

Testimony of Dr. Slade Lail
Before the
House Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Energy, & Research
April 19, 2007
On Behalf of the American Forest Foundation and American Tree Farm System

My name is Slade Lail. My family has owned forest and farm land in Georgia since 2000. We have actively managed our forests since 2000.

Although I'm a dentist in Duluth, Georgia, today is not about dentistry. It is about my other passion: my family's forest land. I'm here today as a representative of the American Forest Foundation, and the American Tree Farm System – a community of 90,000 family forest owners who, like me, have pledged to manage their forests to the highest standards of sustainability.

If ever there was a time when we needed to have a serious talk about the future of these family owned forests in Georgia, in the South, and nationwide – it is now.

Most forests in this country are owned by individuals and families like mine. There are 10 million of us nationwide. Nearly half of us own more than 10 acres, but few of us are timber barons. We're dentists, truck drivers, insurance salesmen, nurses, teachers, Congressmen – even a few Presidents are in the bunch. Most of us own fewer than 100 acres.

But together, we are part of an engine that drives rural economies, preserves our rural communities and traditions, and protects our rural environment.

Take Georgia, my home state, for example. I am one of the 650,000 family forestland owners in Georgia. We grow Georgia's highest valued crop – timber is a crop, just like the others you've heard about today. That crop supports over 68,000 jobs and generates nearly \$23 billion for the state's economy. South-wide, the forest crop supports an industry that generates \$120 billion of total output. And the story is similar in other parts of the country.

Just as important are the environmental benefits these forests provide. EPA estimates that 70 percent of US watersheds flow through private forest land. Of the nation's most threatened watersheds, all depend on good forest stewardship to help protect drinking water. These forests also provide critical habitat for wildlife – endangered species as well as some of our most prized game species. About three-fourths of all hunters and anglers pursue their sport on private lands. And generate dollars for rural communities..

I could go on, Mr. Chairman, but I think the picture is clear. Family-owned forests are part of the bedrock of a healthy environment, our city drinking water, our precious wildlife, not to mention the rural heritage we treasure.

But that bedrock is being chipped away. Family forest owners are one of the nation's most vulnerable endangered species, and our forests are fast disappearing from the landscape, just like the American Chestnut tree.

Right here in Georgia, well over a million acres of forest have been developed in the past decade. That is the equivalent of paving a parking lot the size of Hancock County – where I own my forest land – every three years!

If you look at the nation overall, the picture is just as bleak. We are losing about 1.5 million acres of family forests a year – about the size of Everglades National Park every year. This isn't a rural issue or an urban issue, a farm issue or a forest issue. It's bad news for all of us:

- It's bad news for rural communities that depend on forest-based industries to generate a huge share of their income, and some of their best jobs.
- It's bad news for our urban neighbors who depend on family-owned forests for clean air, clean water, wildlife habitat, healthy watersheds and for the green space that surrounds their cities.
- It's bad news for the hunters and anglers who depend on private lands for their sport. And that includes, I might add, Governor Sonny Perdue who took a wild turkey on my property two weeks ago.
- And finally, it's bad news for families like ours who have been good stewards for generations and would like our children and grandchildren to have the same opportunities we did.

Please understand me. I'm not anti-growth or anti-development. For some owners, the opportunity to earn a return on their investment in land through development makes a lot of sense.

However, family forest owners want the opportunity to consider other choices too: to keep their forests healthy, growing and working, to improve the environment, keep rural communities intact and local economies strong.

In my case, having access to funds from EQIP made it easier for me to make that choice.

My EQIP project involves controlled burning under mature pine and hardwood stands. This helps to reduce undesirable tree species in the understory, reduces fuel for potential wildfires, and benefits wildlife by encouraging new growth. EQIP has also allowed us to establish water bars that help control erosion, therefore improving water quality. I've recently been approved for additional EQIP funding for thinning a pine stand and establishment of native grasses.

Many other landowners have been afforded the same opportunity. We've made great progress since the 2002 Farm Bill. Forestry spending through EQIP now totals some \$20 to \$25 million annually. Congress and NRCS – from the leadership to the state conservationists have done a lot to include forest owners in EQIP and other programs like WHIP. And we deeply appreciate these efforts – especially since, with FLEP gone, there is no other forestry cost-share program available for forest owners like me.

However far we've come, I personally believe we can do more.

Many forest owners in many states have been unable to access EQIP and other NRCS programs. Part of the problem is cultural. NRCS grew up to serve farmers and it is organized to do that – and do it very well. We need to help family forest owners get in the door in every state, so their conservation needs can be considered.

Another part of the problem is money. There's not enough of it to meet current demand, and there very well could be less available in the future. This puts a high premium on careful planning and priority-setting at the state level – so we can insure forest projects can compete where conservation action is needed.

Right now, forestry expenditures account for something less than 2 percent of total outlays through EQIP. I hope we can do more for forest conservation. But the current fiscal climate demands we do it smart.

That's why we favor a Federal initiative that supports state-level planning ... planning that looks beyond just forests to their relationship to state and local plans for wildlife, water and green space issues as well.

By assuring that all players – Federal and state level – come to the table and agree on a long-term strategy, we can identify the highest priority forest conservation needs, and determine how and through which programs we can address them. We can set benchmarks for progress, so we'll know what works and what doesn't – and whether we've accomplished the goals we set for ourselves. Whether enacted through the Conservation Title or Forestry Title, comprehensive planning and transparent priority-setting will benefit farmers as well as forest owners, whatever crop they grow.

Second, we would like to see funding for forest conservation reach a level commensurate with the public's stake in sustaining these family-owned forests. In the current climate, we know we won't get there tomorrow, perhaps not anytime soon. But we applaud your efforts to begin the process, and we pledge to work with you in any way we can.

Third, as a dentist, I learned pretty quickly that people will work hard to help themselves – if they know what to do, and if they're confident in their ability to do it. It's the same with forestry. Unfortunately, many family forest owners – especially new owners – don't understand how active management practices can do more to keep their forests healthy and growing.

At the same time, all the organizations and agencies that traditionally reached out to these owners are starved for funding. The centerpiece for these efforts – our state forestry agency – struggle with continually shrinking budgets. USDA funding for forestry extension has never exceeded a few million dollars. Often, provisions for technical assistance aren't fully integrated into or funded by the largest conservation programs. This translates into the reality that well-educated and well-intended family forestland owners are not aware that help is available and implementation of active management practices is beneficial.

I hope the 2007 Farm Bill will re-energize existing vehicles and spur development of new and creative delivery systems for outreach, education and technical assistance.

A well-funded Forest Stewardship Program will be critical, along with new approaches to knitting together the work done by the Forest Service, NRCS, Extension and the various state agencies that “connect” with family forest owners. Experience with EQIP in Montana demonstrates how state forestry agencies and NRCS can work together to efficiently provide the technical assistance needed to implement conservation projects on the ground.

But government needn’t do it all, or do it alone. Non-governmental organizations like the one I represent can play a key role in outreach – through field days, publications, and by encouraging our 90,000 members to visit their neighbors and show them the benefits of better forestry. To kick-start these kinds of efforts, we urge Congress to authorize funding of \$25 million for the Sustainable Forestry Outreach Initiative established in the 2002 Farm Bill.

There are so many different agencies and organizations – public, private and non-profit – interested in forest conservation. All make a unique contribution, but if we find ways to weave their efforts together, we’ll be able to do more, and do it more creatively. We’ll be able to build flexibility into the total system so we aren’t trapped with 1940’s tools to reach 2007 landowners, and we’ll be able to produce better results more efficiently.

Fourth, we need to find practical ways to generate renewable energy from forests – via cellulosic ethanol or other via wood-to-energy technology. We urge Congress to support research and pilot projects that establish practical ways for family forest owners to participate in these markets. At the same time, we need to better understand how increased use of wood for fuel and energy will affect the environment, communities and traditional wood-based economies.

Fifth, we need to find income streams for all the other goods produced from family forests – especially the ones you can’t chip or saw. Carbon sequestration, wetlands banking, endangered species protection are all services we, the public, need from family forest owners. We are excited by the prospect of establishing private markets in which owners of working forests can participate.

At the end of the day, the future of our nation’s forests will depend as much on decisions made at the kitchen table, as on decisions you make around this committee table. The best forest conservation policy, then, is the one that helps folks make the best kitchen-table decisions, the ones that are right for their family and their heirs.

I’m a realist. I know this is going to come down to dollars, and there aren’t many of them out there.

But I believe the debate over forests in the Farm Bill shouldn’t be seen as “us” versus “them.” It’s not about farm states versus urban states, red states versus blue states, commodity crops versus timber crops. We truly are in this together. We all share the same ultimate goal -- to keep rural America a vibrant, vital and growing part of our economy, our environment, and our national life.

**Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Required Witness Disclosure Form**

House Rules* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2004.

Name: Slade W. Lail

Address: 3415 E. Lawrenceville St.
Duluth, GA 30096

Telephone: 770-476-2400

Organization you represent (if any): American Forest Foundation/American Tree Farm System

1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do **NOT** require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:

Source: FLEP	Amount: \$8,230.07
Source: Southern Pine Beetle Prevention, Restoration, & Suppression	Amount: \$4,755
Source: WHIP	Amount: \$6,000
Source: EQIP	Amount: \$1,500

2. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) the organization has received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:

Source: USFS (general support, sustainable forestry, F2W2)	Amount: \$100,000
Source: USFWS (oak savannah restoration project, F2W2)	Amount: \$160,000
Source: USEPA (teacher training, PLT)	Amount: \$175,000
Source: NASA (Earth and Sky partnership, PLT)	Amount: \$120,712
Source: NOAA (Earth and Sky partnership, PLT)	Amount: \$65,866

Signature: Slade Lail (per phone)

** Rule XI, clause 2(g)(4) of the U.S. House of Representatives provides: Each committee shall, to the greatest extent practicable, require witnesses who appear before it to submit in advance written statements of proposed testimony and to limit their initial presentations to the committee to brief summaries thereof. In the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by any entity represented by the witness.*

PLEASE ATTACH DISCLOSURE FORM TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.

**Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Information Required From Non-governmental Witnesses**

House rules require non-governmental witnesses to provide their resume or biographical sketch prior to testifying. If you do not have a resume or biographical sketch available, please complete this form.

1. **Name:** Slade W. Lail
2. **BusinessAddress:** 3415 E. Lawrenceville St.
Duluth, GA 30096
3. **Business Phone Number:** 770-476-2400
4. **Organization you represent:** American Forest Foundation/American Tree Farm System
5. **Please list any occupational, employment, or work-related experience you have which add to your qualifications to provide testimony before the Committee:**

Management of Plumbdent Farms

6. **Please list any special training, education, or professional experience you have which add to your qualifications to provide testimony before the Committee:**

Experience with forestry related projects

7. **If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list the capacity in which you are representing that organization, including any offices or elected positions you hold:**

An active member of American Tree Farm System

PLEASE ATTACH THIS FORM OR YOUR BIOGRAPHY TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.