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## **NEWS RELEASE**

### **NEW EFFORTS IN CONGRESS TO KEEP FORESTLAND INTACT AND WORKING WIN EARLY PRAISE FROM COALITION**

*Forest Conservation Easement Program will support jobs, clean drinking water*

**WASHINGTON, D.C. (August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023)** — Today a coalition of conservation, sportsmen and forest management organizations and companies applauded the introduction of the Forest Conservation Easement Program (FCEP) Act of 2023 in the U.S. Senate. The bipartisan legislation will fill a critical gap and help keep private forestland intact and sustainably managed for timber, allowing the lands to continue providing numerous benefits to rural and urban communities.

The legislation was introduced in the U.S. Senate by U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., and U.S. Senator Roger Wicker, R-Miss., with the goal of including the legislation in the 2023 Farm Bill with mandatory funding.

The legislation would prevent the conversion of forests into non-forest areas by authorizing funding to purchase development rights from willing private landowners. This would be achieved by placing a voluntary conservation easement on the privately owned land. FCEP is an expansion of and successor to the current Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) under the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). As a successor program, FCEP has the potential to offer new resources to meet various needs, which is especially critical at this time. One significant feature of this expansion is that it would provide funding for conservation easements to be acquired by non-federal and non-state entities, similar to a longstanding program for farmland and rangeland. This fills a vital funding gap for forestland.

“Every year we lose more and more intact working forests to fragmentation and conversion to development. Since 2007 we have lost more than 7.5 million acres,” said **Larry Selzer, president and CEO of The Conservation Fund**. “The Conservation Fund is dedicated to addressing the threat of forestland conversion and applauds U.S. Senators Gillibrand and Wicker for stepping up to provide an important, missing conservation tool to preserve working forests. We look forward to working with our leaders in Congress to get this pragmatic and bipartisan solution included in the 2023 Farm Bill with mandatory funding.”

“The United States loses approximately half a million acres of privately owned forest land to development each year, at the expense of clean water, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities,

timber supplies and more,” said **Andrew Bowman, president and CEO of the Land Trust Alliance**. “Land trusts are uniquely positioned to help private forest owners protect and manage their lands while also educating the public about the benefits of forest conservation to the environment and economy. We’re grateful for the efforts of Senators Gillibrand and Wicker in introducing this bill that will allow land trusts to work with the federal government to ensure that private forests remain forests.”

“Conservation easement programs are an important tool that should be available to all private forest owners,” said **Dave Tenny, president and CEO of the National Alliance of Forest Owners**. “Combined with healthy markets for forest products, conservation easement programs help privately owned forests provide a full range of benefits to rural communities. These include both economic prosperity and maintaining healthy populations of common and at-risk species and the habitats they need. Smart legislation, like the Forest Conservation Easement Program Act of 2023, helps America’s private working forests continue to provide clean air and water, wildlife habitat, and good paying jobs in rural communities.”

“From filtering drinking water, providing habitat for wildlife, buffering flood waters and sequestering carbon, to providing much-needed forest products and jobs, forests are an essential part of the fabric of America,” said **Camille Green, conservation policy coordinator for Wildlife Mississippi**. “The Forest Conservation Easement Program will help preserve forests for future generations to enjoy.”

“Forest conservation has been a priority of the Boone and Crockett Club since Theodore Roosevelt helped establish the Timberland Reserve Bill in 1891, which began creating forests to be held in the public trust,” said **James L. Cummins, president of the Boone and Crockett Club**. “We have great, voluntary, easement-based conservation programs for almost every habitat type except forests. With the many pressures we have today on our nation’s forests and the many opportunities we have to utilize them to solve many of society’s problems, the Forest Conservation Easement Program is the logical next tool we need to advance forest conservation for the next generation.”

“Voluntary conservation agreements are proven tools for conserving forests,” said **Jeff Crane, president & CEO of the Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation**. “We applaud Senators Gillibrand and Wicker for championing the Forest Conservation Easement Program Act of 2023 to provide additional incentives for landowners to conserve working forests and thereby support habitat for fish and wildlife and our outdoor sporting traditions that depend on healthy habitats to provide quality experiences for sportsmen and women.”

At its core, FCEP introduces two components, both of which seek to expand conservation easement options on private and tribal forestland while supporting sustainable forest management and production.

- Through **forest land easements**, NRCS will provide funding for eligible entities, such as land trusts, to purchase working forest conservation easements, filling a void among federal programs. Currently, no existing forest easement program provides funding for land trusts to acquire easements.

- Through **forest reserve easements**, NRCS will purchase forest conservation easements directly from forest landowners while additionally providing financial assistance for the management and restoration of the lands to benefit at-risk species. This aspect of FCEP serves as the successor to the HFRP.

Conservation easements allow private forest landowners to keep forests intact now and for future generations, ensuring the land remains privately owned and working. This provides stable forest cover, advances conservation goals and perpetuates timber supply for forest products. Private working forests in the United States support 2.5 million jobs, filter nearly 30 percent of the nation's drinking water, provide habitat for 60 percent of at-risk species and serve as a powerful carbon sink.

According to the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, approximately 500,000 acres of U.S. forestland are converted to other land uses every year, highlighting the urgency of conserving and maintaining privately owned forested areas. While this forestland loss has been offset by reforestation of other lands, the quality of forests replacing those that have been lost are not equal. Moreover, forests are facing greater threats than ever before, including wildfire, habitat loss, pests, diseases and invasive species.

The existing NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) is crucial for preserving working farmland and rangeland, but most forestland is ineligible. Additionally, the existing forest easement programs target state or federal conservation priorities, through the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy Program (FLP) or HFRP, respectively. These are highly successful and important programs, but FCEP is needed to fill a gap by providing funding for the two different easement options: forest land easements and forest reserve easements, with this funding being in addition to funding for ACEP and FLP.

House companion legislation, the FCEP Act of 2023 (H.R. 3424), was introduced on May 17 by U.S. Representative Trent Kelly, R-Miss., and U.S. Representative Annie Kuster, D-N.H.

For more information, visit [www.foresteasement.org](http://www.foresteasement.org).

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**Additional quotes**

**Nicole Zussman, president and CEO, Appalachian Mountain Club**

“We’re committed to the protection, enjoyment, and understanding of the outdoors. Working forests mitigate the effects of climate change and reduce biodiversity loss, and every year our research scientists learn more about the invaluable ecosystem services that intact forests provide. Working forests also contribute significantly to regional economies and are often where generations of people find joyful experiences in the outdoors. We applaud Senators Gillibrand and Wicker for advancing the Forest Conservation Easement program. This legislation is vital to protecting the forests and trails we love.”

**John Gale, vice president, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers**

“The Forest Conservation Easement Program may be one of the most important tools we have to secure the future of healthy and intact forest systems. The demands on both private and public lands compel us to develop thoughtful solutions that secure greater certainty for our natural resources. Voluntary programs like FCEP provide a tremendous benefit to fish and wildlife habitat and play a central role in securing water resources and mitigating the impacts of climate change. Hunters and anglers uniquely understand the conservation challenges we collectively face and we applaud our congressional leaders for championing this bipartisan commitment.”

**Cristel Zoebisch, deputy director of policy, Carbon180**

“With more than half of all US forests under private ownership, voluntary conservation easements play a critical role in keeping forests as forests. By expanding conservation easement options that enable collaboration with land trusts, the new FCEP model can help landowners continue to increase carbon storage, foster biodiversity, and protect air and water quality. We applaud Senators Gillibrand and Wicker for championing these visionary improvements and encourage Congress to include them in the 2023 Farm Bill.”

**Janae’ Reneaud Field, executive director, The Frontera Land Alliance**

“The Frontera Land Alliance, a nationally accredited land trust, works to conserve open natural spaces, working farms and ranches in west Texas and southern New Mexico. The Forest Conservation Easement Program would add another option for landowners to conserve important corridors and forest lands today for future generations.”

**Karin R. Tilberg, president/CEO, Forest Society of Maine**

“Having nearly 90% of Maine in forest, and witnessing development pressure begin to convert forestland to other uses, we need new tools like the Forest Land Easement Program under the NRCS. It will enable forestland owners to have more options available for easements by increasing conservation partners to include land trusts. We receive calls every week from forest landowners seeking conservation options for their land. This legislation will help us respond to these requests in a timely and effective manner.”

**Matt Ross, director of conservation, National Deer Association**

“Healthy, working forests are a vital part of our ecosystems, economy, and ethos – we simply can’t afford to lose more. The National Deer Association has been a proponent of private forest management for over 35 years; we’re proud to work with legislators and conservation partners to stand up the Forest Conservation Easement Program so that more landowners can make the decision to keep forests intact. As we look forward, we’re also committed to assist Congressional leaders to see this important bill become law.”

**Louis Geltman, policy director, Outdoor Alliance**

“Intact private forest lands are critical for outdoor recreation and the outdoor economy. These forests, which provide important ecological services like clean water, also support recreation access, scenic values and rural economies. The Forest Conservation Easement Program Act of 2023 would help willing landowners conserve these benefits for present and future generations.”

**Jack Savage, president, Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests**

“New England forests have long provided critical benefits, including clean drinking water, wildlife habitat and renewable wood products. We continue to lose 5,000 acres of forest annually in New Hampshire. Keeping forests as forests is an urgent priority to maintain our quality of life as we address climate change this century. As a land trust, the Forest Society would be able to conserve more forests more quickly through the Forest Conservation Easement Program.”

**Whit Fosburgh, president and CEO, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership**

“The importance of forests for wildlife habitat and climate resilience, adaptation and mitigation continues to grow. The TRCP strongly supports the FCEP Act of 2023 as a much-needed voluntary easement program to advance private lands forest conservation and complement other successful Farm Bill Title II programs.”

**Mark Pacilio, executive director, Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust**

“This funding of the Forest Conservation Easement Program (FCEP) will provide a critical tool and resource for our Land Trust to work with volunteer landowners to protect core forests in the famous Tug Hill Region of upstate and northern New York State. These forests are absolutely vital to the natural ecosystem that extends from the Adirondack Mountains to Lake Ontario. This is an exciting and encouraging step taken by Congress and the Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust wholeheartedly supports this action. We thank Senator Gillibrand and Senator Wicker for their leadership on this important issue.