

Input into the 2002 farm bill

American Forests
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"Farm bill" is a generic name for a federal law passed every five years or so that authorizes several food and agricultural programs, including forestry and conservation programs. The most recent farm bill, the *Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996* (P.L. 104-127), contains provisions that will expire in 2002, making reauthorization of the farm bill a top priority for the 107th Congress. Because Congress must reauthorize programs in the farm bill and because of the many different programs included under this bill, it has become a key legislative vehicle for interest groups, including community forestry proponents.

In the House

The House Agriculture Committee has completed and passed its version of the next farm bill, *The Farm Security Act of 2001* (H.R. 2646). While the House version of the Farm Bill maintains a traditional focus on agricultural commodity programs, it also contains provisions to strengthen conservation and forestry programs, including increasing funding for agricultural conservation by about \$1.65 billion a year.

Forestry provisions in that version of the bill include:

- outreach and cost-share incentives for non-industrial private forest lands;
- a wildfire community assistance program; and
- a provision allowing the Forest Service to use stewardship contracting authorities on hazardous forest fuels reduction projects.

These forestry provisions resulted largely from suggestions made collectively by a number of forestry groups, all members of the National Council on Private Forests. If passed, they have the potential to help our nation's 9.9 million non-industrial private forest landowners.

But H.R. 2646 is not likely to pass the full House without a struggle. A group of conservation and environmental organizations have been working with members in the House on a bill to replace the conservation title in the agriculture committee's version of the Farm Bill. The amendment would place greater emphasis on conservation programs than H.R. 2646. Representatives Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY), Ron Kind (D-WI) and Wayne Gilchrest (R-MD) are expected to introduce an amendment based on the *Working Lands Stewardship Act* (H.R. 2375) that, if passed, would authorize \$1.9 billion more per year for conservation programs than H.R. 2646. The amendment would authorize programs to improve water quality, protect food and drinking water supplies, restore wildlife habitat, combat sprawl, restore and maintain forests, and provide assistance to agricultural communities. It also contains provisions to engage non-governmental groups in technical assistance activities and to target socially disadvantaged groups. The amendment would provide \$50 million annually in mandatory funding for urban and community forestry and authorize \$100 million annually for technical assistance and cost-share incentives in an expanded forest stewardship program.

In the Senate

Staffers with the Senate Committee on Agriculture are in the process of developing forestry provisions for their version of the farm bill. American Forests presented recommendations to that committee, based on input from the Communities Committee of the Seventh American Forest Congress, the National Network of Forest Practitioners, the national Alliance for Community Trees, Sustainable Northwest, and the Lead Partnership Group. The recommendations call for authorities and incentives to:

- promote collaborative, public-private planning and projects at watershed scales;
- increase technical and financial assistance to communities;
- build communities' capacity to play an integral role in wildfire management;
- provide mechanisms and funding for monitoring and collaborative learning; and
- strengthen outreach to underserved and minority communities.

The coalition that helped develop the Boehlert-Kind-Gilchrest amendment in the House is working to get similar legislation introduced in the Senate. In addition, the Administration appears to be ready to engage in the farm bill debate.

Still time to provide input to the farm bill

The farm bill has been moving on a fast track in recent months. Due to the tragic terrorist activity on September 11, 2001, however, priorities in Congress have changed and budgetary issues are uncertain. Some Congressional and Administration leaders now believe the farm bill may not pass until next year. This likely delay has widened the window of opportunity for community forestry practitioners to propose new or revise existing forestry and conservation programs. Practitioners should share their ideas with their delegation, staff from the Senate Agriculture Committee, and other forestry and conservation groups.