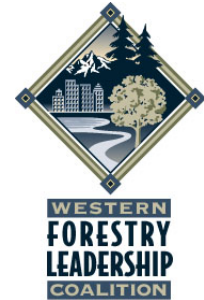


# Threats to Western Private Forests: A Framework for Conserving and Enhancing the Benefits from Private Working Forests in the Western U.S.



## Executive Summary

### Private working forests and the benefits they provide are at risk

While only a fraction of the total forested landscape, private working forests provide critical ecosystem services — clean water, wildlife habitat, wood products, flood protection, erosion control, family and community identity, recreation opportunities, carbon sequestration, and many others — to their owners and to the public. They also create important linkages within the broader landscape, facilitating the production of ecosystem services on public lands. However, we are in danger of losing the benefits provided by private working forests owing to such forces as changing climate, economic conditions, demographics, and competing social values. The impact of these changes to private working forests is degradation (decreased health and resilience) or conversion to non-forest uses, which is occurring at an ever-increasing rate.

### Threats to private working forests are complex and interrelated

The threats facing private working forests are traceable to a complex set of drivers, none of which act independently. These drivers interact in ways that put stress on private working forests and the benefits they provide to owners and the public. For example, in addition to affecting forest ecosystems directly, climate change is affecting the policy environment, spurring mitigation and adaptation responses that, in turn, affect markets and economic regulations. Similarly, a lack of social license to practice forestry (on both private and public lands) has direct impacts on the health and resilience of private working forests and is contributing to the decline of the forest products industry in the Western U.S. A clear understanding of these cause-and-effect relationships can lead to the development of solutions that do more than simply treat symptoms.

### Collaborative processes yield creative solutions

To explore the relationships among the threats facing private working forests across the West, and to identify solutions that address underlying issues, the Western Forestry Leadership Coalition (WFLC) brought together family and large-scale forest landowners, county commissioners, local and regional planning agencies, state forestry and wildlife agencies, federal land managers, tribes, universities, conservation districts, and nonprofit organizations at six exploratory workshops across the West. From this, a drafting committee synthesized workshop input and developed this report, which includes recommendations for addressing the threats to western private forests. The goal is to facilitate the creation of a new policy framework and new business model that, together, address the needs of private forest landowners; local, state and federal agencies; conservation organizations; and other stakeholders in the western U.S.

### Recommendations

These recommendations developed by the Threats to Western Private Forests drafting committee are meant to foster solutions at a meaningful scale. Policy, program, and on-the-ground actions by a multitude of partners in line with these recommendations can contribute to a future where sustainable forest management is an economic reality, a recognized social benefit, and a significant contributor to forest health and long-term climate change mitigation and adaptation goals.

### **Reward landowners for their stewardship of ecosystem services**

With the loss of private working forests, we also lose the ecosystem services they provide. The creation of markets for ecosystem services, financial incentives, and changes to land use and tax policy could contribute the necessary additional revenue streams needed to raise working forest values to levels that more appropriately account for their public benefits and allow for more robust competition with other land uses.

- Develop new markets for ecosystem services
- Support, encourage, and fund applied research in ecosystem service valuation, monitoring, and modeling
- Support the creation of new and modification of existing tax policies and financial incentives
- Encourage the development and improvement of local and state land use policies and compensation mechanisms

### **Promote diverse forest products markets and the utilization of woody biomass**

Active forest management often involves harvesting trees of various sizes to reduce fire risks, address insect and disease outbreaks, and improve overall forest health and resilience. Increased resilience is a necessary part of a climate adaptation strategy. Used as a means to realize additional economic value within a managed forest ecosystem, traditional forest products and woody biomass utilization (for thermal energy, electricity generation, and transportation fuels) can influence the decisions made by private landowners with regard to selling or holding onto their land.

- Facilitate the utilization of diverse forest products
- Implement programs that support traditional markets and woody biomass utilization
- Secure funding for woody biomass utilization through traditional and emerging markets
- Define renewable biomass in federal legislation to recognize material produced by sustainable forest management on private, state, and federal lands
- Develop and promote methods to verify and communicate that sustainable forest management is an ecosystem, social, and economic benefit

### **Facilitate action through cross-ownership management and partnerships**

Because of patchwork ownership patterns across the Western U.S. and the scale of the threats private working forests face, cross-boundary coordination is especially important. Cross-ownership management and partnerships among private forest landowners, public (state and federal) land management agencies, tribes, and communities is crucial to success on the ground and must aspire to overcome regulatory and other barriers that often keep sustainable forest management for multiple products and services from happening.

- Encourage the USDA to clarify, articulate, and develop the means to implement the all-lands approach
- Support effective partnerships among landowners, government entities, and communities at meaningful scales
- Move toward an environment that values and makes effective use of collaborative partnerships, compensation options, and market-based solutions
- Encourage coordination among regulatory and land management agencies at all levels