

TESTIMONY OF JASON MEYER

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BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON HR 5582

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Chairman Tiffany, Ranking member Neguse and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on H.R. 5582, the White Oak Resilience Act. I would also like to thank Chairman Westerman for his work on white oak and Representatives Andy Barr and Ami Bera for their leadership on this important issue.

I am the executive director of the White Oak Initiative and a forester by training. The White Oak Initiative is a diverse coalition of non-profits, trade associations, universities, state and federal forestry partners, forest industry representatives, landowners, and the distilled spirits industry. All of these are concerned about the future of white oak populations and the upland hardwood forests they are found in. We are committed to the long-term sustainability of America's white oak forests as well as the economic, social, and environmental benefits they provide.

American white oak (*Quercus alba*) is a tree species currently occupying more than 104 million acres of public and private forestland across much of the eastern and central United States. American white oak has a strong presence in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia and Wisconsin. Not only do white oak forests support extensive plant and animal biodiversity, but white oak is also the most commercially important timber oak, generating billions of dollars annually, boosting rural economies, and supplying necessary material to industries such as furniture, flooring, cabinetry, railroad ties, and wine and spirits.

#### The Challenge

Today's white oak forests are dominated by older mature oak trees. Younger trees and seedlings are not regenerating at historic levels and without action now, the population of white oak in our forests will decline significantly in the next 20-50 years. This will have a profound negative impact not just on the numerous forest products industries reliant on white oak, but also on wildlife, including game species such as deer, turkey, and ruffed grouse (hunting licenses are an important source of revenue for states). As a keystone species in the ecosystem, the impact goes beyond our favorite game species, though, and will negatively impact over 500 other species of birds, bats, and pollinating insects that depend on this species for their survival. Clearly this is an ecological dilemma as well as a commercial one.

To protect and enhance American white oak populations, we need to work together — thinking, planning, and acting — to prevent a looming crisis. The only way we will be successful at regenerating white oak for the future is to set the stage for what this species needs to survive and thrive — namely disturbance in the forest that creates conditions for sunlight to reach the forest floor. Seventy years ago, when today's mature trees were just seedlings, public and private landowners were actively logging, fire was more prevalent on the landscape, invasive species did not have the foothold that they have today, and forests were not being converted to other land uses at the current rate. As forest management

activities slowed, fires began to be suppressed, and invasive species moved in, white oak seedlings became threatened by direct competitors that do much better in shaded forest conditions.

#### In More Detail: The White Oak Assessment & Conservation Plan

To address this problem, the White Oak Initiative, with support from USFS Region 8 and 9 Landscape Scale Restoration Grants (which includes participation from 17 state agencies, as well as conservation groups and key public and private partners), began developing a range-wide, science-based report detailing the current state of America's white oak forests. This report, "Restoring Sustainability for White Oak and Upland Oak Communities: An Assessment and Conservation Plan," recommends a practical plan of action to avoid upland oak decline.

According to the report, shifts in land management and ecological changes throughout much of the white oak range are resulting in an increase of competing species establishing themselves in white oak forests. These competing species, most notably maples, beech, and poplar, are shading out white oak seedlings, preventing them from surviving to maturity. As a result, older white oak trees are not being replaced by younger white oak trees at a pace that will support long-term sustainability. The report also highlights the importance of other challenges such as invasive insects and diseases, climate change and behavior change.

The report demonstrates that to restore the long-term sustainability of America's white oak forests, and maintain the economic, social, and environmental benefits they provide, we need active cross-boundary collaboration, participation, and support from industry, resource professionals, policymakers, landowners, and others who can align knowledge and resources behind the report's 10 recommended forest management practices before it's too late.

A full copy of the report has been submitted with this testimony and may be found on the White Oak Initiative website at <https://www.whiteoakinitiative.org/assessment-conservation-plan>.

#### H.R. 5582, The White Oak Resilience Act

Knowing that Federal action would be a key component of the solution, the White Oak Initiative worked closely with the White Oak Caucus in the House of Representatives (Chairs are Rep. Andy Barr, Rep. Ami Bera, Rep. Steve Cohen, and Rep. Scott DesJarlais), the House Natural Resources Committee, and the House Agriculture Committee to draft H.R. 5582 to mitigate the white oak regeneration problem. Given the long-lived life cycle of the white oak, we must actively manage our upland oak forests now to ensure that today's seedlings can outcompete the species that will crowd them out, and to do so means providing the support necessary to remove barriers for landowners, agencies, and conservation groups catalyzing on-the-ground action. Importantly, the bill does not authorize any new funding, new programs, nor should it carry a mandatory score from the Congressional Budget Office. Instead, H.R. 5582 would work within existing USDA Forest Service and Natural Resource Conservation Service programs to address the problem. In summary, the bill:

- Codifies the White Oak Restoration Initiative Coalition – based on the current White Oak Initiative, this body of state, private and federal partners would work together to regenerate white oak across its range.
- Creates pilot projects for the US Forest Service and the Department of the Interior to reforest and regenerate white oak where appropriate.

- Creates a white oak restoration fund where private funding could be used to fund white oak regeneration on national forests through the National Forest Foundation.
- Allows the Civilian Conservation Corps to plant white oak and other associated hardwoods to re-establish native hardwood forests.
- Solves the tree nursery problem by requiring the Forest Service to develop and implement a national strategy to increase the capacity of Federal, State, Tribal and private tree nurseries. This is not limited to white oak, but instead includes all tree species and would help the Forest Service meet its reforestation backlog goals.
- Allows the Forest Service to enter Memorandums of Understanding with land grant institutions, including Historically Black Colleges, to conduct much-needed research on white oak.
- Prioritizes white oak projects by directing USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to create a formal initiative on white oak (similar to the Longleaf Pine Initiative and the Sage Grouse Initiative at USDA).
- Encourages the use of existing authorities that foster collaboration (the Good Neighbor and Stewardship Contracting authorities).

#### Restoring the Long-Term Sustainability of White Oak is Possible

Starting today, we must help both public and private landowners and forest managers actively manage our white oak forests to restore their health by removing competing tree species, prevent diseases and further spread of invasive species, and create openings for this sun-loving tree to flourish. We must work to develop markets for the smaller diameter trees that must be removed to make space for our oaks, as this is a significant barrier for landowners who must invest capital in management practices that they may never see the return on in their lifetimes. We must continue to support research that will improve the vigor of this species to allow it to better withstand the obstacles it must overcome to mature, including climate change. We must invest in the infrastructure necessary, such as nurseries, to augment the natural regeneration that we are trying to lift up. And, we must continue to collaborate and work together across boundaries, disciplines, and sometimes competing interests to face this challenge head-on. H.R. 5582 supports these efforts and outcomes.

Ensuring the regeneration of our upland oak forests is possible, but immediate action must be taken. The White Oak Initiative would like to thank the Natural Resources Committee for highlighting this incredibly important problem and we stand ready to assist in any possible way.