

Reorganizing the U.S. Forest Service to Succeed in the 21st Century



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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to present The Wilderness Society's views regarding the possible move of the U.S. Forest Service from the Department of Agriculture into the Department of the Interior.

The Forest Service is a proud agency with a century-long tradition deeply rooted in the conservation ethic of Gifford Pinchot and Theodore Roosevelt, who put the Forest Service into the Agriculture Department in the first place. Today the agency's website still links its mission to Pinchot's exhortation to do "the greatest good for the greatest number in the long run." Some of The Wilderness Society's founders, including Aldo Leopold and Robert Marshall, spent part of their careers working for the Forest Service. While we certainly have had differences with the Forest Service over the years, The Wilderness Society respects the agency's professionalism and scientific expertise.

Today I would like to focus my testimony on the central challenge that lies ahead of the Forest Service in the coming century – that is, the potentially devastating ecological, economic, and social impacts of climate change. For I firmly believe that the question of whether to move the Forest Service into a different department must be evaluated in the context of a larger issue: *what needs to be done to protect our forests and public lands from global warming?*

The Forest Service plays several critically important roles in our nation's defense against climate change. First, it has sole management responsibility for the 193 million-acre National Forest System, which constitutes nearly one-quarter of all federal lands in the United States. The national forests provide much of America's finest fish and wildlife habitat, including one-half of the spawning habitat for salmon and steelhead. Global warming poses a serious threat to these cold-water fisheries, as well as to thousands of other species of wildlife and plants that inhabit the national forests. The national forests also sequester and store vast amounts of carbon that might otherwise be part of greenhouse gases contributing to global warming. In fact, the Pacific Northwest's national forests are believed to store more carbon per acre than any other forest ecosystem on Earth.

The federal government holds our public lands in trust for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. The Forest Service, Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Land Management – regardless of whether they are all housed in the same department – must work together to ensure that the federal lands and their biological resources successfully adapt to the stresses of climate change.

Second, the Forest Service is the federal government’s primary agency dealing with all of America’s forests, whether in public or private ownership. Forests cover 750 million acres, or approximately one-third of the United States (including Alaska), and 60 percent of U.S. forests are privately owned. The Forest Service provides important technical and financial assistance to state and private forestry agencies.

The Wilderness Society is working with state agencies and private forest owners in collaborative efforts to incorporate forest carbon offsets into future cap-and-trade systems on non-federal lands. Our hope is that the use of forest carbon credits will provide financial incentives for private forest owners to manage their forests in ways that are ecologically sustainable and climate-friendly. Forest Service data collection and expertise are crucial to the successful design and implementation of any carbon credit system. For instance, the credibility of the carbon accounting system hinges on the accuracy of the Forest Service’s inventories of forest carbon stores and estimated rates of sequestration.

Third, the Forest Service is the largest forestry research organization in the world. Much of that research is aimed at improving our understanding of the impacts of climate change on forest ecosystems. The Forest Service’s Global Change Research group has more than 20 years of experience in evaluating the effects of climate change. The agency’s research provides invaluable information to federal, state, and private forest managers to help them find ways to increase carbon sequestration and make their forests more resilient to climate change.

What do the Forest Service’s multiple roles in the climate issue tell us about whether or not the agency should be transferred to Interior? Arguably, from a climate change perspective, America’s *forests* will be better off if the Forest Service stays in the Agriculture Department where it can continue to work closely with state and private forest owners on climate change issues. On the other hand, America’s *federal lands* might be better served by moving the Forest Service to the Interior Department, where it could coordinate more effectively with the other federal land management agencies.

However, I believe that is a false choice: *we can and must find ways for the Forest Service to succeed in both roles*, regardless of whether it is housed in Agriculture or Interior.

If the Forest Service remains in Agriculture, improved coordination with the other agencies responsible for federal land and wildlife stewardship will be essential. Clear and consistent messages from the Administration will provide strong direction to the agencies to better coordinate and to successfully achieve priority programs. In addition, our federal forests can be better managed with increased government coordination by taking an ecosystem and landscape approach rather than by dividing the landscape along administrative and political boundaries.

Fifteen years ago, the White House brought together numerous federal agencies (management and regulatory) to develop and implement the Northwest Forest Plan. The result was a scientifically credible plan for National Forests and Bureau of Land Management forests in western Washington, Oregon, and northern California. Unfortunately, the BLM in recent years has been more interested in increasing timber production than coordinating with other agencies or implementing the Northwest Forest Plan. One option to address this problem is to transfer the forest lands managed by BLM in Oregon to the National Forest System, thus consolidating federal forest management into a single department.

Coordination of fire and fuels management activities among federal agencies is a relatively positive story. Over the last decade we have seen significantly better teamwork in fire management, with the Forest Service, BLM, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, as well as state agencies, teaming up to increase efficiency and to spread expertise. Coordination includes shared training, supplying, human resources, and equipment, along with data collection and dissemination. The National Interagency Fire Center in Boise is a good example of coordination across agencies and departments. More work can and should be done to coordinate and integrate fire management, research and advance treatments, with or without moving agencies into different departments.

Within the Department of Agriculture, the Forest Service has also begun to take some positive steps to deal with the climate change issue. Perhaps most notably, in December 2008 the outgoing Secretary of Agriculture established a new Office of Ecosystems and Markets and appointed as its first director Forest Service Associate Chief Sally Collins, who has shown exceptional leadership in addressing the challenges of climate change. Collins' primary role will be to help develop the guidelines and science-based methods necessary for forests, farms, and ranches to engage in carbon trading markets designed to mitigate the negative effects of global warming.

Finally, I want to applaud Chairman Dicks and other members of this subcommittee for helping to guide the Forest Service toward more climate-friendly management. For example, the Legacy Roads and Trails Remediation Initiative provided \$40 million last year to reduce the impacts of old Forest Service roads in places like the Skokomish River watershed on the Olympic National Forest. The Legacy Roads funding will help many national forest watersheds and downstream communities better withstand the impacts of increasingly intense rain storms and flooding that are expected to result from climate change.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I truly believe that we stand at a major turning point in the history of the Forest Service. The next few years will be critically important in determining how well America's forests and public lands stand up to the inevitable impacts of climate change. The global warming era will demand strong leadership, new ideas, better integration of science and management, the willingness to experiment, and adequate funding to enable the agency to fulfill its mission in the 21st century. The Wilderness Society looks forward to working with the Forest Service, this subcommittee, and other partners to meet this formidable challenge in the months and years ahead.