Committee on Resources,

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

forests - - Rep. Scott McInnis, Chairman
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Witness Statement

Statement of Thomas Brendler
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before the
House of Representatives Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
on
Effective Community Involvement in National Forest
Restoration and Recreation Efforts: Obstacles & Opportunities
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Dear Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I am Thomas Brendler, Executive Director of the National Network of Forest Practitioners. I will begin with a brief overview of my organization and the community forestry movement, followed by a discussion of what I see as some of the issues and challenges associated with community involvement in national forest restoration and recreation efforts. I will then briefly address national forests of the eastern united states, and close with discussion of the Forest Service's Economic Action Programs, which in my view represent a working model for effective community-agency partnership.

the nnfp & the community forestry movement

The National Network of Forest Practitioners (NNFP) is a grassroots alliance of rural people, organizations, and businesses finding practical ways to integrate economic development, forest conservation, and social justice. The Network's mission is to promote the mutual well being of workers, rural communities, and forests by supporting individuals and groups that build sustainable relationships between forests and people.

Formed in 1990, the Network now boasts over 500 members in 48 states and British Columbia. NNFP members are engaged in a wide variety of enterprises in rural communities including watershed protection and restoration, ecotourism, job training, non-timber forest products, and value-added wood manufacturing. The membership includes people of Native American, Latino, Asian, African American, Caucasian and other ethnic backgrounds. Together, NNFP members are striving to build a forest economy that is ecologically sound and socially just.

The NNFP and its partners represent the vanguard of a growing movement which has come to be known as community forestry. Practitioners of community-based forestry--or "practitioners" for short--first appeared about a decade ago in rural American communities that had traditionally relied on forests for their economic, social, and environmental well-being. Their emergence represented an attempt by rural communities to combat trends that seemed beyond their control: ecological degradation and the 'export' of forest wealth; extreme unemployment, emigration and the decline of community capacity; rising national

pressures on forest policy and consequent federal agency withdrawals into more centralized modes of decision-making; and a rapidly globalizing economy. Communities began to organize to gain greater control of their future, and to ensure the environmental soundness, economic viability, and social justice of forest management.

Everywhere it seems people are talking about the need to balance concerns for environmental protection and economic development. People from rural, forest-dependent communities know that this is no easy task. Across the country, changes in the way forests are managed are bringing about significant social and economic transformations. These changes are particularly acute in traditionally forest-dependent communities, communities which represent the majority of rural America. Faced with the challenge of survival, we are trying to find ways to strengthen our communities by creating economic opportunities which, while forest-based, will be ecologically sound in the long term. By finding creative ways to integrate economic development, environmental protection, and social justice now, community forestry practitioners hope to strengthen their self-reliance, avert future crises, and forge their own prosperity.

While practitioners come in all shapes and sizes, they tend to be community-based non-profit organizations. In many communities, these organizations have risen from the ashes of poverty and resource degradation, in abandoned storefronts and church basements to become engines of grassroots change. Many groups represent the first efforts by communities to come together to solve difficult problems, and many of these have grown up to become community institutions. While they often serve as a incubators for partnership and collaboration, their focus is ultimately on action and tangible change. They are the "doers" in the community forestry movement: they translate vision into practice, they know what policies look like when they hit the ground. They are living examples of a paradigm shift that is taking place across the country.

issues & opportunities

Rural communities plagued by scarce jobs and depressed economies view restoration, stewardship, and environmentally sound recreation not only as an economic opportunity, but as the beginning of a new conservation-based economy. Practitioners are making a living harvesting and processing undervalued species and diameter classes, restoring stream banks, maintaining trails, and leading pack trips and ecotours. The economic impact of these activities can be enormous: a 1995 report by the Forest Service showed that, for example, recreation on national forests accounted for a $97.8 billion contribution to the Gross National Product, compared with $3.5 billion for logging. Renewed focus on restoration afforded by the fire plan and the large scale watershed projects hold enormous potential to strengthen rural communities in an ecologically sound manner.

The potential of rural communities to benefit from forest restoration efforts does, however, raise several important issues.

Social Justice

At the same time, rural areas are sites of immense poverty and historic injustice: 25 per cent of rural counties are classified as persistently poor. Because more than half of all rural counties are within 100 miles of a national forest boundary, its is essential for concerns about poverty and social justice to be taken into consideration in discussions about national forest policies. Moreover, much of the forest work on national forests--tree planting, thinning, road closures and maintenance, and non-timber forest products harvesting--is carried out by working-class people and people of color. In the Pacific Northwest, for example, over 80 per cent of tree planting is carried out by Latinos. This recognition has heightened longstanding concerns

about marginalization, discrimination, and racism by land management agencies, natural resource professions, and interest groups.

The NNFP believes that traditionally disenfranchised groups can make an essential contribution to the advancement of sustainable forestry, and forest restoration, particularly because they have a direct impact on the land and because their communities are often most severely affected by forest trends, such the depletion of non-timber forest products. Most importantly, these groups represent a significant portion of the *existing* restoration workforce, which has been present for more than 20 years, and as such represents a wealth of historical knowledge about restoration and a set of potential partners.

- We firmly believe that engaging underserved and minority groups--and addressing the associated, fundamental issues of cultural diversity and social justice--will help overcome societal barriers to achieving lasting forest stewardship.

- Forest management is inseparable from issues like access to capital, job training, and forest work; the elusive living wage; the treatment of forest workers; and the impacts of forest management decisions on surrounding communities.

- In general, there is a need for a more complete understanding of the full range of work being carried out in the woods an appreciation of the true diversity of the workforce engaged in it.

- We fully support the notion of a nationwide assessment of the forest and watershed restoration workforce, which could serve as valuable reference in the development of forest policy.

Collaboration

The NNFP has had a long and amicable relationship with the Forest Service. In 1999, the NNFP and the Forest Service negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), whose goals include expanding access to information for practitioners and agency staff alike, and promoting cooperation at the national, regional, and local levels. Partnerships between community-based non-profits and federal agencies like the Forest Service continue to emerge, and have proven an effective tool for accomplishing mutual goals.

Most recently, the NNFP its partners have been working with the Forest Service to ensure that the new fire plan is implemented in a fashion that strengthens small rural communities and promotes collaborative stewardship. Our concern from the beginning has been that the fast pace and enormous scale of the fire effort, which has, for example, led many practitioners to fear that their skills, experience, resources, and small size will make it difficult to compete for and carry out restoration contracts. As a result, those who have worked over the past decade to open up opportunities for small, local, light-on-the-land enterprises, and local and mobile contract workers of all kinds, are concerned that rural communities will once again become dependent on large, non-local firms.

Although this work is in its early stages, there have already been some reports of resistance at the local and regional level to collaborating with non-agency partners. Such critics view the fire plan as a strictly inter-agency initiative, and question the role of community-based non-profits and other potential partners. These reports appear to contradict explicit directives set forth in Title IV of the FY 2001 Appropriations Bill, for, for example, working with non-profits and employing innovative contractual tools for carrying out work. This confusion about the role of non-profits also seems ironic, considering that ordinary citizens have been approaching community-based non profits for information about the fire plan, before they contact the Forest

Service, if at all.

In our other work with the Forest Service, I have observed a similar dynamic: the Washington office is readily supportive and willing to issue national directives, while the at local and regional level in some areas--perhaps specifically in reaction to such directives--is resistant to working differently. It is important to point out, however, that at the same time, the local and regional levels have been wellsprings of innovation--there are some Forest Service staff who our members would like to have "cloned." In addition, support for community forestry at the national level is far from universal, as illustrated by the limited internal support for the Economic Action Program, which I will discuss later. In general, we are optimistic with the support for community collaboration thus far by the Forest Service as it begins implementing the fire plan, but the Committee's help to ensure that the Forest Service fulfills its commitment to rural communities.

I would like to draw your attention to several critical needs:

- Agencies, especially at the local and regional level, need a better understanding of and appreciation for how community-based non profits can help them implement their work, for example by serving as a bridge between these agencies and local communities. We are supportive of the Forest Service's Collaborative Stewardship Team's recommendation for joint workshops that would bring communities and agency staff together in an educational setting.

- Some agency staff resist using unconventional tools (like those identified in Title IV) because they do not receive internal encouragement to do so. Risk-taking and innovation within agencies is a critical element in forging new partnerships and solving complex natural resource problems. It must be rewarded at all levels.

- Agencies like the Forest Service cannot be expected to employ new tools without adequate resources for necessary training and staff. For example, the Forest Service currently lacks a sufficient number of contracting officers ("CO's) the agency will need in order to meet the expectations of Title IV.

- Community collaboration and investment needs to be an agency priority for which all staff are held accountable. There have been timber targets in the past, and we would propose that the agency needs community and ecological targets.

- We need to take a long term view that extends beyond the current crisis, while at the same time uses it to leverage a permanent, meaningful role for rural communities in national forest management.

Investment & Capacity

Forests and communities must be seen as a target for long-term investment, not just as a source of endless, short-term dividends. Conventional methods for measuring the worth of forests have failed to take into account non-market values, such as forests' role in maintaining air and water quality, and as a result have hampered effective forest management. Accepting forests as providers of public goods will require us to make investments for which short dividends are not necessarily guaranteed.

Similarly, rural communities continue to suffer from an inability to capture, add to, and recirculate the value that comes off of their neighboring forests. As you are probably aware, the economic multipliers at each successive link in the value-added chain are significant. One observer has gone so far as to propose "man

years per thousand board feet" as an alternative measure of mill productivity. We feel that adding value to what comes of the not only forest communities, but, by increasing the value of each acre, reduces the number of acres that need to be cut to generate the same amount of income.

Ultimately, the ability of community forestry practitioners to be effective partners and to create lasting change in forests and rural communities, depends on their capacity to solve problems and capitalize on emerging opportunities. Because most community forestry practitioners operate on shoestring budgets, often relying on volunteers and in-kind support, they often lack the resources to build their own capacity. With narrow profit margins, many small, innovative community-based business find themselves in a similar predicament. These groups are breaking new ground, and the new economy they are helping create--built on conservation and restoration--requires investment. This is "R&D," plain and simple. At present there is no significant source of such investment. The Forest Service's Economic Action Program represents the beginnings of such a resource, but its funding has always been tenuous.

- We envision a Community Forestry Investment Fund, which would provide grants and low interest loans to stimulate nationwide innovation in small-scale, conservation-based forest enterprise and document lessons learned.

Information

Rural communities and groups like ours have become accustomed to the fact that information on Forest Service activities is difficult to access, rarely comparable across regions, and in some cases lacking altogether. While was encouraging to see that the General Accounting Office identified this need in 1997, I mention this issue at every opportunity, because information is a building block of trust, and a key to community involvement. The Forest Service appears to have acknowledged this need, but it is important that it be a priority.

For example, there is no easily accessible, comparable data (current or historic), for example on the Economic Action Program. This situation has made it difficult for communities to learn about the program, and for groups like ours to support it effectively. We have similar concerns about the new fire plan, and have been urging the Forest Service to make basic information on the plan (including opportunities it offers and how to access them) widely accessible.

- We have proposed to the Forest Service the creation of a regularly updated, web-based database of proposed and ongoing fire plan projects, which would be searchable by forest, locality, and other criteria. Such a tool could serve as model for EAP and other Forest Service programs.

Monitoring

Well-designed restoration projects require a commitment to track or monitor work so successes and failures can be identified, and actions modified--or halted--if necessary. Diverse interests are more likely to support each other when they have common objectives and safeguards to protect their interests. Monitoring is the first step, but it is incomplete by itself. It must be accompanied by reporting mechanisms and the establishment of processes that ensure prompt corrective actions when necessary. These steps are part of adaptive management, which views every management action as an experiment and acknowledges the uncertainty associated with each action.

For many years monitoring has been seen as an important activity in public policy and management models

but done in a limited fashion, if at all. Looking forward and putting new projects on the ground has always been more captivating than looking back and monitoring what has been done. Yet, monitoring is the linchpin in efforts to understand and learn from our actions, as well as to begin to build accountability for them. Building accountability requires, first, engaging diverse local and distant stakeholders in monitoring processes and practices, and, second, developing ways that monitoring and learning inform and even obligate subsequent actions.

Community-based monitoring efforts a number of technical and political challenges, including:

- Adequate funding: some propose that projects should not be approved if a monitoring plan and necessary funding are not in place at the outset
- Tension over the level of scientific rigor required to achieve objectives
- Differing perceptions and expectations
- Inclusiveness in multi-party monitoring; and
- Integrating social and ecological factors into the monitoring process

A Footnote from the East

While I am the head of a national organization, as a resident and native of New England, and the sole witness from the eastern United States, I thought it important to draw your attention briefly to my backyard. As you might imagine, national forests in the east are easily overshadowed by their western counterparts, because they represent a fraction of the national forest system's total acreage. Yet, they are no less capable of serving as crucibles for innovation and partnership.

Two examples from the Northeast are:

- The Green Mountain, White Mountain, and Finger Lakes national forests have just received approval to resume their forest plan revision process. Important new regulations (and interpretations of them) have changed fundamentally the way these forests will go approach public involvement. Key among these is a new awareness of the need for local advisory committees (both scientific and citizen-based), the need for greater integration of forest planning with more landscape (ecosystem and community) perspectives, and stronger emphasis on building broad principles and goals into the planning process. Another important philosophical change that is influencing the planning process is a strong focus on sustainability as the principle objective of forest management.
- In Vermont, one of our members is attempting to develop the first stewardship contract in their local district of the Green Mountain National Forest, focusing on headwater stream restoration in past and ongoing timber sale areas. They report it has been a slow process of education of mid-level agency officials about the stewardship contracting process--and the opportunities it presents--but hope to begin work this summer.

One last point is that while national forests in the east will benefit from the same tools and programs as their western counterparts, the predominance of private lands will heighten the importance of developing parallel, private-sector, market-based innovations as well, such as "green" certification, and cooperatives among

landowners and manufacturers. Such innovation would certainly have application to the West, where private lands issues, while overshadowed, are far from nonexistent.

economic action programs: a case study of what works

Though its Cooperative Forestry Program, the Forest Service has played, and can continue to play, a critical role in assisting communities like those of our members. We are grateful for the official recognition of this role in the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1978, the National Forest-Dependent Rural Communities Economic Diversification Act of 1990, and in the Forest Service's 1990 strategic plan.

As you are probably aware, the Forest Service's Economic Action Programs (EAP) have traditionally consisted of five programs: Wood in Transportation, Forest Products Conservation and Recycling, Rural Development, Economic Recovery, and Economic Diversification Studies. Network members have found these last three programs, which we shall collectively refer to as Rural Community Assistance (RCA), to be particularly effective mechanisms for enabling the Forest Service to carry out its rural assistance role. In fact, in many areas of the country, RCA is the only resource of its kind available to struggling rural communities. Furthermore, while many communities have benefited from RCA-many more across the country are facing growing challenges that RCA's minimal but critical assistance can help them address before these challenges balloon into major crises.

As you may know, rural communities can apply through the Rural Development program for grants that serve as matching funds for local projects to stimulate improvements in long-term economic and social well-being. Economic Recovery assists rural communities in or near national forests, which are experiencing acute economic problems associated with changes in resource management policies and decisions. Economic Recovery has been used to help community leaders facilitate community-based planning, develop job- and leadership skills, develop business plans, and devise and implement market strategies for new and existing technologies. The Economic Diversification Studies program, which was discontinued in FY 1996, provided cost-share funds to study ways of diversifying local economies in communities that were heavily dependent on one industry. Projects ranged from tourism and value-added manufacturing to historic preservation and recycling.

We have found EAP and RCA to be instrumental and cost-effective for several reasons:

1) On average, every dollar spent RCA leverages $5 to $10 from other sources. For example, the $80,000 in RCA funds which supported the development of the Watershed Improvement Network in northern California leveraged some $500,000 in state and federal funds for watershed improvement.

2) EAP offers a helping hand, not a handout. It strengthens the capacity of rural communities to solve problems by (for example) providing access to technology and expertise, and by building working relationships among community residents, organizations, businesses and governmental agencies. The end result of the agency's EAP approach is both a strengthening of the internal resources of a community, as well as improved access to the external resources available to it.

3) The community capacity built with the help of EAP often provides a necessary foundation for future economic development. It has been a major catalyst in the development of economic opportunities emerging around forest conservation and restoration.

4) The lasting contribution the EAP efforts has made to the social and economic infrastructure of

rural communities will lessen their reliance on federal assistance in the long term, and help avert future crises that would invariably involve further public expenditure.

5) As rural communities take their critical first steps toward capacity building and economic development, EAP is often the only source of funding. EAP support to communities during these early stages strengthens their competitiveness and in many cases simply makes them eligible for better known, but less accessible programs. In this respect EAP again acts as a source of leverage.

6) EAP starts at the community level, engaging Forest Service staff (often local residents themselves) directly with community leaders, and developing solutions from the ground up. In many areas, EAP is the only agency approach with such an intensive delivery system. This local orientation produces solutions appropriate to unique local circumstances, and in which local residents feel invested--two characteristics which our experiences have shown to be determinants of lasting success.

7) EAP does not presume to hold the answers to the problems of rural communities. Nor does it assume that all rural communities are alike Instead, EAP is structured to be adaptive both to unique local circumstances of client communities as well as to changing social and economic conditions and emerging crises. For example, RCA has adapted to the unique landowner patterns in the northeast, where Rural Development monies are implemented through the Rural Development Through Forestry program.

8) The Forest Service is uniquely positioned to administer EAP. With "branch offices" in small rural communities, the Forest Service is able to reach communities other agencies cannot reach. The Forest Service also brings to the table an enormous land base, access to national resources, and internal reserves of expertise in forest management, economic development, and forest products technology.

9) While state agencies often function as invaluable partners in EAP projects, EAP's status as a federal program offers several unique advantages. It affords consistent service delivery, draws upon a national pool of expertise, and facilitates the transfer of knowledge among rural communities nationwide. As EAP monies are not limited to federally-owned land, the program provides a useful tool for reckoning with challenges at the watershed level and other areas of mixed ownership. All of these strengths as a federal program help make EAP more cost effective.

Yet, EAP's usefulness and effectiveness have built a growing constituency of past and potential beneficiaries who want to see the effort flourish. A closer examination of similar EAP projects around the country reveals that as the projects mature beyond implementation the leveraged dollars often increase dramatically and the social, emotional, economic and environmental benefits to the communities multiply. We are not talking about hand outs or government grant dollars thrown into the wind, but rather investments that pay off in big dividends to communities.

The Forest Service's EAP effort has been easy to overlook because it represents such a small percentage of the Forest Service's budget--about half of one percent. It is further isolated within the agency by being treated as a separate program. If it is to be as important a part of the agency's programs as many Forest Service leaders hope and contend, then it must be fully integrated into all Forest Service programs, and must receive a greater share of the budget. We are appreciative of Congress' $12.5 million additional appropriation for FY 2001 under Title IV, and hope that it signals the beginning of a new era for the program, and for the communities who benefit from it.

- We are interested in seeing the annual appropriation for EAP increase beyond its 1997 high of $20 million, to more on the order of $50 million. I must point out, however, that unrelated earmarks undercut the program's potential at any funding level: last year earmarks accounted for two-thirds of the EAP appropriation.

As one of our members put it, "Cutting this program is like cutting a lifeline between rural areas and the rest of the world." And this, from the director of a top-ranked Resource Conservation and Development District: "EAP is the most responsive, accomplishment oriented, least bureaucratic program of them all. There are federal programs that have out lived their purpose and should be eliminated. EAP is not one of them." We feel very strongly that EAP can serve as a model for other federal programs that seek to build partnerships with communities while carrying out restoration efforts.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Subcommittee today.

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