

THE
CONSERVATION FUND

 Land Trust Alliance
Together, conserving the places you love




National Alliance of Forest Owners

 American
Forests™

 Wildlife
Mississippi



NEWS RELEASE

CONGRESS PRIORITIZES PARITY FOR FOREST LANDOWNERS THROUGH EASEMENT PROGRAM

Forest Conservation Easement Program will combat climate change while preserving working forestlands

WASHINGTON, D.C. (May 17, 2024) — A coalition of conservation, sportsmen and forest management organizations and companies today applauded inclusion of the Forest Conservation Easement Program (FCEP) in the Farm Bill as introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives.

In establishing the first comprehensive private and tribal forestland conservation easement program, FCEP would give forest landowners the same opportunity other working agricultural landowners have to protect and preserve their working lands. FCEP fills a critical gap to help keep these forestlands intact and sustainably managed for timber, providing numerous economic and environmental benefits to rural and urban communities.

FCEP would prevent the conversion of forests into non-forest uses by funding the purchase of development rights from willing private and tribal landowners. This would be achieved by placing on the forestland a voluntary conservation easement, a legal agreement with the landowner that permanently conserves wildlife habitats, natural resources and more. FCEP would replace, rename and expand upon the current Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Forests are critical for mitigating the effects of our changing climate. The U.S. has more than 765 million acres of forestland, most of which is privately owned. According to the National Alliance of Forest Owners, private working forests account for approximately 80 percent of U.S. forests' annual carbon sequestration and approximately 51 percent of total carbon storage. But our nation's forests face significant threats. According to the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. could lose millions of acres of forestland by 2060 due to conversion and urban sprawl. FCEP easements will prevent the conversion of private and tribal forestland to non-forest uses, preserving these forestlands as powerful carbon sinks.

“Forest conservation easements are an essential means for ensuring forests are protected for future generations,” said **Jad Daley, president and CEO of American Forests**. “Expanding this opportunity to private and tribal landowners safeguards our working forests and enhances wildlife habitat, water supplies, continued carbon sequestration and so much more that forests

provide. American Forests applauds the House Agriculture Committee for the inclusion of FCEP in their Farm Bill proposal.”

“The Boone and Crockett Club has a long history in forest conservation and management policy, starting with our founder Theodore Roosevelt’s efforts to create the national forest system. Private land forests provide essential wildlife habitat along with playing a critical role in natural climate solutions and yet we currently do not have a voluntary, easement-based program focused on forests,” said **James L. Cummins, president of the Boone and Crockett Club**. “We have been strong supporters of the Forest Conservation Easement Program because it is the logical tool we need to advance forest conservation for the next generation, and we appreciate the House Agriculture Committee including it in their Farm Bill reauthorization.”

“Voluntary conservation agreements are proven tools for conserving forests,” said **Jeff Crane, president and CEO of the Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation**. “We are thankful that Congressional Sportsmen’s Caucus Member and Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee Rep. GT Thompson included the Forest Conservation Easement Program in the Farm Bill to provide additional incentives for landowners to conserve working forests and thereby support habitat for fish and wildlife and our outdoor sporting traditions that depend on healthy habitats to provide quality experiences for sportsmen and women.”

“Every year we lose more and more intact working forests to fragmentation and conversion. Since 2007, we have lost more than 7.5 million acres,” said **Larry Selzer, president and CEO of The Conservation Fund**. “The Conservation Fund is dedicated to addressing the threat of forestland conversion and urges Congress to create FCEP to provide an important, missing conservation tool to preserve working forests. We applaud U.S. House Agriculture Committee Chairman U.S. Representative Glenn ‘GT’ Thompson, R-P.A., and Ranking Member U.S. Representative David Scott, D-G.A., for supporting FCEP. We look forward to continuing working with the House and Senate to get this pragmatic and bipartisan solution included in the Farm Bill.”

“The United States loses approximately half a million acres of privately owned forest land to development each year, at the expense of clean water, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, timber supplies and more,” said **Andrew Bowman, president and CEO of the Land Trust Alliance**. “Land trusts are uniquely positioned to help private landowners protect and manage their forested lands while also educating the public about the benefits of forest conservation to the environment and economy. FCEP enjoys broad, bipartisan support and will allow land trusts to work with the federal government to ensure that private forests remain forests.”

“Conservation easement programs are an important tool that should be available to all private forest owners,” said **Dave Tenny, president and CEO of the National Alliance of Forest Owners**. “Combined with healthy markets for forest products, conservation easement programs help privately owned forests provide a full range of benefits to rural communities. These include both economic prosperity and maintaining healthy populations of common and at-risk species and the habitats they need. Smart legislation, like the Forest Conservation Easement Program Act of 2023, helps America’s private working forests continue to provide clean air and water, wildlife habitat, and good paying jobs in rural communities.”

“From filtering drinking water, providing habitat for wildlife, buffering flood waters and sequestering carbon, to providing much-needed forest products and jobs, forests are an essential part of the fabric of America,” said **Camille Green, conservation policy coordinator for Wildlife Mississippi**. “The Forest Conservation Easement Program will help preserve forests for future generations to enjoy.”

At its core, FCEP introduces two components, both of which seek to expand conservation easement options on private and tribal forestland while supporting sustainable forest management and production.

- Through **forest land easements**, NRCS will provide funding for eligible entities – including conservation organizations (such as land trusts), state and local agencies, and tribes – to purchase working forest conservation easements, filling a void among federal programs. Currently, no existing forest easement program provides funding for land trusts and tribes to acquire easements.
- Through **forest reserve easements**, NRCS will purchase forest conservation easements directly from forest landowners while additionally providing financial assistance for the management and restoration of the lands to benefit at-risk species. This aspect of FCEP serves as the successor to the HFRP.

Through this expansion of HFRP, FCEP would provide mandatory funding for conservation easements to be acquired on forestland by non-federal and non-state entities, similar to a longstanding program for farmland and rangeland. FCEP would also have broader forestland eligibility than existing federal forest easement programs. This fills a vital funding gap for forestland, allowing the preservation of working forestland at scale and putting working forestland on par with other Farm Bill working lands easement programs.

FCEP easements will allow private forest landowners to keep forests intact and working now and for future generations. This provides stable forest cover, advances conservation goals and perpetuates timber supply for forest products. In addition to being vital carbon sinks, private working forests in the United States support 2.5 million jobs, filter nearly 30 percent of the nation’s drinking water, and provide habitat for 60 percent of at-risk species.

The FCEP text included in the U.S. House’s Farm Bill is similar to the FCEP Act of 2023 (H.R. 3424/S. 2631), which was introduced in the U.S. House by U.S. Representative Trent Kelly, R-Miss., and U.S. Representative Annie Kuster, D-N.H., and in the U.S. Senate by U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., and U.S. Senator Roger Wicker, R-Miss., with the goal of including the legislation in the Farm Bill with mandatory funding. Unfortunately, the Farm Bill framework recently released by the Chair of the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee does not include FCEP though, with bipartisan Senate support, the FCEP coalition is hopeful that FCEP will ultimately be included in the Senate’s Farm Bill with mandatory funding.

For more information, visit www.foresteasement.org.

Media Contacts:

Josh Lynch, The Conservation Fund, 703-908-5809, jlynch@conservationfund.org

Corey Himrod, Land Trust Alliance, 202-638-4724, chimrod@lta.org

###

Additional quotes

Thomas Reddick, executive director, Alabama Forest Land Trust

“The FCEP will be a monumental conservation tool in states that do not have funding programs for private forestland conservation. Many of our landowners are unable to realize the IRS tax benefits offered as the only financial incentive for conservation easements. FCEP also removes the burden on state and federal agencies, allowing local, accredited land trusts to engage with landowners and hold the deeded conservation easements.”

Mike Parr, president, American Bird Conservancy

“Forests and other natural systems are being lost, degraded, and fragmented by our increasing and changing land use demands. The Forest Conservation Easement Program adds a much-needed tool to allow willing landowners to protect important tracts of forest at-risk from new development. Forest birds — like the Golden-winged Warbler or the Eastern Whip-poor-will — rely on diverse and healthy forests to survive, and their numbers are declining. ABC applauds House Ag Chairman G.T. Thompson for building FCEP into the House version of the Farm Bill.”

Nicole Zussman, president and CEO, Appalachian Mountain Club

“Working forests mitigate the effects of climate change and reduce biodiversity loss, and every year our research scientists learn more about the invaluable natural services that intact forests provide. Working forests also contribute significantly to regional economies and are often where generations of people find meaningful, inspiring experiences in the outdoors. We applaud the House Agriculture Committee for including FCEP in the House Farm Bill to provide a key tool for ensuring that our nation’s working forests continue to provide benefits for climate, nature, and communities.”

Cristel Zoebisch, policy director, Carbon180

"Keeping forests as forests is necessary to safeguard the carbon removal potential of woodlands and mitigate the climate crisis. Carbon180 commends the incorporation of FCEP in the framework released by Chairman Thompson and the efforts to expand voluntary conservation easements. These measures are crucial for promoting sustainable forest management amidst mounting land-use challenges and wildfire risk."

Scott Jones, CEO, Forest Landowners Association

"Private forest landowners are indispensable stewards, entrusted with the vital responsibility of nurturing clean air, clean water sources, essential wildlife habitats, and supporting rural communities. The Forest Conservation Easement Program Act of 2023 offers landowners an essential mechanism to both yield returns on their investments and safeguard the ecological integrity of their land for generations to come."

Karen Tilberg, president & CEO, Forest Society of Maine

“Maine’s largely privately-owned forests sequester and store nearly 70% of greenhouse gas emissions in Maine every year. Keeping Maine’s forests as forests is a top priority for climate mitigation strategies in the state. FSM currently holds over 1 million acres of forest conservation easements and more are on the way. This legislation would enable FSM to access vitally needed easement funding to continue to retain the globally significant and vast unfragmented forests in Maine.”

Portia Brown, president, Kentucky Woodland Owners Association

"The Forest Conservation Easement Program, FCEP, is a major step forward in sustaining working forests for our collective future. Kentucky’s woodlands provide important economic value to Kentucky, from bourbon barrels to toilet paper, and everything in between. This value is further compounded by the environmental benefits ranging from carbon sequestration, healthy air, water, & soils, and wildlife habitat; benefits that also bear economic returns in recreation and non-timber wood products. Kentucky Woodland Owners Association, KWOA, applauds the US House of Representatives for moving this forward."

John Morgan, CEO, National Bobwhite and Grassland Initiative Foundation

“A forest land easement program for private working forest owners is an important yet critically missing conservation and management tool. Our private working forests and savannas are important wildlife habitat, and many species such as the Northern bobwhite depend upon the conservation and management of private forests and savannas to survive and thrive. These forests face an increasing myriad of threats to conversion for other uses. A Forest Conservation Easement Program would provide an important alternative for voluntarily maintaining the long-term habitat benefits of private working forests.”

Jack Savage, president, Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests

“New England forests have long provided critical benefits, including clean drinking water, wildlife habitat and renewable wood products. We continue to lose 5,000 acres of forest annually in New Hampshire. Keeping forests as forests is an urgent priority to maintain our quality of life as we address climate change this century. As a land trust, the Forest Society would be able to conserve more forests more quickly through the Forest Conservation Easement Program.”

Mark Pacilio, executive director, Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust

"The core forests of the Tug Hill Region in upstate NY must be conserved to remain healthy. Healthy forests are vital to our ecosystem and the Tug Hill region has a great impact upon the upstate climate, wildlife habitat and migration, and clean water. The FCEP program will help us to preserve these important areas by providing funding for voluntary conservation easements to landowners and is a major component of the Farm Bill."

Thomas D. Saunders, president and CEO, Western Pennsylvania Conservancy

"A workable, working forest conservation easement program would be a valuable and welcome addition to the suite of voluntary, private lands conservation programs in the Farm Bill. It can benefit all of Pennsylvania by providing new tools for conservancies and land trusts to protect forestland in the commonwealth."