

Capitalizing on nature's benefits: New incentives for private forest landowners

By Gerry Gray - 05/09/11 10:06 AM ET

Private forests are essential to the environment, culture and economy of our country. While traditionally valued primarily for wood products — lumber and paper — these forests also provide numerous public benefits referred to as ecosystem services, such as clean water, carbon sequestration, and wildlife habitat.

More than 420 million acres — about 56 percent of our nation's forests — are privately owned by nearly 11 million landowners. About three-quarters of these private forests are in the Eastern United States.

In many parts of our country today, the value of private forests for development has increased significantly, especially around urban areas and near forested waterways or mountains. The result has been that many private forest landowners are finding it more and more tempting to sell their land for development.

The implications of this development trend for ecosystem services is significant. With respect to water quality, for example, watersheds with greater forest cover increase groundwater supplies, lower stormwater runoff, and lower levels of nutrients and sediment in streams than urban or agricultural areas.

The USDA Forest Service estimates that more than a quarter of our of our nation's fresh water flows from and is filtered by private forests, yet a recent agency report projects that more than 57 million acres of rural private forest land will undergo substantial increases in housing density from 2000 to 2030. The size of the forest area is key — wetlands near large forest tracts have lower levels of harmful nutrients and pollutants than wetlands near smaller forest tracts.

If we as a nation value the many benefits that private forests provide, we must find ways to create economic incentives to help landowners maintain these lands as forests for conservation purposes.

Payments for ecosystem services hold promise as a new economic opportunity to help maintain private forests. These payments reflect a number of public and private approaches to providing direct payments to landowners as a strategy to preserve, protect and restore one or more forest-based ecosystem services. Payments may come from government sources, such as the Conservation Reserve Program, or from non-governmental sources, such as payments for wetland mitigation, conservation easements or carbon offsets.

A recent report by Forest Trends Ecosystem Marketplace estimates total payments to landowners in 2007 of nearly \$1.9 billion in the U.S. Unfortunately, only a small percentage of private forest owners have participated in projects involving payments for ecosystem services, and the payments they have received are often too small to compete with values offered by developers. To really have an impact, mechanisms that deliver payments for ecosystem services must be further developed and then scaled up significantly.

American Forests, and its partners in the Coalition for Eastern Forests and Communities, will be advocating for these changes along with members of the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition and the National Rural Assembly, next week. About 30 local leaders from these coalitions will be in Washington, D.C., to carry on the policy work that community-based forestry groups have been doing for two decades, solutions for the future of our nation's forests and communities. This year, one of our key discussion areas is the 2012 Farm Bill as a vehicle for new authorities and funding for an incentive program for ecosystem services.

The 2008 Farm Bill directed the U.S. Department of Agriculture to establish "technical guidelines that outline science-based methods to measure the environmental services benefits from conservation and land management activities in order to facilitate the participation of farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners in emerging environmental services markets." In response, USDA created what is now the Office of Environmental Markets.

A key challenge, however, is that Congress did not provide funding for USDA to achieve this mandate. As discussions of the 2012 Farm Bill begin, American Forests and its coalition partners will ask Congress to recognize USDA as the lead agency for oversight and coordination of ecosystem services policy and programs at the federal level, and to provide adequate funding for USDA to facilitate the development of common metrics and procedures to advance ecosystem services markets.

While requesting funding is difficult during these cost-cutting times, this investment is essential to establish the foundation for ecosystem services markets, which will generate funds from the private sector for forest conservation.

Gerry Gray, PhD., is the senior vice president of conservation programs at American Forests, a nonprofit conservation organization.

Source:

<http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/energy-a-environment/159947-capitalizing-on-natures-benefits-new-incentives-for-private-forest-landowners>

The contents of this site are © 2011 Capitol Hill Publishing Corp., a subsidiary of News Communications, Inc.