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guest commentary

Forests need our help

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Americans have long recognized the contributions of family-owned farms and ranches to our way of life. Those contributions have been supported by federal programs, that assist farmers and help them conserve our nation's soil, water and wildlife. Congress soon will be debating the next farm bill.

The same kinds of programs that have proven so valuable to farmers can help family-forest owners stay on the land, and ensure their forests are managed to the highest environmental standards. To retain America's family-owned forests in the face of so many threats, this next farm bill must better address the problems of all of our country's working landscapes - farms, grasslands and forests.

Some 32 percent of the United States is covered by forests, and 59 percent of that forest land is owned and managed by individual family landowners. Family-managed working forests, just like family farms, provide the bulk of the renewable natural resources that allow the high standard of living most Americans enjoy. Some 92 percent of all raw wood materials come from private forests, which in turn support approximately 1.2 million people who work for wood-processing facilities.

Working family forests are different from both traditional agriculture and intensively managed industrial timberland in that most of these lands are managed for multiple resources in addition to trees.

Trees take decades to grow large, and thus family forests require family involvement across generations. To be successful, landowners must manage for long-term conservation, with good practices and detailed knowledge of the land passed from generation to generation. Managing for a healthy forest is also the only agricultural practice in the world that can maintain the biodiversity of the original landscape.

Other benefits include providing for improved water and air quality and recreational outlets. There are an estimated 107 million annual user visits each year to privately-owned forests for hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing nationwide.

The importance of America's family forests for conservation is also a problem.

Unlike a typical agricultural field with row crops, many working family forests offer the illusion to the casual passerby of being either wild forests or exclusive estates. This has led to a general underestimation of the personal labor and financial investment these lands require of landowners.

In today's fast-paced and global economy few if any businesses have a capital investment policy with a timeframe longer than 5-10 years. Prices and products need to be flexible to maintain competitive as demands, technical innovations and supplies constantly change. Family forest owners invest to plant a crop and then have to wait 30-90 years to realize a return on that investment. Living expenses, equipment, and property taxes all must be paid for in a much shorter time frame. In addition, there is risk to the crop from climatic events that only occur every other decade, new kinds of exotic pests, as well as the more predictable drought and native pests. Finally, when the crop is ready for harvest, there is a real risk that the processing facility has moved to another country where labor is cheaper, safety laws less stringent and environmental restrictions more lax.

Now imagine the working forest landowner is offered several million dollars by a land developer who wants to build a new subdivision in a scenic area. This probably is more money than the land will earn for the owner in their entire life.

These factors explain why the conversion of working family forest lands has reached epidemic proportions in the United States.

If current policies and trends continue, the U.S. Forest Service estimates that 44 million acres of forest land will be lost just to urban sprawl between now and 2030. Currently there are less than 288 million acres of working family forests left in the United States. In comparison there are 464 million acres of agricultural croplands.

Family forest landowners are desperately trying to maintain their lands as working forests and need to be recognized as vital to the future health of American society and its economy. With all of these essential public values at stake, the forestry conservation provisions in the farm bill need to include strong support for family forest landowners. A comparatively small amount of public dollars invested will enhance the management of and investment in family-owned forest land and return benefits worth hundreds of billions of dollars the public.

Bob Harrington is Montana's state forester and chair of the Council of Western State Foresters.