

Statement of

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United States Department of Agriculture

Before the
House Resource Committee
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
U.S. House of Representatives

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H.R. 3846, Tribal Forest Protection Act of 2004

Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to present the Department's views on H.R. 3846, the Tribal Forest Protection Act of 2004. The Department supports this bill, which is consistent with the general goals of stewardship contracting authorities and more actively involves federally recognized American Indian tribes in addressing risk to landscapes and communities in which they live.

The bill identifies stewardship contracting as a tool to use in addressing fire, disease, and other threats to Indian forest land or tribal communities. It allows tribes to request to enter into agreements or contracts for projects on federal land bordering on or adjacent to Indian forest land. It allows the Secretary to consider entering into contracts for activities to achieve land management goals or, if a request is denied, provide notice identifying contributing factors and how to overcome them. ~~Contracts will continue to be awarded through open competition, but~~ ✓ the bill emphasizes criteria to consider in evaluating stewardship contracting proposals to include such factors as tribal treaty rights or cultural and historical affiliation to the land.

In recent years, the United States has witnessed some of the most destructive wildfire events ever seen. We must work together to reduce the risk to forest resources, communities, and people who live in and near fire-prone landscapes on a priority basis. Our neighbors, including Indian tribes, have an understandable interest in the management of Federal lands, especially where conditions pose a risk to their lands. As federal land managers, we have emphasized collaboration with communities to identify, prioritize, and address risks across landscapes.

This bill focuses that collaborative effort on Indian tribes and Indian forest land, a concept we support. The Forest Service is currently engaged in several stewardship contracting projects with tribes. On the Upper Peninsula of the state of Michigan, the Lac Vieux Desert Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians has recently signed a stewardship contract with the Ottawa National Forest to thin some rapidly growing red pine stands. This work will mitigate existing resource damage, reduce fire hazard to the remaining stand and accelerate the growth of the residual stand. In return for the work, the Band will have access to the material removed from the stand to construct a traditional Roundhouse that will be used to conduct life-way and spiritual ceremonies.

We look forward to working with the tribes and all of our neighbors to address fire, disease, or other threats that affect us all. By working together in a collaborative way, as envisioned in the National Fire Plan's 10-year Comprehensive Strategy, we can make our landscapes healthier and our communities safer.

I will be pleased to answer any questions that the committee may have.