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June 8, 2015

Brett Butler
USDA Forest Service
Northern Research Station
160 Holdsworth Way
Amherst, MA 01003
Submitted by email: bbutler01@fs.fed.us

RE: National Woodland Owner Survey (FR Doc 2015-08134)

Dear Mr. Butler:

On behalf of the American Forest Foundation (AFF), I appreciate the opportunity to submit comments in response to the federal register notice on the reinstatement with change for the National Woodland Owner Survey (NWOS).

AFF works nationwide and in partnership with local, state, and national groups to provide hands-on, on-the-ground support for America's over 22 million family forest owners, working to protect clean water, wildlife habitat, sustainable wood products, and the other benefits of America's forests by engaging unprecedented numbers of landowners in active stewardship of their land. Our largest program for family forests, the American Tree Farm System® (ATFS) and our on-the-ground conservation projects, provide AFF with over 70 years of experience working with family forest owners. To protect the many public benefits that forests provide and to maintain strong rural communities, we need to ensure that family forest owners have the tools and technical information to keep their forests as forests for current and future generations.

For AFF and our partners to be successful in our outreach to family forest owners, we must understand the diverse and ever-changing population. NWOS provides data on the land they own, why they own it, how they use it and if—and how—they manage it. This intelligence is invaluable to the U.S. Forest Service, state forestry agencies, and non-governmental organizations, like AFF, to help us focus our outreach and technical service efforts to protect and enhance the benefits from family-owned forestland.

The most recent survey data indicate that there are more than 22 million woodland owners in the United States, responsible for 283 million acres of forested land—more than the land area of the Eastern seaboard from Maine to Georgia. That's a lot of forestland, representing significant forest benefits like clean air and water, carbon storage, outdoor recreation opportunities and good rural jobs. What's troubling is that only two million of these family forest owners are implementing a management plan to keep their woodlands healthy and productive, leaving more than 20 million forest owners and 226 million acres behind.

With the increasing damage done to forests by bugs, disease, catastrophic fire, flooding, drought and storms, thoughtful, active stewardship is essential to the health of our forests and the continued benefits they provide. Furthermore, programs exist to provide technical assistance and cost-share dollars to help woodland owners mitigate risks. The initial survey data indicate that very few woodland owners know about programs available to help them improve forest conservation. Three-quarters of the forest owners surveyed were unfamiliar with federal cost share programs; 77 percent did not know about tax programs; and 78 percent were unfamiliar with conservation easements. These are all programs that can help improve forest conservation of private lands.

From NWOS data, the American Forest Foundation forms the basis for our action plans to reach greater numbers of woodland owners where conservation needs are the greatest. We encourage continued investment in this important research to better understand this important natural resource and the stewards who care for it.

On behalf of AFF and the nation's more than 22 million family forest owners, thank you for the opportunity to submit comments. If we can be of any assistance in answering any questions you may have about working with small landowners to achieve conservation outcomes, please let us know.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Tom Martin", is centered within a light blue rectangular box.

Tom Martin
President and CEO
American Forest Foundation