhile goals.

The Forest Guild supports the Forest Landscape Restoration Act's intent of encouraging ecosystem restoration at the landscape level with a focus on reestablishing natural fire regimes, reducing the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire, leveraging local and private resources with national resources, and demonstrating how wildfire management costs can be reduced through the use of restoration by-products while achieving ecological objectives.

We are particularly enthused to see eligibility criteria that address a range of process concerns and values that are important in moving beyond a limited focus on fuels reduction and toward a more comprehensive approach to forest restoration. For example, several key eligibility criteria require:

- a collaborative approach to developing and implementing restoration projects (Section 4(b)(2)),
- plans to use woody biomass and small-diameter trees from restoration projects (Section 4(b)(3)(F)),
- plans to develop small business incubators and provide employment and training opportunities as means of providing economic and capacity building benefits for rural communities (Section 4(b)(3)(H)), and
- plans that specifically address other forest values such as wildlife habitat, water quality, and invasive and exotic species (Section 4(b)(3)(B, C, D)).

The Need for Greater Federal Investment in Forest Restoration

The conditions on our western forests dictate the need for a restoration program that takes a landscape-scale approach. The confluence of a number of factors – particularly a century of land use and management practices, including fire suppression, and a warmer climate and drought over recent decades – have helped make our forests prone to fires that are more extreme and far-ranging than historically experienced and that are causing profound changes to our forested ecosystems. These fire-prone conditions exist across millions of acres, presenting the need for strategies that address both high-priority areas such as Wildlands-Urban Interface (WUI) areas as well as larger landscapes.

While fire plays a necessary and important role in most forested ecosystems, many of our forest ecosystems need to be restored to more fire-adapted conditions before fire can play that role. The fact is that more forestland has burned in the last decade than in any ten-year period since record keeping began in 1960. These wildfires are consuming the U.S. Forest Service budget at an ever-increasing rate, while the agency's overall budget has remained relatively flat. As a result, the agency has had to allocate funding from other resource management programs to wildland fire management in order to keep pace. Over the last 18 years, funding for wildland fire management has increased from 13 percent to 45 percent of the agency's budget.

Furthermore, an increasing portion of the funding for wildland fire management is being allocated to wildfire suppression relative to fuels reduction and forest restoration activities. A major strength of the Forest Landscape Restoration Act is that it provides new strategies to focus

federal financial resources on restoration in high-priority landscapes, to provide greater assurances that funding will be available over a ten-year period (allowing for a consistent program of restoration work on the land), and to provide greater incentives for private sector investment to build local business capacity based on the use of restoration byproducts, thus providing job opportunities and other economic benefits to rural communities.

In recent years, Congress has taken several actions to address growing wildfire and forest restoration concerns through federal collaborative efforts with states and local communities. Each of these legislative actions, such as the National Fire Plan, the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act, the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, and the Community Forest Restoration Act for New Mexico, has provided model approaches and demonstration projects through which lessons have been learned. Another one of the strengths of the Forest Landscape Restoration Act is that it has been informed by these models and lessons. It is addressing a major need identified through other projects to direct resources toward collaborative landscape-scale restoration projects and it is adopting a number of provisions that have been useful in other programs. Thus, this legislation is building from earlier programs and taking the next step in developing a model to address longer-term, landscape-scale restoration, primarily on federal lands. This is an important step towards our vision of developing a comprehensive forest restoration program that invests in ecosystem health across public and private forest lands, addresses a broad range of environmental values, and creates economic opportunities and benefits for rural communities.

We would also like to call attention to the challenge of providing long-term funding for Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program projects. While we are very supportive of S. 2593 authorizing significant funding for the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Fund, that level of funding is still subject to the annual appropriations process. If this bill becomes law, the resulting project proposals would be much stronger if there were greater certainty of a long-term funding commitment from Congress and the agencies so that businesses and communities would have greater incentive and less risk in investing in this program.

Opportunities to Strengthen S. 2593

As stated earlier, we commend the Senators sponsoring this legislation for recognizing the need for landscape-level restoration linked with economic and social sustainability. We also appreciate the opportunity to provide the constructive input that follows regarding how this legislation can be strengthened.

1. **Collaborative requirements need improvement.** We agree with the need to clearly define the type of programs that will be eligible under S. 2593, and we specifically support the focus on projects that have been developed collaboratively. However, Section 4(b)(2)(C) as currently written, requiring that collaborators proposing a project must have “an established record of successful planning and implementation of ecological restoration projects on National Forest System lands,” may be overly restrictive. Does this mean that a collaborative must already be in existence and the “record of success” must be that of the collaborative? What about entities that come together to make application under this legislation that

individually have had significant collaborative restoration success but have never worked together in the exact collaborative that has come together to propose a project?

While we understand the importance of collaborative partners having experience and a track record, we also believe it is important for this program to encourage new collaborative efforts. We recommend that the project proponents' collective collaborative experience be included as a weighted criterion in the selection process, but we do not believe that it should be an eligibility criterion.

- 2. Ensure the program is an open and competitive process.** We support S. 2593's focus on landscape-scale and a 10-year horizon for planning, implementation, and monitoring. However, we believe the bill would be strengthened considerably if the following components were added. (a) The process that leads to a Regional Forester nominating proposals for selection by the Secretary (Sec. 4(c)(2)) should be an open and competitive process whereby new and existing collaboratives are given the opportunity to propose projects. (b) Every two years there should be request for new proposals that can be submitted to the Regional office through an open and competitive process. (c) The Regional offices should be encouraged to use a multi-stakeholder proposal review committee (similar to that used by the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program in New Mexico) to ensure broad regional agreement on priority landscapes and increase chances to leverage private, state, and other resources.

Incorporating the above will (a) ensure that projects are achieving their goals and/or adjusting to new circumstances, allowing true adaptive management to occur; (b) ensure adequate monitoring of the progress of collaborative efforts, and (c) provide added incentives for collaborative groups to approach restoration from a landscape-scale and to achieve ecological, economic, and social sustainability.

- 3. Proposal eligibility criteria and evaluation criteria need to be linked.** Connected to our recommendation 2 above to make the selection of projects under this program an open and competitive process, and to accomplish the landscape-scale objectives of S. 2593, we believe that the criteria spelled out as part of the selection process must mirror the eligibility criteria. Currently, the selection criteria (Sec. 4(d)(2)) don't clearly match up with the eligibility criteria (Sec. 4(b)), especially criteria (B), (C), (D), (E), (H), and (I) spelled out under Sec. 4(b)(3) that identify multiple ecological and rural economic and social objectives that projects should plan to achieve. These are important criteria for comprehensive restoration projects, and if they are listed as eligibility criteria than they should be included in the selection criteria.

In addition, as S. 2593 now reads, Sec. 4(d)(2)(A) and Sec. 4(d)(2)(E) of the selection criteria are very similarly; the latter section could be modified to ensure that the selection criteria consider the eligibility criteria of Sec 4(b)(3) above.

- 4. Improve and streamline the Advisory Panel structures.** The current bifurcation of the Scientific and Technical Advisory Panels (Sec. 4(e)), and requiring the Scientific Advisory panel ("The Secretary shall establish....") but not the Technical Advisory Panel ("The

Secretary may establish...”) doesn't seem to support the integrative nature of S. 2593 (encouraging “ecological, economic, and social sustainability” (Sec. 2(1))). Thus, we have three relevant recommendations: (a) combine the two panels into one National Advisory Panel; (b) ensure the composition of the National Advisory Panel has diverse scientific backgrounds, include those with expertise in collaboration and community capacity building; and (c) enlist the National Advisory Panel to review progress being made and reported by projects funded through this program.

5. **Clarification of use of funding for monitoring.** We support the focus on development of performance measures and outcomes, rather than simply traditional outputs, as well as the strong requirements for multi-party monitoring. We would like there to be greater clarity that funds can be used for effectiveness and implementation monitoring. It is not sufficient for the agencies to simply monitor process or to just collect traditional information based on old forest management priorities. We need make it possible to collect meaningful information that will let the American public know that environmental conditions are improving and that local businesses are thriving by working to restore public lands.
6. **Consider delivery mechanisms for technical assistance to projects.** This bill is extremely innovative in many ways. The projects selected will be pioneering new approaches to landscape-scale restoration and the development of value-added enterprises that will support this restoration work. There will be a need for on-going technical assistance related to collaboration, project design, business development, and other dimensions of implementation and monitoring. With the loss of the Economic Action Programs, the Forest Service has no way to deliver this assistance in a coordinated or effective manner. We strongly encourage the exploration of how to address these technical assistance needs proactively. Delivering such assistance will contribute to the success of projects funded through this legislation and will help build a robust program of work around comprehensive restoration across priority landscapes.