

Testimony of  
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The Federal Role In Restoring Private Forest Land After Hurricane Katrina

Presented To The  
Subcommittee On Forests And Forests Health

An Oversight Hearing On  
Restoration After Recent Hurricanes And Other Natural Disasters:  
Federal Role In Recovery After Catastrophic Events Affecting Forest Lands

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***"Man will not merely endure: He will prevail."***

William Faulkner

Chairman Walden, Ranking Member Udall, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to speak on the impacts of Hurricane Katrina on the private forest land in Mississippi. Many of you have spent a lot of time working on supplemental disaster bills for Katrina. Along with the 150,000 citizens of Mississippi who either lost their home or suffered significant damage to it and the 60,000 private forest landowners who lost significant amounts of their forest, I truly appreciate it.

You will see some of these losses on the screen. But what you will not be able to capture is the smell of the Coast, the total view of the devastation or the sound of its silence.

I am James L. Cummins, Executive Director of the Mississippi Fish and Wildlife Foundation. I am a certified fisheries biologist, a certified wildlife biologist and a private landowner. My family's 140 acres have been in the family since 1833 and during that time it has undergone many changes from cotton to cattle/corn to timber/wildlife today. Some of the Foundation's more significant accomplishments include conceptualization of the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, helping pass the Grassland Reserve Program and developing many of the components of the Wetland Reserve Program. Regarding public lands, the Foundation worked to develop the Holt Collier and Theodore Roosevelt National Wildlife Refuges as well as the Sky Lake Wildlife Management Area, which contains the largest stand of ancient cypress in the world.

Background

It was 2:00 p.m. on Saturday, August 27. The staff of the Mississippi Fish and Wildlife Foundation was in the process of hosting our 6th Annual Mississippi Fish and Wildlife Expo; we typically have 10,000 to 12,000 attendees during the 3-day event. But this time, I was not managing the event. I was meeting at the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. After reviewing the nine or so models from the National Weather Service and listening to local officials and their request for us to shut down one of the area's largest events of the year, there was no question. That evening we canceled the Expo and moved the vendors out; 12 hours later, the largest public facility north of the Mississippi Gulf Coast and south of Jackson was ready to provide shelter for the thousands of evacuees from New Orleans, Biloxi, Gulfport and the other numerous cities and towns in harm's way.

Little did I know that a storm surge 80 miles wide and 30 feet high was racing to the Gulf Coast. Little did I know that winds of over 150 miles per hour were on their way to the Coast and we would have over 100 mile per hour winds over 200 miles inland. Katrina did not care if you were poor, wealthy or in the middle. She was an equal opportunity destroyer.

When Oxford, Mississippian William Faulkner accepted the Nobel Prize in 1950, he said "I believe that man will not merely endure: He will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion, sacrifice and endurance." Today, Mr. Faulkner would be proud of his state. Its spirit, cooperation and help for others is amazing.

Mississippi's First Lady Marsha Barbour has been on the Coast helping since the night of the storm. Governor Barbour told me last week she has spent all but 4 days at the Coast. And in Oxford this past Saturday night, Sam Haskell, of my home town of Amory, and Lanny Griffith hosted a fundraiser titled *Mississippi Rising* featuring Mississippi natives Morgan Freeman, Sela Ward, Faith Hill, Steve Azar and Gerald McRaney. Others included Ray Romano, Whoopi Goldberg, Delta Burke, Debbie Allen, Brian McKnight, Pam Tillis, Samuel Jackson and Kathy Ireland. Most of these celebrities are familiar with our state. They come every other year to Amory - a small town of 8,000 - to raise money for scholarships for Mississippi students. Mrs. Ireland even liked the area so much that she manufactures her line of furniture near there. The fundraiser has raised over \$15 million so far. But even before Katrina, Mississippi had the highest per capita of charitable giving of any state in the United States.

What is Needed?

First at hand is helping people with some basic needs - food, clothing and shelter. Help them rebuild their lives and their spirit. Some of that has already been done and the entire Congress and the Administration deserves credit for helping. Thank you. Next, we must begin addressing the rebuilding of infrastructure - roads, schools, bridges, etc. - and getting people back to work.

Beside the most important species inhabiting our state - the human species - Katrina had other victims. They are the diverse species of fish, wildlife and plants that inhabit this region, including over 170 species of amphibians and reptiles alone. Pine and hardwood forests are their main habitat and the greatest non-human victim. Katrina caused the largest single devastation of forests in our Nation's history. And it is the largest single devastation of fish and wildlife habitat since the Exxon Valdez.

These forests were valuable at producing oxygen, sequestering carbon dioxide, filtering air and water, providing fish and wildlife habitat, including that for many threatened and endangered species, improving the aesthetic beauty of the Gulf Coast and providing opportunities for recreation and solitude, just to name a few. Their contribution to the latter was a major reason the Coast was such a tourist destination.

According to the USDA Forest Service, Hurricane Katrina damaged 5 million acres, with 4 million acres in Mississippi alone, and most of it on private forest lands. This represents 19 billion board feet of timber with a value of \$5 billion. This is enough timber to build 800,000 homes and make 25 million tons of paper and paperboard. Much of the downed timber will be worthless due to splintering of the logs and degradation of the wood structure. Experience with Hurricanes Ivan and Hugo suggests that about one-third of the downed timber will be salvageable; that will only partially defray the costs of clearing, site preparation and replanting. Prompt salvage will be needed to capture value and prevent future insect and wildfire outbreaks.

For the most part, these damages did not occur to "big timber" as some like to refer. They occurred mostly to small landowners with an average acreage of approximately 100 acres. Their timber was their 501(k).

But what can the federal government do to aid in the recovery of our forests and their associated resources after Katrina, Rita and other hurricanes? Let me provide an overview of the needs. These needs were developed after many conversations and meetings with private landowners, county and state forestry associations and the conservation community.

Salvage/Clean Up

First is salvage and clean up, which has begun. There is a tremendous shortage of loggers for many reasons including a shortage of housing, reduced harvest efficiency and the increased fuel costs. It was an honor to be in Washington, D.C. a few weeks ago making our case in partnership with the Mississippi Loggers Association and several other colleagues that are before you today. I will let some of the other members of this distinguished panel discuss the economics of the current forest situation - that is where their expertise lies. But let me be clear - from a restoration perspective and a conservation perspective - salvaging this material is very important.

The biomass provision that Congressman Chip Pickering and Mike Ross introduced last week, which was added to the Energy Bill, if adopted, will have a large impact on increasing the demand for this salvage.

## Fire Prevention

The extensive damage to the forest resources of Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas has created extremely dangerous wildfire conditions. The excessive buildup of downed timber and associated storm debris will be a significant hindrance to fire fighting crews. Fires in these areas will burn more intensely due to the excessive buildup of fuels. Also, due to the opening of the canopy by Katrina, there will be excessive growth of native vegetation as well as invasive species such as cogongrass. This growth will add to the already dangerously high fuel levels across the storm impacted areas, increasing the chances of a catastrophic fire event.

The programs that can address these impacts are the State Fire Assistance, the Volunteer Fire Assistance and the Fire Plan Hazard Mitigation.

We appreciate the tremendous efforts of Deputy Secretary Lynn Scarlet, Undersecretary Mark Rey and the Mississippi Forestry Commission for the superb job they are currently doing in guarding against these fires. Three weeks ago I asked Undersecretary Rey about mobilizing some of the staff of the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management to the region to guard against these fires once the fire season in the West begins to decline and this region's fire season increases. His response was that you don't have to ask, many are already there.

## Damage Reconnaissance

To fully determine the impacts of Hurricane Katrina, a full reconnaissance should be conducted.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, as authorized by the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, and the U. S. Geological Survey can play key roles in this.

The Mississippi Institute for Forest Inventory, which I was nominated to be on it's Board this week by Governor Haley Barbour, should also have a lead role in this effort. An inventory of our forests, wildlife, wetlands, scenic and natural areas, hunting and fishing impacts and wildlife-associated tourism impacts is needed.

## Invasive Species

Hurricanes spread invasive species, such as the newly found giant salvinia in the Pascagoula River, which came ashore from Hurricane Dennis. In areas of severe blowdown, the removal of forest canopy will dramatically increase available sunlight reaching the understory and encourage an explosion of a number of highly invasive species. Among the most problematic in the impacted area are Chinese tallow tree (*Triadica sebifera*), cogongrass (*Imperata brasiliensis* and *I. cylindrica*), privet hedge (*Ligustrum sinense*) and Japanese climbing fern (*Lygodium japonicum*). Without aggressive action, it is extremely likely that Chinese tallow tree, cogongrass, privet hedge and Japanese climbing fern will "capture succession" across thousands of acres and will prevent re-establishment of native forests across ownerships, including an array of ecologically and economically significant public and private lands. It is highly likely the movement of heavy equipment through infested areas will also exacerbate the spread of cogongrass.

Federal programs to control invasive species are the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Partners For Fish and Wildlife Program and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program. Funding could also be made to the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry and the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce to accomplish the control.

## Forest Restoration

According to the latest data from the USDA Forest Service, specifically the Southern Forest Resource Assessment, nationwide, the South alone provides 60 percent of the nation's timber supply, making it the largest producer of timber compared to any country in the world.

Across the southern coastal plain, the longleaf pine ecosystem once covered some 74 - 92 million acres from southern Virginia to central Florida and west to eastern Texas. Longleaf pine currently covers less than 3 million acres, much of which is highly degraded. The longleaf pine ecosystem is characterized by open-canopied stands and is one of the most biologically diverse temperate forest ecosystems in North America. Over 20 federally-listed species (candidate, threatened, endangered) inhabit the longleaf pine ecosystem. According to the Forest Service, longleaf pine is more resistant

to breakage, uprooting and insects and disease than any other species of southern pine. Moreover, longleaf pine produces superior wood products, such as saw timber, utility poles and other high value products.

To restore the forests, both softwood and hardwood, which were devastated by Katrina, a combination of tax-based programs and direct payment/cost-share programs will help meet the needs of both small and medium-sized landowners. It is important that we use a variety of programs to take advantage of the current level of staff and level of expertise that these agencies have.

On the direct payment and cost-share side, the Healthy Forests Reserve Program, which originated in this Committee and is under your leadership, can provide the greatest benefit to the private landowner and the forests of the area. The landowner can utilize the cost-share to restore the forests. He/she can utilize the easement payment of either 30 or 99 years to help offset a loss of income. To maximize the acreage restored, you might consider emphasizing the 10 year option.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture should consider utilizing the expired Continuous Sign-up for Longleaf Pine in the Conservation Reserve Program for affected counties in the range of longleaf pine. The cost to restore pine, including roller chopping, is approximately \$400/acre (included administration/delivery). For every \$10 million, 25,000 acres can be restored. Longleaf is more resistant to high winds and in some cases it is a higher value product than loblolly; longleaf is also a much more desirable tree from a conservation perspective.

On the tax side, an Emergency Restoration Tax Credit program could be authorized. States such as Mississippi and Texas have had enormous success with tax credit based restoration programs utilizing state income tax credits. The program could be administered through the State and Private Forestry division of the USDA Forest Service and implemented by the State agency(s) of the Governor's choosing. The program would be eligible in counties and parishes designated as a Presidential Disaster Area. A forest landowner would be able to claim 75 percent of his or her restoration expenses up to \$50,000 per year for 3 years; a homeowner would be able to claim the same, but would have a limit of \$1,500 per year for 3 years. Other natural resource needs, not just reforestation, would be eligible.

Overall, the Healthy Forests Reserve Program, the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, the Landowner Incentives Program, the Partners For Fish and Wildlife Program, the Forest Land Enhancement Program, the Forest Stewardship Program and the Emergency Restoration Tax Credit have the greatest potential for assisting in the restoration of our forests.

#### Urban/Community Forestry

According to the Mississippi Forestry Commission, 181 cities and communities have approximately 2.75 million trees damaged or destroyed with an economic value of \$1.1 billion.

To restore the quality of life on the Gulf Coast, financial and technical assistance is needed to plan and re-establish trees and forests. Emphasis should be placed on trees that are the most resistant to high winds (i.e., live oaks, longleaf pine and bald cypress). The USDA Forest Service's Urban and Community Forestry Program and the proposed Emergency Restoration Tax Credit can greatly assist in these efforts.

#### Insects and Diseases

Before Katrina, approximately 70 million acres of public and private lands nationwide were at serious risk from 26 different insects and diseases, most of which are non-native. This figure grows dramatically when the approximately 5 million acres affected by Katrina is factored in. The southern pine beetle and the black turpentine beetle are two threats that will impact already stressed forests along the Gulf Coast. Estimates are that the United States spends \$137 billion per year in total economic damages and associated control costs.

The Cooperative Lands Forest Health Management Program can greatly help with this issue.

#### Stream Obstruction Removal

Preliminary reconnaissance estimates show numerous creeks, streams and small rivers clogged with debris and fallen trees. These are contributing to fish kills, including that of threatened and endangered species.

The Emergency Watershed Program has been working with watershed management districts to dredge and rip-rap some of the watersheds throughout Mississippi. Emphasis should be to restore the stream's natural flow, including native plantings and wetland restoration efforts along any areas disturbed by the debris clean up. Unless this is written in the plan, every stream

in the affected area is subject to being dredged. The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program can also aid in this recovery effort.

### Fish/Aquatic Habitat Assessment and Planning Assistance

The states hit by Katrina are home to 15 major fishing ports, 177 seafood processing facilities and 1,816 federally permitted fishing vessels. These states account for 10 percent of the United States shrimp production and 40 percent of the United States oyster production. The surge damaged fragile habitat, including oyster reefs and sea grass beds. The toxic chemicals, including oil spills from Hurricane Rita, leaching into the Gulf of Mexico will probably prove deadly for fish and crustaceans. Preliminary reports show \$540 million in economic losses to the industry from Katrina alone. In the sportfishing industry, many small boats and charter craft were damaged. In Louisiana alone, the economic impact to its sportfishing industry is estimated to be \$200 million in the next year. Several institutions including federal and state agencies, academic institutions and non-profit organizations have already begun compiling information about what the impacts are.

Federal programs to address these issues are the National Marine Fisheries Service (Office of Habitat), the National Ocean Service (Office of Response and Restoration), the U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ( Gulf of Mexico Program and Office of Wetlands, Oceans and Watersheds).

### Threatened/Endangered Species Restoration

There were many impacts to threatened and endangered species. There was probably little or no direct mortality on gopher tortoises, but indirectly the destruction and opening of the canopy in habitat that already was marginal will accelerate understory shrub and hardwood encroachment to further increase habitat loss in the absence of adequate prescribed fire and management. We were in the process of working in cooperation with private landowners, Environmental Defense, the Longleaf Alliance, the American Forest Foundation and others to restore habitat for the tortoise and de-list it in ten years. That is unlikely now.

Regarding the gulf sturgeon, there are reports of fish kills, and at least one confirmed report of dead gulf sturgeon due to low oxygen in the water from organic input from leaf litter and other sources such as raw sewage and untreated effluent from Hattiesburg, New Augusta, Lucedale, Petal, Columbia, Jackson and virtually every municipality or source of discharge that lost power.

With the population of the sandhill crane, there were two deaths out of a population of 32 with transmitters on them. The population was already marginal for the purposes of sustaining a viable population. Indirectly the destruction and opening of the canopy in habitat that already was marginal will accelerate understory shrub and hardwood encroachment to further increase habitat loss.

The piping plover has a small wintering population in Mississippi and uses shallow mud flats for foraging. It is not known whether we lost this limited habitat along the coast and on the barrier islands.

For the red-cockaded woodpecker, there are lost cavity trees in Bienville National Forest, the largest state population, as well as Homochitto National Forest. Surveys are currently ongoing.

With the gopher frog, there is a significant amount of trees down in and around one of the last two breeding ponds. There is probably no direct mortality, but there is a concern that excessive downed logs might actually block movement by frogs into ponds for breeding. This can be resolved with careful salvage and management.

With quillwort, in small coastal streams the potential concern is that fallen trees and damage along the bayheads bordering these small streams could alter the local hydrology and sedimentation, which will modify and perhaps destroy its habitat.

With bald eagles, nests and nesting tree losses have occurred, but the extent is unknown.

Sand dunes in Alabama were destroyed, thus a loss of habitat for the Alabama beach mouse. Also, salt spray from the ocean damaged the scrub habitat where the mouse forages.

Furthermore, the damage to sea turtles through nesting beach conditions on the barrier islands is probable.

The food for the yellowblotched map turtle and the ringed sawback turtle was probably harmed with the low oxygen levels due to excess debris in streams. With brown pelicans, there is storm mortality, but the extent is unknown.

An assessment of the status of these species and their habitat since the hurricane should be completed to develop management or restoration needs. In the meantime, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of these species will benefit from longleaf, hardwood and stream restoration activities and the efforts to restore freshwater, coastal or barrier islands.

The Landowner Incentives Program, the Healthy Forests Reserve Program, the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, the Partners For Fish and Wildlife Program, the NOAA Fisheries Habitat Restoration Program and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Office of Habitat Conservation can all help with this very important issue.

#### Other Restoration Activities

Preliminary reconnaissance estimates show a wide array of impacts to coastal habitats along the northern Gulf Coast that provide important shoreline protection and habitat benefits. Impacts include coastal wetlands losses, damaged oyster reefs and loss of other shellfish resources, damage to beaches and dune systems, numerous creeks, streams and small rivers clogged with debris and fallen trees that may impede fish passage.

Agencies must work quickly with states, counties, parishes and local communities to identify and carry out needed near-term and mid-term response and restoration activities critical to public trust resources, infrastructure rebuilding and human communities. Congress should provide funding through programs that have the capacity to respond quickly to these needs.

We should utilize the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Emergency Watershed Protection Program, the NOAA Fisheries Habitat Restoration Program and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to address these needs.

#### Wildlife-Associated Tourism

Sportsmen in Mississippi annually pay \$55.6 million in state sales, fuel and income taxes - this could pay the salaries of 1,881 teachers or fund the annual education expenses of 10,488 students. Sportsmen support more jobs in Mississippi (12,258 jobs) than Northrup Grumman's Pascagoula facility (10,000 jobs), one of Mississippi's largest employers. Mississippi's sportsmen annually spend more than the value of the state's cotton crop (\$670 million versus \$406 million). And the ripple effect of Mississippi's sportsmen is \$1.2 billion on our state's economy.

Tourism in Mississippi as a whole brings in billions of dollars. The Division of Tourism within the Mississippi Development Authority estimates that 33 million visitors stayed over night in Mississippi in 2002, with an average expenditure of \$96 per day, or \$3.1 billion for the year. About 86 percent of these visitors were from out-of-state. With the number of manufacturing businesses closing and jobs going to other countries, tourism dollars are increasingly important to the health of Mississippi's economy. They will be significantly decreased due to Katrina. For example, the second most requested information from the Mississippi Development Authority is on saltwater fishing.

Recently, Secretary Norton gave the opening remarks at a conference titled "Banking On Nature" signifying the importance of wildlife-associated tourism on our economy.

The Economic Assistance Program and the Rural Development Program can help with these losses.

#### Closing Remarks

I hope I have provided you an overview of the impacts and the programs that can help us get back on our feet. I look forward to working with you, the rest of the panel, our great Governor, our entire delegation, the Congress and the Administration in doing so.

In conclusion, I would like to end with a quote from one of my favorite actors and a fellow Mississippian, Morgan Freeman. Last week at *Mississippi Rising*, a fundraiser for the Mississippi Hurricane Recovery Fund, the teary-eyed Freeman said, "We ( Mississippi) will rise again. Mississippi crawled out of the rubble and helped their neighbors and got about the business of surviving." I am asking you to help all the victims of Katrina take the next step in the hard walk of a new life - to get about the business of living.

Thank you.

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