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AGRICULTURE SECRETARY VILSACK ANNOUNCES NEW DIRECTION AND VISION FOR AMERICA'S FORESTS

SEATTLE, August 14, 2009 - Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today outlined his vision for the future of our nation's forests. In his first major speech regarding the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service, Vilsack set forth a new direction for conservation, management, and restoration of these natural treasures.

"Our nation's forestlands, both public and private, are environmental and economic assets that are in critical need of restoration and conservation," said Vilsack. "By using a collaborative management approach with a heavy focus on restoring these natural resources, we can make our forests more resilient to climate change, protect water resources, and improve forest health while creating jobs and opportunities."

Climate change, catastrophic fires, disease and pests have all led to declining forest health in recent decades. The resulting impact on watersheds, the climate, local economies, wildlife, and recreation, has led the USDA to offer a new vision for our nation's forests. By taking forest management in a new direction, the Department will emphasize the role our national forestlands play in contributing to the health and prosperity of the country and reverse the trend of declining forest health.

"Declining forest health and the effects of our changing climate have resulted in an increasing number of catastrophic wildfires and insect outbreaks," said Vilsack. "It is time for a change in the way we view and manage America's forestlands with an eye towards the future. This will require a new approach that engages the American people and stakeholders in conserving and restoring both our National Forests and our privately-owned forests. It is essential that we reconnect Americans across the nation with the natural resources and landscapes that sustain us."

In addition, the new approach to managing our forests aims to secure the nation's water supply. Watersheds with a large proportion of forest cover are more likely to be associated with good water quality, with forests protecting soil, moderating streamflow, supporting healthy aquatic systems, and sustaining good water quality.

President Obama's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is one component of this new direction that USDA has already begun to implement. Through the Recovery Act, the Obama Administration is funding 512 projects that will create jobs restoring our nation's private, state and national forests through hazardous fuel reduction, forest health protection, rehabilitation, and hazard mitigation activities. Nearly 170 of these projects will help maintain our forests to reduce the potential for fires. Meanwhile, thirty of these projects, funded at \$57 million, will promote the development of biofuels from woody biomass to help private sector businesses establish renewable energy infrastructure, create green jobs and build a new, green economy for the 21st century.

The U.S. Forest Service manages national forests and grasslands encompassing 193 million acres of land, which is an area equivalent to the size of Texas. With over 80% of the forest area in the United States outside of the National Forest System, the new vision seeks to increase public-private cooperation regarding the conservation and restoration practices to non-federal forests - state, tribal and private forest lands. The Administration's plan calls for the U.S. Forest Service to play a leading role in the development of new markets to sustain the economic viability of forest stewardship and provide landowners with economic incentives to maintain and restore forests.

National forestlands produce economic benefits from a diverse range of sources including recreation and more than 200 hydroelectric plants operated in national forest watersheds. With more than 192 million visitors to National Forests in 2008, local communities throughout the country benefit economically from those who recreate on and near forestlands and high-quality water bodies protected by forested watersheds.

A healthy and prosperous America relies on the health of our nation's forests:

- Nearly 87% of all of the country's fresh water supply originates from forests and agricultural lands and more than 200 million people rely on their drinking water from public and private forests and grasslands;
- 53% of the Nation's total water supply originates from public and private forest lands;
- More than 900 cities rely on national forest watersheds;
- 3,400 public water systems serving 66 million people in 33 states are supplied by watersheds with Forest Service land;
- Public and private forests in the 20 Northeastern and Midwestern States help to protect more the 1,600 drinking water supplies supplying more than 4 trillion gallons per day to households of more than 52 million Americans;
- 80% of the forest area in the United States is outside of the National Forest System;
- The estimated annual value of water from national forests for in-stream uses is at least \$3.7 billion.

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" [See excerpts of Secretary Vilsack's speech online:](#)"

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