

**Remarks as Prepared for Delivery
Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack – A Vision for America’s Forests
Courtyard Marriott, Grappone Conference Center – Concord, New Hampshire
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On April 16, President Obama launched the America’s Great Outdoors Initiative to build a conservation agenda for the 21st century and to reconnect Americans to the great outdoors. In launching this effort, the President recognized that while we have made great strides in conserving our natural resources, we have many challenges before us. Americans are losing touch with the outdoors as children spend more time in front of televisions and computer screens and as we confront alarmingly high rates of childhood obesity. And, while we have much to celebrate in land conservation, we are losing many of our most productive farm, ranch and forest lands to fragmentation and development.

The good news is that conservation groups, landowners, businesses, and governments at the federal, state and local level are involved in efforts across the country to address conservation challenges and reconnect Americans to the outdoors. In launching this initiative, the President asked Secretary of Interior Salazar, EPA Administrator Jackson, Chair of the Council on Environmental Quality Sutley and me to host a series of listening sessions across the country to learn from these efforts and to develop a series of recommendations based on what we’ve heard. The President has asked that we provide these recommendations to him in a November report.

Since early June, we have held 18 listening sessions across the country. Some common themes have emerged. We have heard about the importance of local partnerships and collaboration in conserving large landscapes. We heard how the federal government can be a better partner in these efforts by providing technical assistance and financial resources. Participants have emphasized the importance of reconnecting children to the outdoors through education, recreation and outdoor learning. Landowners and conservationists alike have talked about the need for tax incentives and funding for conservation easements.

While most of our listening sessions have focused broadly on conservation and reconnecting Americans to the outdoors, today we are taking a somewhat different approach by focusing on conservation of working forests. And, we have come to New England where there is a long history of innovative partnerships to keep forests as forests through purchase, conservation easements, maintaining markets for forest products, and other approaches.

Here, New Englanders recognize that forests are vital to a healthy and prosperous America. Our forests supply us with clean, abundant water. 53% of the water supply of the lower 48 states originates in our forests. Forests are critically important for preserving wildlife habitat. They are among our greatest assets in the

battle against global climate change – sequestering carbon that offsets 12% of national greenhouse gas emissions.

And healthy forests are critical to a healthy rural economy. They generate wealth by providing opportunities for outdoor recreation and tourism such as hunting, fishing, and hiking – which may be worth \$730 billion to the American economy each year. And forests provide good jobs for people in rural communities through the forest products industry. Conserving our forests isn't just something that we should choose to do, it's something we must do.

Almost one year ago, I gave a speech to lay out a vision for forests in the United States. In it, I called for our national debates around forests to move past polarization around issues like endangered species, timber management, and other concerns. Instead, I imagined a shared vision, based on a recognition that our forests face significant threats and that we must work together to address those threats. Those threats include the loss of forest lands to development and fragmentation; unnaturally destructive fires and disease; global climate change, and others.

Our new approach to forests emphasizes the need to conserve and restore our forests to make them more resilient to climate change and to secure our water resources. At USDA, we have adopted an “all-lands approach” that recognizes that we must look across ownership boundaries on federal, state and private lands to address these threats. We also must recognize that to maintain our forests and our rural economies we need vibrant markets for traditional wood products and new markets for energy, carbon sequestration and the environmental benefits provided by healthy forests.

Over the last year, we've made significant progress towards this shared vision. And, so, today, I want to report on some of the USDA has done over the last year. I also want to frame our challenge on private lands while pointing to some of the successes in New England. Our hope today is to learn from those examples and to incorporate them in the recommendations we develop for the President under the America's Great Outdoors initiative.

On public lands, our fundamental challenge is to undertake restoration activities at a landscape-wide scale to address forest health issues, reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire, and to make our forests more resilient to climate change. Yet, polarization around how we manage our federal lands has made it difficult and expensive for the Forest Service to accomplish this goal.

Last winter, I visited the Four Forests Restoration Initiative in central Arizona, where environmentalists, forest industry, county commissioners, and the US Forest Service are working together to develop a plan that would restore Ponderosa pine forests across 2.4 million acres. Doing so would benefit the environment, make the

forest more resilient to climate change and fire, and would provide local jobs in forest industry.

Operating at this scale is unprecedented. It will require a strong scientific foundation, input and buy-in from diverse stakeholders, and a commitment to undertake restoration activities across tens of thousands of acres annually. The partners in Arizona are committed to this effort. But this is not an isolated example – there are many other states and regions which hope to accomplish similar restoration.

There are a number of things that the Forest Service can do to facilitate collaborative efforts like these. First, with extensive input from many of our stakeholders, the Forest Service is developing a new planning rule to govern how we manage our National Forests. This rule will have a strong scientific underpinning and will foster collaboration with our partners and stakeholders in managing our National Forests. This rule will give Americans confidence that we are managing our forests for a broad range of goals, while at the same time removing barriers to restoration and conservation activities.

The Forest Service is also building resilience to climate change into its management of our National Forests and our other activities. We have created a roadmap for responding to climate change and a climate scorecard so that we can chart the progress of our National Forests over time.

We are developing new approaches to managing our federal forests. Stewardship contracting has proven to be a very valuable tool that allows the Forest Service to take a holistic and long-term approach to management of large landscapes. We need to expand the use of these contracts by working with Congress to make the legal authority for stewardship contracting permanent and to remove the financial barriers that makes it more difficult for the Forest Service to undertake long-term contracts. On the budgetary side, we've proposed to restructure the Forest Service's land management budget through Integrated Resource Restoration program to allow for greater flexibility in managing our forests.

Collaboration is key to our approach on federal lands. The new Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program provides an opportunity to undertake large scale restoration on National Forests with input from local stakeholders. And, I'm most excited about our work in the Tongass National Forest. There, the Forest Service, working closely with USDA's Rural Development mission area, has developed a new framework that seeks to quickly transition forest management from old-growth to second growth timber while maintaining a viable forest industry and local jobs for rural communities dependent on the forest. This regional partnership with Rural Development could be a model for forest based economic diversification that can be replicated across the country.

These are important steps forward but the real emphasis of today's event is conservation of our private working forest lands. 56% of the nation's forests are in private hands. And in the eastern United States, that figure is much higher. Our privately-owned forests cover 430 million acres are held by 11 million private owners.

As we begin this conversation, we should remember that the real threats to our private working forest lands. On Wednesday, the Forest Service will release a study called *Private Forests, Public Benefits*.

This study projects that across the country, over 57 million acres of rural forest will experience significant growth in housing development by 2030. The resulting forest loss and fragmentation will have significant consequences for the benefits we derive from forests – clean water, forest products, wildlife, recreation. Indeed the report looks specifically at the implications for water quality, at-risk species, timber production, forest fire and forest health and finds that urbanization will exacerbate all of these threats.

Some of the most striking impacts of forest loss will occur right here in New Hampshire. New Hampshire contains portions of two of the top three watersheds projected to be most impacted by development over the next two decades. The report examined where development would have the greatest impact on water quality and three of the four watersheds where water quality would be most negatively impacted occur in New Hampshire.

This report notes that the average age of our family forest owners is increasing, raising the threat that lands will turn over more rapidly and thereby face greater development pressure. There have also been enormous changes in the ownership of corporate forest lands as forest industry has sold its lands. This could place significant new pressures on these lands for development.

Protecting against fragmentation and loss of forest land ultimately requires that forest ownership be financially rewarding. Put simply, forest stewardship must pay. To do this, government policies must make it easier for landowners to continue to maintain their forests as forests. Tax policies, conservation programs and funding, and assistance to landowners in managing their lands can help create an environment that makes it easier for landowners to keep forests as forests – and not sell them to the first developer who makes an offer.

Markets will play a critical role in providing landowners with economic incentives to maintain forest lands. Maintaining traditional markets for wood and paper is, therefore, a very important piece of the puzzle. With growing interest in green building, it is vital that wood products be given appropriate value for energy savings and carbon sequestration. The Forest Service has much to offer here through its research and procurement policies. Development of new markets for carbon

sequestration, water and other environmental services could also be important in rewarding landowners for stewardship activities.

Likewise, markets for woody biomass will provide further incentives for landowners to maintain forests. These markets can provide value for small diameter timber and thereby bolster forest restoration efforts. Expanding markets for thinnings and slash could also help address hazardous fire conditions along the wildland urban interface. We also know woody biomass can provide significant greenhouse gas benefits and thereby give us one tool to address climate change with home grown energy. I recognize that there is some uncertainty right now as to how biomass will be dealt with through various federal policies. But, USDA is committed to helping to develop these markets in ways that benefit forests, that are sustainable and that provide real greenhouse gas benefits.

States and the states foresters are also playing an important role in addressing the stewardship of private working forests. In June, all state forestry agencies completed Statewide Forest Resource Assessments as called for in the 2008 Farm Bill. These assessments examine the conditions and trends in the states and provide a roadmap for state and federal investments in forest stewardship and conservation. Further, these assessments can also provide a roadmap for how USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service can work in partnership with the Forest Service and State forest agencies in keeping forests as forests. As budgets tighten, these assessments may prove invaluable in helping us focus our dollars for maximum effect.

As we examine how the America's Great Outdoors initiative can bolster forest conservation and reconnect Americans to their natural heritage, New England has many lessons to teach us. The partnership around New Hampshire's Connecticut Lakes Headwaters provides a great example. Here, Senator Shaheen's leadership in partnership with state agencies, conservation groups, and many others have protected 171,000 acres of forest, the vast majority of which will remain in private ownership as working forests under a conservation easement. Connecticut Lakes combined resources from the state, the federal government, including USDA, and non-profits – demonstrating the power of collaborative, focused efforts in protecting large landscapes.

Equally impressive is a project in Maine which used new markets tax credits to conserve 130,000 acres while maintaining a local paper mill and the jobs associated with that mill. As in Connecticut Lakes, this project conserves working forests in perpetuity and in private ownership. I know many in Massachusetts and New Hampshire are now working on protecting the large landscape from central Massachusetts to the White Mountain National Forest in New Hampshire. And, in Maine, Governor Baldacci, conservation groups, local communities, landowners and others are working together to keep forests as forests there.

In addition to these conservation efforts, there's also a great tradition in New England in involving youth in the outdoors. The work of the Student Conservation Association and the Appalachian Mountain Club in getting kids into the woods has been particularly important. Building greater appreciation of forests, farms, ranches, and open space may be some of the most important work we do as part of this initiative.

We look forward to hearing about these and other efforts today. As I noted earlier, our intent in hosting these listening sessions is to learn from you and to build a conservation agenda for the 21st century based on your experience and knowledge.

Next year we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Weeks Act. It was under the Weeks Act that the White Mountain National Forest was established. Millions of Americans have benefited from the establishment of that forest and other forests under the Weeks Act.

What will our conservation legacy be 100 years from now? Our goal today is to learn from you so that we can work with you to build a continuing conservation legacy. And, maybe, 100 years hence, our children's children can look back and thank us for the work we have done in protecting forests and grasslands, farms and ranches, parks and rivers, and in strengthening the ties of all Americans to these special places.