

Testimony of Dr. Elizabeth DesPortes Dreelin  
Before the  
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Albany State University  
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Elizabeth DesPortes Dreelin. My family, all of whom were born and raised here in Georgia, has owned forest and farm land in Georgia since the 1840s. All of our land has been in forest production since about 1930. My formal education is in clinical psychology. I have studied and taught at Emory University School of Medicine. However, I decided to come home to practice psychology so that I could manage my family's timber land.

Today is not about psychology or medical research. It is about my other passion: my family's forest land.

I'm here as a representative of individual family forest landowners. Like five million other independent family forest landowners across the South we love our land. Many of us have diaries, letters, and other records from our ancestors telling us just how difficult and heart breaking it has been holding on to our land through hardships like reconstruction and the Great Depression. These inherited experiences evoke in us great depth of passion and commitment to hold onto our land despite the hardships and challenges currently facing today's forest landowners.

We want to be good stewards of our resources and pass them and our conservation values to our children and grandchildren.

So I was pleased when I was offered the opportunity to come here today. If ever there was a time when we needed to have a serious talk about the future of family owned forests in Georgia, in the South, and nationwide – it is now.

I am one of the 650,000 family forestland owners in Georgia. We grow Georgia's highest valued crop – timber – supporting over 68,000 jobs and generating nearly \$23 billion for the state's economy. Of Georgia's 159 counties, 131 are at least half covered by forests – the largest area of forest cover in the South.

The fact is, family forest owners are one of the South's most vulnerable endangered species, and our forests are fast disappearing from the landscape just like the American Chestnut tree.

Right here in Georgia, well over a million acres of forest have been paved in the past decade. That is the equivalent of paving a parking lot the size of DeKalb County every year! We will lose even more trees in years to come.

If you look at the South overall, the picture is just as bleak. We are losing about 1.2 million acres of family forests a year. Forecasts indicate that another 5.6 million acres of forests in Georgia may be converted to developed uses by 2010 – just four years from now.

The foundation of much that we treasure in the South – our rich and diverse forestland – is slipping away. That is bad news for all of us:

- For rural communities that depend on forest-based industries to generate a huge share of their income, and some of their best jobs.
- For our urban neighbors who depend on family-owned forests for clean air, clean water, wildlife habitat, healthy watersheds and for the green space that surrounds their cities.
- For the hunters and anglers who depend on private lands for their sport.
- And finally, for families like ours who have been good stewards for generations and would like our children and grandchildren to have the same opportunities we did.

Please understand that I'm not anti-growth or anti-development. For some owners, the opportunity to earn a return on their investment in land through development makes a lot of sense. However, family forest owners want the opportunity to consider other choices too: to keep their forests healthy, growing and working, to keep rural communities intact and local economies strong.

Every day, it gets more difficult to make this choice. This is what may be called the South's "Invisible Forest Crisis" -- a crisis where many forest owners don't see a way to preserve their family's heritage of voluntary, private stewardship.

I've talked to numerous family forestland owners. Economically, they feel trapped. The value of the land under our forests is making it almost impossible to justify further investments in forestry. I know I could sell my land today for at least \$5,000 an acre and never have to work again, but that would be contrary to my heritage and values.

There are a number of factors that have contributed to this "Invisible Forest Crisis". Markets for wood are sluggish, near non-existent for lower-value trees. Land prices and taxes are high, and getting higher as cities and towns grow closer to the woods. In many places, we're taxed on the potential value of our land, rather than the current value. This is a discouraging practice and amounts to indirect condemnation.

Most families don't own forests just for the money. Forest ownership is an American heritage and has been a way of life for generations resulting in a value system in which profits on timber are often not at the top of the list. Despite these values, even the most conservation-minded owner needs cash. We require food, clothing, and shelter as well as money for taxes, insurance, and investment in the practices of sustainable forestry.

The problem is, more and more these days, that sufficient cash can't be generated by forest product alone. This is exactly why I practice psychology part time to provide cash flow necessary to sustain our forestry operations.

This backs me and millions of other Southern landowners right into a corner.

Our timber crop is among the most valuable in the South – supporting over 770,000 direct jobs, and about \$120 billion in total industry output. Many rural industries depend on our wood. Just as important, our city neighbors prize the “environmental goods” we produce. Our forests are the green places suburbanites want to get away to. Their water is cleaner and cheaper because of the watersheds we manage. Our forests produce oxygen, and take up carbon dioxide. Our forests provide habitat for game, and we take care of the special places endangered species need to survive.

It seems public values and public policy toward family forest owners are based on flawed premises - that our land can sustain itself without cash flow, and that vital public goods can be produced without investment.

Can we work our way out of this “Invisible Forest Crisis”? I hope we can, and the 2007 Farm Bill is an excellent place to start.

**First, we all win if we choose to invest more in sustaining our nation's family forests.**

That investment can take many forms:

- research to identify new markets for low value wood;
- support for outreach, education and technical assistance to owners;
- direct incentives that owners can match with their own resources to protect watersheds, water quality and wildlife;
- private markets for ecosystem services;
- and there are many others.

Let me offer a few preliminary thoughts on some ways Farm Bill programs might help.

Incentives. Cost-share funding for family forest owners has historically varied from slim to none. The Forest Land Enhancement Program (FLEP) was somewhat successful, but has not been able to achieve its goals. A portion of EQIP funds are available for forest management in Georgia, but I understand that, overall, this \$1.1 billion program spends

less than \$10 million annually in forestry cost share assistance to American forest owners.

The need is much, much greater. With targeted investment toward active management for healthy forests, including thinning, prescribed fire and invasive species control, our forests could be more economically productive and provide more in the way of ecological services.

To keep our long rotation forests growing, and our wood-based economy intact, we need some kind of return on all the investments we make, including for those things you can't chip or saw: like water quality, habitat, and recreation. Incentives will in fact encourage forestland owners to produce those services and products of forests which are important to the larger good.

In Georgia and surrounding Southern states, some great work is being done in restoration of Longleaf pine forests. Longleaf pine forests at one time stretched over 140,000 square miles from Virginia to Texas. Unfortunately, this valuable Southern resource has been reduced to less than three percent of its former range. Longleaf pine forests at Ichauway and other properties offer excellent opportunities for hunting, implementing healthy forest management practices such as prescribed fire, and providing habitat under the safe harbor program. Asking landowners to provide these important ecological services for free while they wait 80 to 100 years on a long-rotation harvest is what we're doing now; some financial support would make it a lot more attractive and more likely to happen.

We hope Congress will recognize these needs for cost share and reserve programs as it considers the future of the Farm Bill forestry programs, conservation programs like EQIP, the Wetlands Reserve Program, the Conservation Reserve Program, the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, and even a better version of FLEP or expanded Forest Stewardship Program.

Coordination. I just mentioned several different programs supporting a variety of aspects to forests and their management. All effective rural conservation programs are rooted in effective state leadership. In some cases, that leadership is provided locally through Federal offices – for example, NRCS state committees and local work groups or through state extension offices. At the same time, state forestry agencies have traditionally assumed a leadership role in delivering programs for landowners and as a source of technical assistance. All these folks are good people; they understand what needs to be done. We could help them do it better by seeking more coordination among programs, more sharing of information, more joint planning and program delivery.

Outreach, Education and Technical Assistance. As a clinician, I learned pretty quickly that people will work hard to help themselves – if they know what to do, and if they're confident in their ability to do it. It's the same with forestry. Unfortunately, many family forest owners—especially new owners-- don't understand how active management practices can do more to keep them healthy and growing.

At the same time, all the organizations and agencies that traditionally reached out to these owners are starved for funding. The centerpiece for these efforts – our state forestry agencies – struggle with continually shrinking budgets. USDA funding for forestry extension has never exceeded a few million dollars. Often, provisions for technical assistance aren't fully integrated into or funded by the largest conservation programs. This translates into the reality that well educated and well intended family forestland owners are not aware that help is available and implementation of active management practices is beneficial.

I hope the 2007 Farm Bill will re-energize existing vehicles and spur development of new and creative delivery systems for outreach, education and technical assistance. A well-funded Forest Stewardship Program will be critical, along with new approaches to knitting together the work done by the Forest Service, NRCS, Extension and the various state agencies that “connect” with family forest owners.

Which brings me to my second “hope” for the 2007 Farm Bill.

**Just as important as investing more, is investing smart.** I understand how tempting it is to plan for next year by repeating what you did this year, simply because you did it last year.

For the sake of our nation's family forests owners, we all have to get beyond that. As the old saying goes, “If you're not catching fish in your favorite pond, you need to at least think about finding a new pond, or a new way to spend the afternoon”. We need to take a hard look at what's working, what's not – and make certain that every dollar we invest in public programs for family forests does at least a dollar's worth of work. Where it counts. In the woods. For all of us.

As Congress takes up the next Farm Bill – in an era of ever-tighter budgets – we hope you will consider ways to get the most out of what we do spend.

Planning and Priority Setting. There's a whole alphabet soup of Federal programs, all with somewhat different objectives but in many cases working toward the same end and often on the same land.

We could maximize return on our Federal investment by seeking more joint priority-setting and planning among the different Federal agencies at the national and state level – at best, assuring that all programs mutually support the highest priority objectives, or, at least, reducing the potential for duplication and overlap.

Results. You can't know if you're winning if you don't keep score. But you'll never know why you're winning if you don't measure carefully what works or what doesn't. We hope Congress will seek ways to assess the impact of programs based on outcomes, not just number of acres or contracts. By using compatible yardsticks across a range of different programs, we'll be able to see where we're doing the best job – and where we might be doing the same job twice.

Landscapes. Our family-owned forests are fragmenting into smaller and non-contiguous tracts. Ecological benefits provided by our forests, including protecting water quality and enhancing wildlife habitat, need larger landscapes which stretch across boundary markers. Programs should encourage owners with common interests to identify common challenges and seek ways to solve them together.

Taking Advantage of All Resources – Public and Private. Cooperative conservation makes sense. There are so many different agencies and organizations – public, private and non-profit – interested in forest conservation. All make a unique contribution, but if we find ways to weave their efforts together, we'll be able to do more, and do it more creatively. We'll be able to build flexibility into the total system so we aren't trapped with 1940's tools to reach 2007 landowners, and we'll be able to produce better results more efficiently.

I'm a realist. I know this is going to come down to dollars, and there aren't many of them out there. But I believe the debate over the Farm Bill shouldn't be seen as "us" versus "them." We truly are in this together. And by "we", I mean individual families like mine and a wide range of groups, including the American Forest Foundation, Environmental Defense, National Wildlife Federation, Society of American Foresters, National Association of University Forest Resource Programs (Southern Region), Southern Environmental Law Center and The Nature Conservancy. We all share the same ultimate goal -- to keep rural America a vibrant, vital and growing part of our economy, our environment, and our national life.

Thank you again. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee has.