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Testimony of Mr. Chuck Leavell

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Before

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Issues Affecting Southern Forests

Growing up around here, I've played many different halls in Georgia, in front of many different crowds. But rarely in broad daylight and never before such a distinguished group.

My name is Chuck Leavell. My wife Rose Lane and I are Tree Farmers from down near Macon in Bullard, Georgia. I also play piano a bit.

But today's not about music. It's about my other passion: family forests. Our Tree Farm, Charlane Plantation, is just one of five million family-owned forests in the South. Altogether these five million families own about 70 percent of all the timberland in our region.

So I was truly excited when Chairman Walden extended the invitation to testify. If ever there was a time when we needed to have a serious talk about healthy forests in the South, it's now.

I was honored to play the national anthem at President Bush's signing ceremony for the Healthy Forests Restoration Act. [Another distinguished crowd, but that was in DC!] You couldn't help be moved by the firefighters honored by the President: elite hotshot crews, smoke jumpers, men and women from local, rural fire departments.

They do a vital job, protecting life and property. And, with an average of 4 million acres of wildlands burning every year, these heroes deserve every ounce of support we can give them – to help fight fires, and to restore forest health so wildfires are less likely to burn in the future.

This is just as true in the South as it is anywhere else. Half the fire starts recorded nationally are in the South. Often, they're small, and don't make headlines.

But they come quickly, and small landowners can only afford small fires. A fire of under a thousand acres can destroy a legacy that a family has taken generations to build. And unlike Federal lands in the West, the states in the South bear the largest burden of firefighting. I know rural fire departments in my part of Georgia are pressed to the limit already. Shrinking state budgets don't help. And declining Federal support for state and rural fire programs makes the job even harder.

The Healthy Forests Initiative is a giant first step in helping us deal with wildfire, insects and disease. I hope Congress will fully fund these programs, as well as the community firefighting assistance and other U.S. Forest Service programs on which my neighbors and I depend to keep our family forests healthy and growing.

But I want to leave you with another message as well. One that I know my fellow Tree Farmers would echo.

Our forests aren't just tree factories. They provide prime habitat for all kinds of species, help nurture critical watersheds. They sequester carbon, produce oxygen, host all sorts of outdoor recreation, and provide the

green space around our cities.

Yes. We want to keep our forests healthy. We want to keep them producing fiber and producing clean water and air, protecting wildlife and providing places where our neighbors can hunt or just walk in the woods.

But most of all, we want to keep them. Period. Keeping our heritage of family stewardship strong – that's always been the cornerstone of conservation in the South.

And it's getting harder and harder every year.

Over 1 million acres of rural Southern land is converted for development annually – most of it family forest land. For some forest owners, that's the right choice.

But many, many other family forest owners want the opportunity to consider other choices too: to keep their forest working, to keep rural communities intact and local economies strong.

Increasingly the deck is stacked against them. This is what I call the South's "Invisible Forest Health Crisis." A crisis where many forest owners don't see a way to preserve their family's heritage of voluntary, private stewardship.

Many of you know I'm active in the American Forest Foundation and serve as a Trustee. Before that, I served for several years as a member of their national forestry operating committee, and I remain an active member of Georgia Forestry Association. This gives me a special opportunity not just to meet dozens and dozens of family forest owners from all over the South. It also gives me an opportunity to listen to their concerns.

Here's what they have to say. [Remember this is a "Chuck" sample, not a Gallup Poll. But I'm confident it's a good reflection of what's on their mind.]

First, economically they feel trapped. The value of the land under our forests is making it almost impossible to justify further investments in our forests. There are a number of factors that have put us in this spot.

Markets for wood are sluggish, near non-existent for lower-value trees. Land prices and taxes are high, and getting higher as cities and towns grow closer to the woods. In many places, we're taxed on the potential value of our land, rather than the current value – an idea that might have made sense 150 years ago.

It's a fact that most families don't own forests just for the money. Most say they're in it for pride and pleasure first; a profit on timber falls further down the list. But even the most conservation-minded owner needs cash. For taxes, insurance, to invest in the future of their forests.

More and more these days, that cash can't be found just by working in the woods.

This backs me and the millions of other Southern landowners right into the corner. Our timber crop is among the most valuable in the South – supporting over 770,000 direct jobs, and about \$120 billion in total industry output. Many rural industries depend on our wood.

Just as important, our city neighbors prize the "environmental goods" we produce. Our forests are the green places suburbanites want to get away to. Their water is cleaner and cheaper because of the watersheds we manage. We produce oxygen in our forests, and take up carbon dioxide. We provide the habitat for game species our neighbors can hunt, and we take care of the special places endangered species need to survive.

They just don't pay for it.

It seems public values and public policy toward family forest owners are based on a paradox – that their land can sustain itself without cash flow, and that vital public goods can be produced without investment.

Can we work our way out of this paradox? I know we can. Here are three ways Congress can help us move forward.

First, support new markets. The biomass provisions in the Healthy Forests Restoration Act open new markets for low value wood, on Federal forests. Those markets are just as important for family forest

owners here in the South, and we hope Congress will work to encourage them. We need biomass markets that work with our nation's existing wood using industries, because unless our domestic paper industry survives there will be fewer and fewer markets, hence fewer and fewer incentives, for family forest owners.

At the same time, wood isn't the only product we produce. Shouldn't family owners also earn some return for the investments they make in endangered species, clean water, and healthy habitat for fish and wildlife? Carbon credits and wetlands mitigation banking are just two examples of how applying market principles to conservation can help provide some of the cash families need to stay on the land. Right now, the Conservation Security Program applies only to family farmers; it should apply to family forest owners too.

The fact is, the Federal government invests over a half billion dollars in State and Private Forestry and Forest Service research programs annually. Over in Bullard, we call that real money. I know how easy it is to justify spending this year, because that's what you did last year, and the year before that. We have to get beyond that. As Rose Lane's great uncle Baby Joe put it: If you're not catching fish in your favorite pond, you need to find a new pond or a new way to spend your afternoons.

We need to take a hard look at what's working, what's not – and make certain that every dollar we invest in public programs for family forests does at least a dollar's worth of work. Where it counts. In the woods.

Second, be sparing with regulation. Some folks believe you can simply force people to be good stewards. Trust me. It doesn't work that way; people have to want to do it.

That's why we Tree Farmers put more stock in education than we do in regulation. When family forest owners know more, they do more. And they do it willingly because we've shown them how conservation practices help them do what they want to do – make their forests better.

[Next week, in fact, Rose Lane and I will be hosting a couple hundred of our neighbors so they can see what we've done with longleaf pine, songbirds and quail and learn what might work for them.]

On the other hand, even the best-intentioned regulations can add costs for family forest owners – costs that often can't be recovered through other kinds of income. When burden tops benefit, people just leave.

I'm not just talking about the cost of hiring consultants, or the income taken by setting aside land for public purposes. Regulation can add a psychological burden too, especially for folks who already feel disposed to do the right thing. Remember, most Tree Farmers like me are in it for pride and pleasure, not just profit. When it stops being fun, when there's one too many hoops to jump through, a lot of good stewards might just give it up.

Third, make the public a partner in sustaining our forests. They enjoy the benefits. Perhaps we can find ways for them to help share in the costs – through the right mix of tax policy, incentives, cost-share programs. The idea isn't to create a welfare program for family forest owners. We don't need it or want it. But to keep our lands working, we need to generate cash flow for all our products, including those you can't saw or pulp.

On taxes, we need to make the death tax repeal permanent. Otherwise, thousands of family forest owners won't be able to keep their land in family hands. We need capital gains and cost recovery provisions that reflect the peculiar nature and long-term risks associated with timber.

With respect to appropriations, Congress should fully fund the newly-created Forest Land Enhancement Program. It was zeroed out in the President's Budget. Of all the Farm Bill programs authorized in the last bill, FLEP was the only Federal cost-share program aimed primarily at family forest owners; the rest were targeted primarily to farmers. EQIP needs to be opened even further, so it can address conservation opportunities on all family-owned forestland. And we need a Conservation Security Program aimed at forest owners as well as farmers.

Put another way, 99.4 percent of the conservation funding authorized in the Farm Bill generally addressed row crop and animals. Only .6 percent – FLEP – dealt exclusively with trees. Here in the South though, less than 10 percent of forest land is owned by farmers. The rest is owned by folks who, plain and simple, just grow trees.

Other HFRA programs should be funded as well – especially fire protection, research on insect and

diseases particular to the South, and a robust system for inventory and monitoring.

Ultimately, though, it will take fresh ideas – and perhaps even a willingness to shed some old ones – to solve the South's Invisible Forest Health Crisis. From where I stand, it's not about control. It's not about laws or rules. It's not about putting millions of acres into public ownership. It's about choice.

As a society, we need to give family forest owners more choices, not fewer. Choices that will let them preserve and pass on their heritage of family stewardship. If we educate them about these choices, and make the economics feasible, I'm confident the Southern forest will prosper – because the power of private stewardship can't be matched. When a forest is in family hands, it truly is in good hands.