

STATEMENT OF
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FOREST SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Before the
Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition and Forestry
Committee on Agriculture

Concerning
Forest Service Strategic Plan for Forest Inventory and Monitoring

April 14, 1999

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the Forest Service Strategic Plan for Forest Inventory and Monitoring. I am Robert Lewis, Deputy Chief of Research and Development for the USDA Forest Service. With me this morning is Richard Guldin, Director of Science Policy, Planning, Inventory and Information who is also with the Forest Service.

This plan, submitted with my statement, is written to comply with P.L. 105-185, the Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act of 1998 (Agricultural Research Act).

The strategic plan outlines the changes in the Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program and the Forest Health Detection Monitoring (FHM) program to meet the requirements of the agricultural research act. The plan's key elements include:

Integration of the Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program with the field portion of the Forest Health Detection Monitoring (FHM) program and increasing the use of remote sensing and advanced technologies to provide consistent data.

PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

Currently the FIA and FHM programs must rely upon concurrence of five FIA units, nine National Forest Regions, one Bureau of Land Management (BLM) office, and four FHM offices to bring together a consistent set of resource data and analysis for the nation. To increase efficiency and reduce duplication the strategic plan recommends the Forest Service's research arm assume responsibility, authority, and funding for the strategic inventory by merging the FIA and FHM programs to create a new Forest Inventory and Monitoring (FIM) program. Along with increasing efficiency by eliminating duplication between the programs, this new organization will deliver a more integrated and simplified database covering a wider array of ecological data about forests.

CONSISTENT DATA, SKILLS AND TECHNOLOGIES

FIA and FHM need to cover all lands and to collect data in a consistent manner. Only this way can we compare data across the country from one State to the next. By putting the responsibility of the program in research, as indicated in the plan, we will be able to achieve the consistency that we need.

FIA and FHM are internationally known for their high quality and accurate data. To maintain these standards we will need to incorporate the skills and expertise of our cooperators by making them active participants in all phases of the program. As the scope of the merged FIA and FHM programs expand to meet new customer needs, we will need to perform additional analysis. We will explore the use of outside talents of university faculty, graduate students, and other partners to conduct analysis and reporting.

We currently use remote sensing and other advanced technologies and we are increasing their use to reduce program costs. However, the availability of global positioning systems to accurately locate plots has increased concerns about private property issues. Private property rights are very important to us and therefore, we do not release the location of plot coordinates to the public.

PROGRAM COSTS AND ALTERNATIVES

We estimate that the program specified by Congress to measure 20 percent of all plots every year would cost over \$82 million per year for Federal and State contributors. This is \$45 million more than what is available from research and cooperators for 1999, \$37 million. Much of the increase is due to the increased frequency and scope of sampling, especially in areas of difficult access and short field seasons in the western United States and Alaska.

Nationally, the average cycle length for FIA is about 10-11 years and FHM is in only 32 States. The new FIM program would reduce the cycle to five years and include FHM in 50 States. Some of the increased costs are also due to the change from periodic to annual forest inventory procedures which require covering the entire United States every year, rather than concentrating field operations in a few States at a time.

We realize that this is a significant increase above the current level of funding for States and the Federal government, but there are less costly alternatives which we believe would be nearly as satisfactory to our customers. This includes alternative ways to inventory areas such as interior Alaska, portions of the interior west, and perhaps other areas with sparse population, limited access, and low rates of vegetative change. By factoring this into the program and based on concurrence from State Foresters, costs could be reduced from \$82 million to \$56 million annually.

Program costs are outlined in the strategic plan and we would welcome the opportunity to discuss these alternatives with the Subcommittee.

SUMMARY

Mr. Chairman, the FIA and FHM programs will play a significant role in supplying indicators of forest sustainability for a broad contingent of local, regional, and national clients. With the proposed FIA and FHM program, we will be able to provide data for criteria and indicators while ensuring accuracy as well.

This concludes my statement. I would be happy to address any questions you and Members of the Subcommittee may have.