

## Topic: Forest Conservation Easement Program

Request: Co-sponsor FCEP legislation and/or include in Farm Bill priorities

**What is the Forest Conservation Easement Program?** The Forest Conservation Easement Program (FCEP) is designed to keep forests as forests through the use of conservation easements that purchase development rights from willing private landowners to prevent conversion to non-forest uses. Private forests in a conservation easement can remain privately owned, working and on tax rolls.

**Why conserve private forests?** Private forests sequester large amounts of carbon, filter nearly 30% of the nation's drinking water, provide habitat for 60% of at-risk species and support 2.5 million jobs. These forests face significant threats, mainly from conversion to housing and urban development. Once land is converted, it is highly unlikely it will ever revert to forestland.

**How will FCEP work?** As a forest-focused complement to the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and an expansion of the existing Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP), FCEP has two components: Forest Land Easements (FLE), which will allow eligible entities like land trusts to purchase working forest conservation easements, and Forest Reserve Easements (FRE), through which the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will purchase easements directly from private and tribal landowners.

**How is this different from other forest conservation programs?** FCEP will fill a gap that's not currently being addressed by existing conservation easement programs. Most working forestlands are not eligible for ACEP, which plays a critical role in conserving agricultural lands, grasslands and wetlands. Additionally, no existing forest easement program allows land trusts, tribes and other NGOs to hold conservation easements. Specifically, the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy Program (FLP) provides funding for state agencies to acquire fee title and easements on lands within a state designated "Forest Legacy Area." HFRP easements are federally held by NRCS, and the program has received inconsistent and insufficient funding. While these programs all serve important purposes, FCEP fills the remaining void by replacing and improving upon HFRP with mandatory funding and the addition of an eligible entity-held easement (via FLE) to complement HFRP's federally held easement (will become FRE).

**What is the status of FCEP?** The Alliance is working with a broad coalition of conservation, working forest, hunting and fishing organizations to advocate for FCEP legislation as part of the 2023 Farm Bill. We anticipate a bipartisan and bicameral marker bill will be introduced this spring for eventual inclusion in the 2023 Farm Bill.

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