The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition congratulates President Obama, his administration, and members of Congress for the achievements of the last four years. Thanks to your hard work, many of the goals and recommendations included in the RVCC 2008 Transition Memo were realized. Successes include establishment of the Forest Service’s Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, the piloting of the Forest Service’s Integrated Resources Restoration Line Item approach to budgeting, and enactment of the Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement Act of 2009. We also applaud your efforts to address the unique challenges and opportunities of rural America – including the creation of the White House Rural Council, listening sessions under the America’s Great Outdoors Initiative and your ambitious track record in support of renewable energy development.

RVCC is a nonpartisan, multi-stakeholder network of organizations working in the rural West that has joined together to promote balanced conservation-based approaches to the ecological and economic problems facing our region. We focus on policy issues that affect rural communities, public and private lands management, and the continuation of a natural resource-based economy in the West. Sustainable Northwest founded and coordinates the RVCC.

We recognize that our Nation is under increasing economic pressure and that limited government dollars must be well-spent to achieve multiple outcomes across many sectors. Effective and efficient use of federal dollars will require priority investment in improved management of our Nation’s natural resources to ensure that challenges such as extreme drought and uncharacteristic wildfire are adequately addressed.

We believe the long-term economic health and resiliency of our nation is directly dependent on responsible management of our natural resources – including productive public and private landscapes, abundant water supplies and clean air. We ask for your attention to our platform of goals and recommendations for how rural communities and landscapes can be sustained and positioned to become drivers of economic recovery, job creation, infrastructure renewal, and ecological resilience.

We seek to help you to build a path forward based on stewardship of our natural resources and empowerment of our rural communities. In partnership with the Federal government, rural communities – including businesses, community-based organizations, landowners and local government – can help develop and implement environmentally sound, economically equitable, culturally appropriate, and socially responsible policy that will benefit the Nation as a whole.

The Current State of Rural America

The West’s open spaces, forests, rangelands, watersheds and agricultural soils – and the benefits they provide to all Americans – have never been more important or more threatened.

The proliferation of noxious species, insects and disease, the prevalence of drought, an increase in the number and size of wildfires, land fragmentation through development and corporate divestment, aging landowners, and the loss of stewardship infrastructure and workforce needed for resource stewardship are just a few of those threats. If America is to continue to derive multiple societal benefits from our unparalleled natural heritage, we must be committed to the care and stewardship of our natural resources and invest decisively in our country's future.

Rural communities with natural resource based economies, especially those in public lands settings, can play a significant role in resolving ongoing economic and environmental challenges.

In the West, the federal government owns over 54% of the land (ranging from approximately 29% of the land in Montana to approximately 85% of Nevada’s land base). Rural communities with natural resource based economies have endured boom and bust cycles for decades, following the country’s alternating impulses to exploit or protect its natural resources. These communities are poised to directly address economic and environmental challenges – including rural unemployment, poverty, low wages, lack of access to training and education, degradation of our national forests and rangelands, dwindling water supplies, and decreasing wildlife diversity, among others. We must overcome rural economic decline and promote the stewardship workforce and infrastructure needed to achieve economic, social and ecologic resiliency.

The economic health of our Nation depends in large part on strengthening the economic health of rural America through conservation compatible economic development.

Building an economy that will meet the triple bottom line of environmental, economic, and social sustainability will create strong linkages between urban and rural America, enable our country to meet our climate change challenges, and contribute to supporting healthy lifestyles for all Americans. Optimizing the productivity and protection of both our nation’s landscapes and rural communities must be recognized, engaged and supported. Their contributions to the health of our societies must be held in equal esteem to the high tech and software industries, the financial and manufacturing sectors, and the health care industry. Indeed, the growing imperative to achieve energy independence and food security depends on it.

Across the West, rural communities are proactively engaging in the management of public lands to restore and steward forests and rangelands while creating local and regional economic benefit.

There is strong and pervasive interest across communities in the rural West to engage deeply on decision-making related to management and revenue generation on our national forests and rangelands. Landscape-scale restoration programs that require collaborative engagement from multiple and diverse stakeholders over land management decisions are paving the way towards a future of locally-driven economic growth and ecological resiliency on our public lands and in our rural communities.
Opportunities for Immediate Action

Opportunity 1: Increase rural community capacity for natural resource management and conservation.

To solve the interwoven economic and ecological challenges facing America today, the federal government must invest in rural community capacity and local workforce development. Community capacity is the collective ability and resources of people in rural communities to solve diverse challenges and meet the multiple needs of their communities and American society as a whole, by drawing on human, social, cultural, and physical capital. Key components of capacity investments include provision of technical assistance and supporting institutions that carry out a community-driven, integrated, conservation and economic development agenda, build social agreement around public land management, assist private landowners and strengthen restoration and stewardship. Community-based organizations, regional organizations and networks and government agency employees all drive creation and maintenance of community capacity. Programs such as Farm Bill Conservation Title programs and the USDA Forest Service Community Capacity and Land Stewardship (CCLS) program directly build rural capacity by supporting collaborative decision-making, responsible natural resource use and innovative stewardship. We recommend that Congress designate collaboration and capacity-building outcomes as priority preference criteria for allocation of grants, loans and cost share for partnership programs; direct land management agencies to increase their use of cooperative, contribution and technical service provider agreements to achieve program outcomes; expand the CCLS to a national program; and formalize the role of community-based, local and regional organizations as strategic agency partners.

An essential component of community capacity is the local workforce for restoration and stewardship. Congress and the Administration must do more to ensure that natural resource jobs are high-quality jobs by increasing enforcement of labor and safety laws in the forest and watershed restoration sector. The federal government spends millions of tax dollars each year on contracts for labor-intensive activities on public lands, including planting trees, thinning overstocked stands, piling brush, and fighting fires. The current system rewards contractors who cut corners and offer the lowest prices to do the work, leading to violations of labor laws and poor working conditions for contract forest workers. The federal government must increase funding for enforcement agencies to hire more investigators and other staff; conduct more inspections of labor intensive service contracts to assure compliance with labor laws including health and safety requirements, and improve coordination among land management agencies and the Department of Labor.

Additionally, the H2B visa program – intended to permit temporary employment of non-citizen workers – has been misused, resulting in the failure of contractors to advertise locally, pay prevailing wage, or fully disclose the details of their contracts. Consequently, tens of millions of dollars are spent on foreign workers rather than available and qualified domestic workers. We recommend that Congress work to close loopholes that permit abuse of the H2B visa program for forest workers.

Opportunity 2: Support and invest in the ecological and economic resiliency of rural communities and working forest landscapes by permanently reauthorizing stewardship end-result contracting and fully funding the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP).

Stewardship end-result contracting is an innovative tool for the USDA Forest Service and USDOI Bureau of Land Management to collaboratively restore public lands and create economic benefit for rural communities. It has been successful and critical for fostering restoration of our nation’s forests and watersheds while creating community benefit. Between fiscal years 1999 and 2010, the Forest Service awarded 874 contracts and agreements for restoration treatments
on over 588,020 acres nationwide. The best value provisions in stewardship contracting allow the consideration of factors other than price, creating a mechanism for the agencies to foster local benefit and hire quality workers. The current stewardship contracting authority expires at the end of federal fiscal year 2013. **The reauthorization and expansion of stewardship contracting should be aggressively pursued.**

The long-term health of rural communities and economies is directly dependent on the ability of the Federal government and its partners to engage in landscape scale restoration on our National Forests. CFLRP and stewardship contracting are essential tools for resilient rural communities and landscape.

Since its launch as a pilot program in 2009, CFLRP has led the way to an inclusive and community-based approach to productive management of our National Forests. To date, the 23 selected CFLRP projects cumulatively created and maintained an estimated 3,375 part and full-time jobs during FY 2011 and 4,754 part and full-time jobs during FY 2012; sold 94.1 million cubic feet of timber; produced 1,158,000 green tons of biomass; generated nearly $320 million of labor income; removed woody material that can fuel wildfires on 383,000 acres near communities; reduced risk of uncharacteristic fire on an additional 229,000 acres; improved 537,000 acres of wildlife habitat; and enhanced clean water supplied by remediating 6,000 miles of eroding roads. However, the benefits of the CFLRP go far beyond the projects selected for funding, as the competitive process is leading Forest Service units and local stakeholders to better coordinate forest restoration planning efforts, prioritize convening collaborative processes, better supporting wood-using businesses, and integrating the best available science in a transparent manner. **CFLRP should receive full funding for the next ten years and should be used as a template for other programs to invest in restoration and land stewardship across the West.**

Opportunity 3: Improve Forest Service budget systems by monitoring and reporting on the impact of the Integrated Resources Restoration (IRR) budget line item pilot program, and creating a new consolidated budget line item dedicated to land management planning, assessment and monitoring.

The goal of the Integrated Resource Restoration budget line item is to facilitate the implementation of restoration projects on our National Forests by bringing together key resources and directing funding to achieve the highest priority work. It better integrates funding and authorities related to forest restoration and water quality, while reducing administrative costs. Consolidating funding for restoration and stewardship into one line item enables land managers to effectively budget for integrated outcomes related to land management goals. This program is currently being piloted in Forest Service Regions 1, 3, and 4. To better understand the budget system and the ecological benefits and challenges of the IRR pilot, the Forest Service must monitor and report on its impact to date.

In addition, the Forest Service can further increase the efficiency of its budget system by creating a new consolidated budget line item dedicated to land management planning, assessment and monitoring. This integrated line item will encourage greater collaboration and community engagement in identifying, prioritizing and implementing programs and projects to address ecological diversity, social and economic stability, watershed health and the impacts of climate change on our public lands and adjacent communities. This new structure would also provide the flexibility necessary to implement the new Planning Rule.

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3People Restoring America’s Forests: 2012 Report on the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, CFLRP Steering Committee and USDA Forest Service, December 2012 [www.nature.org/CFLR](http://www.nature.org/CFLR).
Opportunity 4: Create a comprehensive national energy policy and increase viability of domestic renewable thermal energy production by developing and passing a Renewable Thermal Energy Act.

National energy policy should address all three major energy sectors – electricity, transportation and thermal energy. However, current federal renewable energy policy does not include a thermal energy component. Growth of domestic renewable thermal energy resources can help reduce the nation’s reliance on foreign petroleum, increase energy security and support local jobs. Rural communities across the West are increasingly turning to woody biomass as an alternative fuel for thermal energy production, particularly for larger, institutional buildings. This administration must establish clear thermal energy policies, including: goals for renewable energy production, prioritizing use of domestic fuels; grant programs and/or revolving loan funds to retrofit existing boilers at institutional facilities; tax incentives designed around an efficiency threshold for new and existing facilities to capture more total energy from renewable resources; tax incentives for residential woodstove upgrades to EPA-certified emissions technology; and increased authorization for key programs in the Farm Bill and Energy Bill, such as the Community Wood Energy Program.

Opportunity 5: Continue the Climate Change Adaptation Initiative in the Department of the Interior and direct a portion of this funding to provide outreach, communication, and technical assistance to facilitate rural communities’ participation and leadership in development of local climate change adaptation plans.

The Department of the Interior’s Climate Change Adaptation Initiative is a proactive approach to adapting to and mitigating for climate change impacts to our nation’s public lands. It is a collaborative program based on integrating science with the broad experiences of partners across regional landscapes. The Initiative is vital to understanding potential climate change impacts on public lands and reaching social agreement on management actions necessary to address impacts and implement mitigation measures. Congress should advise the USDA to join the DOI Climate Change Adaptation Initiative to increase interagency collaboration and coordination on climate change strategies. Land management agencies should collaboratively develop programs that ensure that climate change adaptation, as well as mitigation strategies are integrated within agency management plans.

Integrated community participation in the climate change planning process is essential for effective implementation of adaptation plans. Congress should work to improve outreach, communication and rural participation in climate change adaptation planning, implementation and monitoring to increase local investment in and support for adaptation plans, thereby promoting community resilience, landscape restoration and economic benefits and opportunities for rural communities.

Opportunity 6: Foster equitable development of ecosystem service markets on both public and private lands, ensuring public lands communities and small landowners are able to access and benefit from these markets.

Emerging programs and mechanisms to generate and capture revenue through ecosystem services must have clear lines of benefit and access for public land communities and lack opportunity for access by small, private landowners. Federal policies that help develop access to outcomes-based ecosystem service markets and programs must provide small landowners incentives for responsible long-term sustainable land management, an alternative source of income, green job opportunities, and economic recognition of the public values provided by working land stewardship. New policies must ensure that mechanisms that are developed function in an equitable fashion. It is essential that the most vulnerable communities located in counties where federal ownership is dominant and small, private landowners are able to engage in these important emerging markets. The development of ecosystem service markets must ensure that public lands communities and private and family landowners are able to participate in and benefit from these emerging markets.
Our Vision and Values:

The rural West is positioned to play a vital role in solving some of America’s biggest challenges:

• Managing and restoring public lands, managing wildfire, and practicing stewardship.
• Protecting working landscapes, connecting ecological systems across all lands, and promoting responsible private lands stewardship.
• Creating sustainable rural development strategies.
• Developing a new economy with natural resource-based jobs, infrastructure, and markets.
• Securing energy independence by promoting renewable energy investment.
• Mitigating and adapting to climate change.
• Developing and participating in socially and economically equitable ecosystem services markets.
• Providing job and volunteer opportunities for youth to engage in their communities as land stewards.
• Providing food, fiber, clean air and water, and other integral ecosystem services.

To accomplish this we need:

• Rural innovation – policies that create and sustain real opportunities for natural resource based businesses to create jobs in food, fiber, and energy production.
• Effective federal policies and fully staffed, accountable and collaborative land management agencies.
• Strong rural economic systems that support small, local businesses and the sustainability of our natural resources.
• Commitment to the triple bottom line in all federal policy and programs.

We believe:

• The health of our rural communities and landscapes are interdependent – federal policies must not sacrifice one to advance the other.
• The natural resources, recreation opportunities, communities and cultural values of the West are valuable to the Nation as a whole for the goods and services, knowledge and skill they provide to solve 21st century challenges.
• Shared decision-making power is vital to a healthy and democratic system of management and stewardship.
• Diverse interests working together to solve problems and create positive action results in durable solutions that address the public interest.
• Long term resource, food, and energy security is dependent on investment in the sustainability of ecosystems and rural economies.
• Restoring and stewarding our nation’s natural resources offers significant workforce and small business development opportunities in rural communities worthy of federal investment.
## Existing Programs that Support Rural Economic Development and Natural Resource Stewardship and Conservation

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| Community Capacity and Land Stewardship Grant Program | USDA Forest Service, NRCS     | Expand the Community Capacity and Land Stewardship Grant Program to a national program to enhance conservation and rural economic resiliency across the Nation. Currently this program is only available in FS Regions 6 and 10. | • Ensures CBOs and collaborative groups have the financial and technical resources to convene, plan, implement, and monitor landscape scale restoration projects.  
  • Strengthens the relationships and partnerships between the land management agencies, collaborative groups, and CBOs.  
  • Provides training and technical assistance related to collaboration, multi-party monitoring, project design, and stewardship contracting.  
  • Creates peer-to-peer learning networks to accelerate learning and adoption of best practices across the region.  
  • Supports and enhances small rural businesses providing quality jobs in land management and restoration. |
| Farm Bill Conservation Title Programs              | NRCS, USDA Forest Service     | Do not disproportionately cut Farm Bill Conservation Title Programs, and provide sufficient Technical Assistance funding to enable delivery of programs. | • Provides private landowners with the ability to achieve long-term, sustainable forest management and conservation on their lands.  
  • Allows forests and rangelands to continue to be productive, viable businesses that can be passed down to future generations of land stewards.  
  • Allows private landowners to use their stewardship resources and skills to contribute to the maintenance of public values like clean air and water, wildlife and fish habitat, and wildfire risk reduction, in an economically viable manner. |
| Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) | USDA Forest Service            | Fully fund the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) authorized under the Forest Landscape Restoration Act. | • Supports collaboratively designed and/or funded projects, increasing private sector leverage for public projects.  
  • Increases Forest Service internal capacity to work with the public to achieve environmental stewardship and community economic benefit.  
  • Increases funding for planning to grow the rate of restoration in priority landscapes and foster rural community benefit.  
  • Increases funding for restoration on priority National Forest System landscapes.  
  • Creates jobs in natural resource management. |
## APPENDIX – Program Specific Recommendations

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| Stewardship End-Result Contracting Authority | USDA Forest Service | Secure permanent authorization for *stewardship end-result contracting*. | • Increases administrative efficiency, collaboration, revenue for other restoration needs, and community benefit.  
• Allows for the consideration of factors other than price in awarding contracts, fostering local benefit, and providing job opportunities to high quality workers. |
• Provides internal business practices (especially in the arena of procurement) with better support for environmental and social objectives.  
• Supports projects and programs that achieve their goals through collaboration with tribes, state and local governments, rural communities, and interest groups.  
• Fosters positive ecological impacts and economic benefits of forest restoration and stewardship projects over the long-term, rather than focusing on short-term economic and ecological impacts. |
| Community Wood Energy Program | USDA Forest Service | Ensure the *Community Wood Energy Program* is included in the next Farm Bill and is fully funded at $5 million. | • Provides up to $50,000 in grants to qualifying state or local government entities to prepare “community wood energy plans.” Once a plan has been approved, the qualified applicant may request up to 50 percent matching grants toward the capital cost of installing biomass energy systems. |
| Woody Biomass Utilization Grants Program | USDA Forest Service | Increase funding for the *Woody Biomass Utilization Grants Program* under the Hazardous Fuels line item to $10 million. | • Reduces forest management costs by increasing the value of biomass and other forest products generated from forest restoration activities.  
• Promotes comprehensive national energy policy.  
• Greatly increases the ability to meet the national standards by increasing the market for and supply of woody biomass.  
• Fosters the development of community-based approaches to renewable fuel development that would provide jobs to poorer rural communities.  
• Decreases costs of federal wildfire suppression by creating a viable market for the brush and small trees removed in fuels reduction projects to protect rural communities.  
• Spurs the development of public-private partnerships that will direct intellectual and financial capital at developing appropriately-scaled distributed energy systems. |
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| Climate Change Adaptation Initiative   | USDA Forest Service, NRCS, BLM  | Continue the Climate Change Adaptation Initiative in the Department of the Interior and direct a portion of this funding to provide outreach, communication, and technical assistance to facilitate rural communities’ participation and leadership in development of local climate change adaptation plans. | • Fosters a collaborative approach based on integrating science with the broad experiences of partners across regional landscapes.  
• Increases understanding of potential climate change impacts on public lands.  
• Builds social agreement on management actions necessary to address impacts and implement mitigation measures. |
| Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement (FLAME) Act | USDA Forest Service, US Department of Interior | Fully fund the Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement (FLAME) Act reserve account and refrain from transferring surplus funds to the general treasury. | • Eliminates the need to transfer monies from other agency programs to fund emergency suppression.  
(During years when wildfire suppression costs are lower, the FLAME account is supposed to run a surplus, which rolls over until it is needed during a particularly costly fire season.) |
| Community Assistance Programs          | USDA Forest Service             | Fully fund Community Assistance Programs administered through USDA Forest Service, State and Private Forestry. | • Ensures that communities, private landowners, and local businesses are able to prepare for wildfire and to manage the impacts of wildfire. |
| Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program | USDA Forest Service, NRCS | Reauthorize and fund the Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program at approximately $12 million annually. | • Promotes conservation activity and federal conservation investment in non-traditional areas, particularly oriented around rural communities.  
• Conserves thousands of forested acres and increases carbon sequestration and storage values that would otherwise disappear as a result of development.  
• Retains and revitalizes rural livelihoods through conservation and maintains important positive rural character and culture that is fundamental to America as we know it. |


Signatories

The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition is made up of diverse participants. These goals and recommendations are submitted on behalf of the undersigned groups, organizations, business, and individuals who are RVCC participants. The undersigned wish to convey to President Barack Obama, his administration and the Congress that the policy recommendations we make herein are keys to moving decisively into the era of collaborative stewardship for a healthy, sustainable America.

Contact Sustainable Northwest with specific questions about our recommendations.

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Learn about RVCC: www.SustainableNorthwest.org/what-we-do/programs/rural-voices-for-conservation-coalition