



December 4, 2008

To: President-Elect Barack Obama

From: Jim French, President - National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition
Bob Douglas, Executive Director - National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition

RE: Natural Resource Issues of Our Nations Forest Counties and Communities

The National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition represents the 800 counties and over 4,400 school districts that are in and adjacent to our national forests and O&C lands in the United States. This unique coalition not only includes counties and school districts but also local businesses, labor unions, and forest user groups, in rural communities nationwide, as well as the National Education Association, American Association of School Administrators, the Carpenters and Joiners Union of America, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters Union, SEIU, AFCSME, and a host of other diverse organizations – a complete list of our membership is included with this memo.

The National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition was instrumental in passage of the Secure Rural Schools and Communities Self Determination Act of 2000. The intent of that Act was to give rural counties and school districts within forested communities' six years of relief from declines in National Forest receipts which funded rural schools, and vital local services, while Congress addressed restoration of the sustainable management of our national forests. Unfortunately, when the Act expired in 2006 very little had changed for rural counties and school districts so the Coalition asked for and was granted a one-year extension in 2007. This year, a 4- year extension was granted by Congress as part of HR 1424.

President Obama, counties and school districts in rural communities are not asking for a handout from your Administration. We are asking that the Administration and Congress address the management of our national forests and the restoration of our rural economies. We live in these communities, we work and recreate in the forests, and all across the country we see these national treasures deteriorating from lack of management. Many of our communities have been devastated by forest fires and in many places we are saddened to see once healthy trees dead and dying due to bug kill and overgrown stands. At the same time, we have watched a heartbreaking parallel decline in the economic and social stability of National Forest counties and communities.

We believe that if the long term environmental health of our national forests is addressed by the Obama Administration that an improvement in the economic and social health of rural communities will follow. The long-term health of our national forests and our rural communities is deeply connected and intertwined. We stand ready to work with the Obama Administration to craft solutions for this national crisis that are scientifically based and supported by a majority of American citizens. For the last seven years, over 70 Resource Advisory Committees, developed under the Secure Rural Schools and Communities Act, and composed of a diverse cross section of local citizens, have designed and implemented over 5000 collaborative projects on National Forests and BLM Forest lands. Not a single project was appealed or litigated because they were the product of intense collaboration and consensus building at the local level. This type of landscape based cooperative conservation is in our view the future of American public land management. **We urge the new administration to aggressively expand the use of RAC's and similar collaborative planning and oversight mechanisms.**



We continue to advocate for the sustainable utilization of dead, dying, damaged, and appropriate mature trees as a means of thinning our forests, reducing dangerous fuel loads, and generating needed federal revenues for reinvestment in forest management and restoration. **Generating the capital needed to restore our forests from those lands in a long-term sustainable manner is good business and effective asset management.**

In this era of concern regarding the causes and effects of climate change and our increasing need to reduce dependency on foreign energy sources, we urge the new administration to pursue proactive policies that engage all sectors of America, including the National Forest Counties and communities to be actively engaged in solving these monumental challenges. We are extremely excited by the opportunities that energy generation initiatives such as woody biomass plants, wood pellet fuel manufacturing, and cellulosic ethanol production technologies offer for cost effectively, ecologically, and sustainably improving forest health, while simultaneously creating family-wage earner jobs, and restoring rural economies **Biomass and wood fiber from federal lands must be allowed under federal law to be utilized for energy production, ethanol production, and the development of clean wood fuel pellets and other ecologically sound uses. Long term supply contracts must be granted by the federal agencies, and appropriate corporate and small business tax incentives must be put into place, in order to encourage capital investment in new technologies and production facilities** **Rapid development of these newer generation forest industries will allow us to more rapidly address high fuel loads on our forests, reduce the incidence, cost and property destruction of catastrophic wildfires, and reduce our annual production of greenhouse gases, while also restoring rural economies through the expansion of good family wage jobs. Our forests win and our communities win.**

Forest communities are in dire need of an economic stimulus package like other sectors of America. Your administration is poised to embark upon the greatest investment in infrastructure restoration since the 1950's. As was the case then, our nation will need massive amounts of lumber and wood related products for this effort. We urge the new administration to place a high priority on using wood products that were grown and manufactured in America by American workers. As with oil, we must reduce our dependence on foreign wood supply and protect and expand our domestic production of wood products. Protecting and expanding our domestic wood production and developing the new forest industry technologies noted above will provide an effective and powerful economic stimulus for our National Forest Counties.

We are aware that changing the management of national forests will take time. While these changes are implemented by your administration we would welcome the opportunity to discuss policy options with the Administration that address the dilemma of how to compensate rural counties and school districts for the presence of large percentages of national forests within their boundaries. **As the Secure Rural Schools and Communities Act moves toward it's expiration date of 2011, we are committed to working with you to create the next generation of legislation that protects our national forest heritage while also maintaining the 100 year old obligation of the federal government to mitigate the effects upon rural counties and schools for the removal of our federal forest lands from economic development and taxation.**

Thank you for taking the time to consider our ideas and please do not hesitate to contact us, we are looking forward to working with you in the years ahead.