

Private Forest Growth and Retention

Description

USDA administers several programs that protect and enhance private forestland. Specifically, the Forest Service administers two grant programs that support the retention of private forestland threatened by development: the Forest Legacy Program (FLP) and the Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program (CFP). These programs support acquiring conservation easement or fee simple purchases that provide permanent protection for forestland across the country. In addition, NRCS provides technical and financial assistance for a suite of forestry and agroforestry practices.

Forest Legacy Program: The FLP identifies and protects environmentally important forestland threatened by conversion to non-forest use by acquiring conservation easements or fee interest in lands. Projects are selected annually through a two-step competitive process first within participating States, followed by a national panel evaluation. This process results in the selection of high-quality projects that are supported locally and are nationally significant. Projects are evaluated for their importance (which includes economic and environmental criteria), threat of conversion and strategic contribution of the proposed acquisition to the landscape.

Acres that are conserved through the program are protected in perpetuity and managed consistently for the purposes of the FLP. Landowners that participate in the FLP take on the long-term responsibility to manage the land in a manner consistent with the terms specified in the conservation easement and according to a multi-resource management plan that addresses a suite of natural resource elements (soil and water, biological diversity, recreation, timber, threatened and endangered species) where present. In this sense, FLP is not solely a protection program; rather, working forests are encouraged where traditional uses are maintained. Annual monitoring of conservation easements is required to ensure that the specified conservation values are maintained through time.

Community Forest Program: The CFP was authorized in FY 2008 and aims to secure a variety of community benefits through grants to local governments, Tribal governments, and qualified nonprofit organizations to acquire community forests through fee acquisition. In creating these forests, communities and Tribes are able to provide public access and recreational opportunities, protect vital water supplies and wildlife habitat, address the effects of a changing climate, provide demonstration sites for private forestland owners, and derive financial and community benefits from sustainable management. Projects are evaluated for the type and extent of community benefits, contribution to landscape conservation initiatives and the likelihood of conversion.



Clearwater Forest Legacy Program Project. Photo courtesy of USDA.

CFP community forests are managed according to a community forest plan that guides the long-term management and associated community benefits of the community forest. Recipients of community forests grants are required to certify every 5 years that the forest has not been sold or converted to nonforest uses. They are also subject to periodic site visits to ensure conservation values are maintained.

Forest Stewardship Program: The Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) promotes active management of private forest lands through State-directed technical assistance to landowners. This assistance provides landowners with tools and resources to maintain healthy, resilient forest landscapes—including development of forest stewardship management plans, access to State and USDA conservation programs, information on forest certification programs, and connection to existing and new forest product markets.

CASE STUDY

Wisconsin's working forests provide numerous public benefits including wildlife habitat, jobs, recreation opportunities for hiking, hunting and fishing, carbon storage, and clean abundant drinking water for thousands of residents. Located in northwestern Wisconsin, the Brule-St. Croix Forest Legacy Project permanently protects over 21,000 acres of private forest land through a conservation easement held by the State of Wisconsin and funded in part by the Forest Legacy Program. Under the terms of the easement, this stretch of sustainably managed forestland will help to filter and clean drinking water, provide a steady flow of wood products to local mills and protect a shifting mosaic of forest bird habitat. The St. Croix Forest Company will continue to own the land and manage the forest for timber production while ensuring the forest provides vital public benefits for generations to come.

With miles of streams and acres of lakes, ponds, and wetlands, this project protects valuable water resources. Located along the St. Lawrence Continental Divide, the project contains the headwaters of both the St. Croix National Scenic River and the Bois Brule River. These rivers serve as sources of drinking water to nearby towns. The project represents one of the few remaining tracts of private forestland that can be managed to maintain and expand the globally imperiled Pine Barrens forest community. Pine Barrens support an exceptional number of species, including Sharp-Tailed Grouse and 28 species found on the State list of Species of Greatest Conservation Need. Pine Barren habitat is also critical for migratory species such as the federally endangered Kirtland's Warbler; Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ontario, Canada, have the only documented nesting pairs in the world.

The project secures public access and enhances public recreation opportunities for hunting, fishing, trapping, hiking, and cross-country skiing. Centrally located within a complex of protected lands, this property's road and trail networks provide critical links to recreational opportunities on adjoining Forest Service, State, and county land, enhancing recreational opportunities to over 3.5 million people within a 3-hour drive.

Part of a larger conservation initiative, this project ensures the entire Brule-St. Croix Legacy Forest—totaling over 66,000 acres of globally significant Pine Barrens that spans four counties—is now protected under a working forest conservation easement. Large landscape-level conservation initiatives such as the Brule St. Croix Legacy Forest contribute to climate change adaptation and mitigation by keeping forests as forests so they continue to provide benefits such as carbon storage, habitat connectivity, and drinking water protection in the face of a changing climate.

More information on the Brule-St. Croix Legacy Forest can be found at:
<http://www.conservationfund.org/projects/brule-st-croix-legacy-forest>.

As of October 2015, approximately 25 million acres were covered by active Forest Stewardship Management plans. These managed forest landscapes are far less likely to be lost to or degraded by catastrophic wildfire or insect and disease infestations and provide ancillary benefits such as clean air and water, wildlife habitat and recreation opportunities. This program plays an important role in helping to mitigate GHG; however, the associated carbon sequestration is not currently estimated.

NRCS Technical and Financial Assistance: Under the 2008 Farm Bill, most agricultural conservation programs were modified to include forestry activities on non-industrial private forestland, and the use of forestry conservation practices has increased as a result. Financial assistance, mostly through EQIP, has supported an average of 97,000 acres of tree and shrub establishment annually over the past 5 years, and technical assistance has contributed to a further 27,000 acres each year. Nearly 9,000 forest management plans have been developed through the Conservation Activity Plan program during this time period. Windbreaks have been established on over 400 acres; efforts are in place to increase use of this practice for climate adaptation benefits.

Partnership Opportunities

Demand for both the FLP and CFP far exceeds the available resources, a limitation that provides opportunities to leverage non-Federal funds and contributions to maintain private forestland. FLP has been extremely effective at taking advantage of external partnerships and funding. The Forest Service partners with State agencies, landowners, land trusts, and conservation-oriented nonprofit organizations to currently facilitate land transactions, identify potential projects, and contribute considerable cost share. While the program requires a 25-percent non-Federal cost share per project, FLP leverages more than a dollar for each Federal dollar spent in the form of cash, in-kind services, and donation in land and interests in land. Likewise, with a 50-percent cost share requirement, CFP dollars leverage significant funds from other partners and represent a strategic investment in local communities.

Greenhouse Gas Reduction Goal

Goal	GHG Reduction Goal (MMTCO ₂ e per year by 2025) ¹⁴
Enroll an additional 1 million acres of private forestland in the FLP and CFP.	4.8
Enroll an additional 1 million acres of nonindustrial private forestland in NRCS Tree/Shrub Establishment and Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment Practice Standards.	N/A ¹⁵

¹⁴ For information on how to interpret this goal, see p. 6.

¹⁵ The carbon sequestration of these actions has not been estimated at the time this report was developed. These practices may be established on lands that are also enrolled under the FLP or CFP, leading to possible double-counting of estimated carbon sequestration; USDA is exploring how to account for these actions.

Proposed Actions

FY 2016

Action	Lead USDA Agency(s)
Enroll 90,000 additional acres in FLP.	Forest Service
Enroll 1,775 additional acres in CFP.	Forest Service
Enroll 100,000 additional acres in the Tree/Shrub Establishment Practice Standard.	NRCS
Enroll 70,000 additional feet in the Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment Practice Standard.	NRCS

FY 2017

Action	Lead USDA Agency(s)
Enroll 90,000 additional acres in FLP.	Forest Service
Enroll 1,775 additional acres in CFP.	Forest Service
Enroll 100,000 additional acres in the Tree/Shrub Establishment Practice Standard.	NRCS
Enroll 70,000 additional feet in the Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment Practice Standard.	NRCS

FY 2018

Action	Lead USDA Agency(s)
Enroll 90,000 additional acres in FLP.	Forest Service
Enroll 1,775 additional acres in CFP.	Forest Service
Enroll 100,000 additional acres in the Tree/Shrub Establishment Practice Standard.	NRCS
Enroll 70,000 additional feet in the Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment Practice Standard.	NRCS