

The Community Forest Collaborative

March 7, 2011

Community Forest Program
U.S. Forest Service
State and Private Forestry-Cooperative Forestry
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Code 1123
Washington, DC 20250

To Whom it May Concern:

The Community Forest Collaborative is a partnership of the Trust For Public Land, the Northern Forest Center, Sustainable Forest Futures and the Quebec-Labrador Foundation. The Collaborative has been working since 2005 to help communities in northern New England create new community forests; to research and analyze the role of community forests as a community and economic development strategy, as well as in conservation; and to assess the current infrastructure of support for communities that want to acquire and manage forestlands as a community asset.

We are very pleased with the creation of the U.S. Forest Service's Community Forest Program (CFP) and believe it represents a much needed and important federal role in support of communities. The draft rules and regulations are a welcome first step in implementing the program. We would like to commend the staff for the recognition and support in the draft for the unique role that community forests can play across multiple sectors of conservation, community well being and economic opportunities, and for incorporating the concept of "permanence" into the program. In addition we believe that there is a rich opportunity for collaboration between the information that will be collected through this program and housed in the National Information Center for State and Private Forestry, the Trust for Public Land's Conservation Data Base (on community forestry projects) and the new National Community Forestry Service Center to deepen our understanding of project work and the efficacy and impact of community forests. We look forward to being an active partner with the U.S. Forest Service both in bringing good projects to the program and ensuring that other support is available to match that of the CFP. Our partnership with the Open Space Institute (OSI) is an expression of the seriousness of our purpose.

The Community Forest Collaborative has worked closely with OSI to create and implement a new regional Community Forest Fund. The Fund was launched last year with an initial capitalization of \$1.4 million. OSI completed its first round of grants in December of 2010. This Fund will be an important source of match for the CFP and leverage, with private dollars, the public funds made available through CFP.

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In our review of the draft rules and regulations, a number of issues surfaced that we would like to bring to your attention and, in some cases, to offer language that may help to clarify, provide emphasis, or revise what has been proposed.

Eligible Entities (Page 745-bottom of third column)

We are particularly concerned that the interpretation of the statutes referring to eligible non-profits (IRS Code 26 U.S.C. 501(c)(3)) be inclusive rather than limiting. Additionally, the draft language defining eligible non-profits suggests only conservation non-profits are eligible. Since the Collaborative strongly believes that community forests are assets with values beyond conservation, including community and economic development benefits, we would like to emphasize the need to adopt more expansive language that identifies other kinds of community-based non-profits such as, but not limited to, local and regional community and economic development organizations.

Scale: We are pleased that the draft language refers to a broad range of parcel sizes, particularly identifying 5 acres at the low end. There are, however, two issues related to consideration of scale in weighing different proposals that may require more expansive language on the criteria that will be used in judging the proposals. For example, we are concerned that if put side by side, projects with large acreage may be more competitive than projects with small acreage unless criteria is included that puts additional weight on such things as: relative benefits, number of people benefiting from the project, how people are impacted, how project responds to needs/well-being of the community, relationship to town and regional plans or needs.

Additionally, the draft language for "Ranking criteria and proposal selection" (#2 on top of second column page 750) puts significant emphasis on projects that make a "substantial" contribution to landscape conservation initiatives. While we have readily promoted the valuable role that community forests can play in large landscape scale initiatives, we also recognize the value of those small, locally-based projects that are not necessarily important within a larger landscape but have great value locally, and projects that might at some point become part of a larger landscape initiative, but where one currently does not exist. The issues in question include: how in the rules (and implementation of the program) to treat both equitably so that one is not weighted either against the other or more than the other; and how to make sure that the rules and regulations are not overly limiting. One suggestion would be to include the reference to landscape scale initiatives as one of many criteria used to assess projects rather than as one of only two priorities and revise the language to read "substantial contribution to landscape conservation initiative, land use or master plans, state forest resource assessment strategies or other comprehensive planning documents".

Administration of grant program: We understand and concur with the initial intent to keep the process simple and streamlined. Our specific questions are: what is the most effective and efficient process, and what is the appropriate role of the State Forester's office within the process. We recommend revision of the draft language to incorporate the following:

- State Foresters' offices will provide assistance to applicants in preparing the proposals.
- State Forester's office will review applications to the Community Forest Program to ensure they are complete and that the draft forest management plans and GIS information are complete.
- Specify turn-around time for State Foresters' office to complete its review, forward to USFS, CFP review and announcement of awards.

One issue that probably should be addressed is how to deal with what will naturally be different capacities and experience with, as well as interest in, community forests across the states. Some State Foresters' offices have the capacity (and interest) to provide more support than others to this program. Perhaps more importantly should the State Forester's office be asked to "rank" or "make recommendations", issues related to differences in the capacity/interest/role of State Forestry Departments related to community forests may create an uneven playing field for the applicants. Training may be required to build up capacity within the State Foresters' offices, and flexibility should be built into the implementation of this component to see whether this system works or not, and how to implement it effectively across the states.

Finally, we recommend that the program identify a specific person or "face" to the program so that communities and supporting institutions will know who to contact when they need assistance and information about the program.

Technical Assistance: The Community Forest Collaborative has done considerable analysis on the importance of technical assistance and support to community forest projects. We know that community forest projects require technical assistance and support (see attached report) from the early organizing phase of a project (coordination, facilitation, capacity building, small grants for planning, inventory, management plans) through acquisition (legal, financial assistance, capital costs of land) through management and stewardship (monitoring, etc.). The technical assistance component of this program is as important, in many respects, as the capital-funding component. While we recognize that the program is facing significant budget challenges just to get up and running, we recommend that the rules and regulations be revised to incorporate a structural emphasis on technical assistance and support by:

- * Recognizing the suite of resources needed by communities and supporting institutions to create and manage community forests;
- * Identifying the potential range of resources (capital, small grants, technical assistance etc.) that this program will make available;
- * Enabling a small-grants program (matched 1:1 or 2:1 with other sources) for capacity building/facilitation/coordination in the early phases to support such activities including, but not

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limited to: cost of developing management plans, appraisal, legal fees, surveying in the pre-acquisition and acquisition phases; and program development and monitoring in the stewardship of community forests.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the draft rules and regulations and look forward to the ultimate implementation of a much needed and valuable program.

Cordially,

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on behalf of **The Community Forest Collaborative**

With its partner organizations

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