Testimony of a Family Forest Owner

"The Future of the Nation's Forests"

June 3, 2009

The following is a testimony by Clint Bentz, a family forest owner, on behalf of the Oregon Tree Farm System and the American Forest Foundation before the House Agriculture Committee's Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry.

Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of America's family forest owners. I'm a family forest owner in Oregon, where my siblings and I own 700 acres and manage it as a certified property under the American Tree Farm System—a program of the American Forest Foundation. American Tree Farm System certification means that my forest is managed in a way that ensures the continuation of clean water, wildlife, recreational opportunities, and renewable wood products.

I'm here today on behalf of the American Forest Foundation and the 91,000 family owners in the American Tree Farm System.

Family forests that are sustainably managed are critical to our daily lives. Across the nation, these family forests supply the bulk of the wood for wood products, clean water and air, wildlife habitat, and recreational opportunities.

And, without forests, we would be sliding even closer and faster into climate change. Because trees absorb carbon, our nation's forests are effectively reducing 10 percent of all harmful carbon dioxide pollution in the United States every year.

The U.S. EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) predicts that with the right incentives to encourage good forest management practices (like planting trees, replanting cut trees or trees damaged by disasters, lengthening cut rotations, and avoiding deforestation), forests could actually do much more to combat climate change—capturing and storing up to 20 percent of all U.S. carbon emissions.

This is important—we have 20 percent of the solution to our nation's climate challenges right here in our backyard today—in the nation's forests. This is a climate mitigation tool that we can put to work immediately.

The thing I love about being a tree farmer is that I don't live long enough to see the fruit of my own labors. Everything I do on our tree farm is for the benefit of generations yet to come. Anything I do on our land that generates income is due to something that the previous generations created. We care about these lands, and our goal is to leave them to the next generation better than we found them.

Clearly, there is a lot at stake with this essential aspect of our nation's natural infrastructure. Unfortunately, the news isn't all good. These family forests are at grave risk for a number of reasons.

Development Pressure

Family forest owners are faced with tremendous development pressures, as urban areas grow and as the cost of owning their land rises. The U.S. Forest Service predicts that by the year 2030 roughly 44.2 million acres (17.9 million hectares) of forests will experience substantial increases in housing density. When forests are converted to other uses, the Forest Service reports that these negative impacts are common:

- Decreases in native fish and wildlife and their habitats
- Changes in forest health
- Reduced opportunities for outdoor recreation
- Poorer water quality
- Greater loss of life and property to wildfire
- Decreases in production of timber and other forest products

Testimony of a Family Forest Owner (cont.)

Annually, we lose about 1.5 million acres, an area about the size of the state of Delaware. What does this mean? We lose the ecological services like water and air filters, and these lands become much harder and more costly to manage for economic and ecological purposes.

Climate Change and Forest Health

Scientists around the globe predict that as our climate changes, we'll see drastic changes to our forested ecosystems. Many predicted changes will negatively impact America's forests—increased catastrophic wildfires and insect and disease outbreaks, shifts in forest species compositions, and major drought.

We are already seeing the affects of the changing climate today, for example, the massive mountain pine beetle outbreak in the Rocky Mountain region, where millions of acres of forests are dying from the outbreak. Scientists believe the severity of this outbreak is due to a number of factors, one of which is the fact that earlier warming in spring and a longer growing season have allowed the beetles to increase their rate of reproduction to a level we did not think was possible.

Decline in Traditional Markets

One risk to our family forests is the changing economics of forestry. In the South and East, we see paper production moving offshore with a resulting loss of pulpwood markets. We have seen dramatic declines in market opportunities for traditional wood products from family forests for more than a decade. This change is due in large part to the global economy and rising competition from places like South America and Asia. We are importing 35 percent of our lumber from other countries. We are quickly losing our ability to compete with other countries, as manufacturing and environmental costs rise here in the United States and as the regulatory climate for forest owners continues to grow more burdensome.

Forest owners, who previously may have done some cuts to generate revenue each year, have had to hold off the past couple of years because of the weak market. In Oregon, log prices are currently at or below the cost to harvest and transport the logs to the mill. I didn't harvest any timber last year and won't harvest any this year either.

Forest Owners

Raising timber is a multigeneration project. In Western Oregon, it takes 40–80 years to raise a tree from seedling to harvest. In Eastern Oregon, it takes on average 80–120 years to raise a tree to maturity. Hardwoods in the Midwest and East can take up to 150 years to produce high-quality hardwood lumber. That is 3 to 6 generations of owners for one harvest cycle. If families fail to prepare for generational change, this is a point where we see a lot of forests shift into nonforest uses, become fragmented, or become developed—never to return to a working forest.

So, now that I've laid all this depressing information on you, we have some policy solutions to address these threats, to capture the tremendous value of family forests for climate mitigation and other ecosystem services, and to help keep this essential element of our rural economies intact. This is how we will truly secure the future of the nation's forests.

Expanded Market Opportunities

While the primary motivation for ownership among most family forest owners is not timber production (it is a top 10 reason, but not a top 5 reason for owning the land), financial incentives are an essential element for keeping them on the land.

Traditional wood products markets have and will continue to be a strong source of income for family forest owners. With the appropriate policies and incentives in place, these sources can be maintained and improved.

Testimony of a Family Forest Owner (cont.)

Carbon markets represent another minor, yet important, emerging income stream for family forest owners. [A carbon market is when a company or other entity "offsets" a certain amount of carbon dioxide that it produces by paying a forest landowner to grow trees storing an equal amount of carbon in their tissues.] However, it is critical that the policies are structured to reflect the needs of family owners; otherwise, the vast climate mitigation potential in these forests will go untapped.

In addition to carbon markets, markets for other ecosystem services, such as clean water and endangered species habitat, are emerging. We must have policies in place that encourage the development of these markets so we secure the continuation of these services in the future.

Congress has a unique opportunity to create incentives for climate mitigation activities on family forests. Although carbon offset markets are one way to do this, they won't work for every forest owner. Pilot projects that are under way at the American Forest Foundation indicate that although family forest landowners can effectively aggregate their carbon for sale in carbon offset markets, the economic feasibility drops precipitously for forests at or below 80–100 acres.

Because the vast majority of forest owners own less than 100 acres, we need other ways to capture the carbon benefits of those forests—if we are going to double the sequestration in forests from 10 to 20 percent. Incentives will do the job, provided the legislation includes them.

Forests have long provided traditional benefits like wood, wildlife, and recreation. Now, we are also depending on forests to provide ecosystem services like clean drinking water, carbon sequestration, and biomass for clean fuel. Family forests will play an essential role to help our nation with its most pressing environmental issues like climate change. But family forest owners need supportive policies and market incentives if their forests are going to do all they can to survive as healthy forests, thereby providing all the "free" benefits the public now enjoys.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to you.

Questions

1. In what ways can forests help to combat climate change?

2. What three other ecological services do forests provide?

3. How has the global economy affected family forests in the United States?

4. How might wood products markets help to stabilize atmospheric carbon?

5. What is a carbon offset?

6. How might market incentives help to ensure that family forests continue to thrive?