

# Speech

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## **The Future of Partnering With the Forest Service**

Forest Service Associate Chief Sally Collins  
National Association of Conservation Districts, Annual Meeting  
Atlanta, GA—February 8, 2005

It's a pleasure to be here today. The Forest Service is a century old this year, and we just celebrated our hundredth anniversary with a Centennial Congress in Washington, DC. We invited hundreds of our partners to the Congress; maybe some of you were there, too. I'll talk about some of the outcomes of the Congress toward the end of my remarks, because they directly pertain to partnering with the Forest Service.

However, I'd like to start by telling you a little about where we've been at the Forest Service and about where we're headed.

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## Partnership Origins

Even before there was a Forest Service, our agency existed under other names, going back to 1876. By 1900, we were already working with state and private partners for the conservation of the nation's forests. In fact, our role as a government agency has always been analogous to the mission of the National Association of Conservation Districts: to help our state and local partners accomplish collectively what none of us could ever accomplish individually.

In 1905, the Forest Service was founded under our current name. Our research and our state and private mission areas continued, but we also acquired a new mission area through the transfer of the federal forest reserves to our care—the core of today's National Forest System.

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Unfortunately, at the turn of the century, we inherited a system of land management that was very centralized and top-down, with little opportunity for local input. As a result, we also inherited a lot of local dissatisfaction.

Fortunately, our first Forest Service Chief was Gifford Pinchot, who understood the need for working in partnership with local communities if we were to succeed. He wrote the first manual for administering the national forests, and in it he planted the seeds of partnership. He directed our employees to work closely with local communities to promote conservation. Thanks to Pinchot, the Forest Service, like the NACD, is decentralized, relying on the knowledge of people closest to the resources we manage.

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That was a hundred years ago. Ever since then, we've always been committed to fulfilling our mission through partnerships, whether on state and private land or on federal land.

## **Joint Accomplishments**

So when the National Association of Conservation Districts was formed in 1946, we recognized the opportunities for partnership. For decades, our organizations have worked together on behalf of conservation—and I want to stress how much we value your partnership. We've accomplished a lot together. Here are just a few recent examples:

- In particular, I want to thank you for your invaluable support in getting the Healthy Forests Restoration Act passed a little

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more than a year ago. One of the greatest challenges we face in forest management comes from hazardous fuel buildups, particularly in the wildland/urban interface. HFRA lets us work with communities in the WUI to expedite treatments that make sense for ecosystem health and human safety, and you were instrumental in getting it passed.

- I also want to mention biomass utilization. We have to make our treatments cost-effective if we want to make the greatest difference on the ground, and that includes finding ways to utilize the biomass and small-diameter materials that need to be removed. Again, HFRA gives us authorities for promoting the use of biomass. We deeply appreciate the help we've gotten from local conservation districts in promoting the

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utilization of biomass. You've been a key partner for us in this and other aspects of the National Fire Plan.

- At the local level, we've had some spectacular partnerships, such as the Siuslaw River Basin Restoration Partnership in Oregon. It's a great example of a partnership, involving the Siuslaw National Forest and the Siuslaw Soil and Water Conservation District, as well as other organizations, universities, and community members from throughout the Siuslaw River basin. The partnership carries out projects to restore presettlement watershed functions from ridgetop to coastal wetlands. It's so successful that it won the 2004 International Theiss Riverprize, competing against other river restoration partnerships worldwide.

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So we've always been committed to partnership at the Forest Service, and we have a long history of partnering together with the conservation districts. But the way we work together has changed over time as our focus as an agency has changed. This sheds light on the direction we are heading and the kinds of partnership opportunities we will have in the future, and I want to take a few minutes to outline the way our focus as an agency has changed.

## **A Century of Change**

At the turn of the last century we faced—as a nation—a crisis caused by the unrestrained exploitation of our natural resources. Wildlife such as elk and grizzly were going extinct; we were seeing disastrous fires and floods; and most of the eastern seaboard was devoid of trees, a result of rampant harvesting.

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The Forest Service and the conservation movement grew out of this crisis. I think it's fair to say that all of us here have our philosophical roots in that period.

For three-quarters of a century, the goal of the Forest Service was custodial management, restoration, and—especially during and after the Great Depression—jobs and social responsibility. Think of the Civilian Conservation Corps, which built a lot of our infrastructure. During this period, we measured our success largely in terms of securing the land base, controlling fires, and bringing uses such as range and timber under careful regulation.

Post-World War II, we entered a new period characterized by timber production. From the 1960s to the 1980s, every administration, with strong congressional support, called for



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more timber harvest from the national forests, with the goal of replacing the depleted stocks of private and state timber as a result of the war effort. We measured success largely in terms of producing timber and providing multiple uses, including outdoor recreation and fish and wildlife.

In the early 1990s, that changed again. Today, we're in a new period focused primarily on ecological restoration and recreation. Maybe more than ever before, we are focusing on delivering values and services like clean air and water, scenic beauty, habitat for wildlife, and opportunities for outdoor recreation. Not only do Americans want these things from their national forests, but this shift is also essential to cope with some huge threats to the sustainability of these forests. Today, we seek to harmonize the ecological, social, and economic components

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of sustainability, but we face some tremendous threats to our ability to do so.

## Future Challenges

Not all of these threats are everywhere, but they're in enough places to be severe national problems. The threats will all be familiar to many of you:

- Fire and fuels—I've already touched on that problem; you know it well.
- Invasive species—a huge ecological as well as economic threat—it's estimated that all invasives combined cost Americans about \$138 billion per year in total economic damages and associated control costs.

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- Loss of open space—every day, we lose more than 4,000 acres of working farms and ranches to development, and global markets for wood are affecting our ability to sustain our forests in many areas.
  - Resource degradation through recreational use that isn't properly managed—in 2003, we calculated that we have about 14,000 miles of unauthorized user-created trails on national forest land, which can do a lot of damage and be extremely costly to repair.
  - A huge backlog in restoration projects and facilities maintenance—this will take years to catch up on and take enormous resources.

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- Oversubscribed water resources and water quality problems—legendary problems in many parts of the country, and probably familiar to many of you.
  - Finally, substances in the atmosphere—from ozone to carbon dioxide—that are threatening the long-term health of our ecosystems. Some of these problems are related to climate change.

Any one of these problems alone would be huge. When you put them all together, you get some idea of the sheer scale of what we face. I believe that we are at a crucial moment in the history of conservation in the United States. In the past century, there've been only a few similar moments where we've faced challenges on a similar scale.

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Today, the scale of what we face leaves us no other choice: We have *got* to work together. I believe that the only way we can rise to the challenge is by working upfront through collaborative partnerships for long-term ecosystem health.

## Centennial Congress

Fortunately, I see good reason for hope, and that brings me back to the Centennial Congress we held together with our partners a month ago. One of the themes that came out of the Congress had to do with environmental services—finding ways to attach market value to services from the land that we’ve traditionally taken for granted and delivered for free, such as carbon sequestration, soil and water protection, biodiversity, and

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outdoor recreation. If we can do that, then maybe we can slow the loss of working farms, forests, and ranches that I mentioned.

Market incentives can be part of the answer. Worldwide, markets today have acquired a whole new meaning for conservation. They aren't just for timber and other traditional forest products anymore, although with our heavy wood consumption and our growing reliance on timber imports, I'm convinced that traditional forest products must continue to play a role. Still, markets now also include various forms of payment for carbon sequestration, water delivery, soil protection, and biodiversity conservation. We need to jointly think through environmental services and maybe figure out together how to find more market incentives for delivering them.

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A second set of themes revolved around better engaging the public in conservation. People want a more effective voice in resource management, and we're trying out lots of ways to create incentives for that to happen—involving people in planning early and getting them to help us shape future choices. This changes our role: We still have an obligation to lead, but more as organizers and facilitators rather than as experts who have all the answers, because we don't.

A third—and related—set of themes revolved around partnership and collaboration. Perhaps we can reach out better to the public by finding nontraditional partners to deliver the conservation messages, especially in urban areas. And partners like the conservation districts, who enjoy a high degree of public trust, can continue to help. But we need to find ways to make it

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easier by simplifying our processes, and we're working on new legislation to broaden our authorities. We need to reduce partnership liabilities and streamline our grants and agreements process.

## **New Model for Collaboration**

In important ways, the Centennial Congress itself was a kind of turning point for us. For a number of years now, the controversial issues of the moment—timber, roadbuilding, clearcutting, old growth—have been absorbing most of our energy, leaving little time and energy to focus on emerging issues in conservation—issues like fire and fuels, loss of open space, or invasive species.



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We stand at the beginning of a whole new century. We don't know what issues will drive us 20 years from now, but we do know this: We'll have to identify these issues more quickly, get our energy and resources turned to them with more agility, and engage people vigorously throughout. The models we've used for planning and public involvement in the past won't work.

The Centennial Congress might have been a window into this very different future. The participants focused on huge issues that will matter for years to come, like environmental services and partnerships. They stressed the need for us to help people—our public—find solutions for themselves, knowing that they are the ones who know the land, who know their communities, and who are committed for the long term.

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In this new century, partnerships, collaboration, and community-based forestry will be essential to the way the Forest Service carries out its mission. We are absolutely committed to making that a reality by incorporating it into our culture and by living it out on the ground—in our daily interactions with partners like you.