

Transcript of Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack's Speech  
National Vision for America's Forests,  
(August 14, 2009, Seattle, WA)

- **Regional Forester Mary Wagner:** I'm gonna give you a little introduction about what we're gonna do today. So first and foremost, the bathrooms are across the street over at the Audubon building. And the program for this morning will go as follows: from 10:00 to 10:30, Secretary Vilsack will deliver his address on what the future holds for our nation's forests. We're then gonna take a brief intermission at 10:30 while the secretary meets with members of the news media. You're welcome to grab a bottled water, use the rest rooms, take a brief respite. The program will reconvene at 10:45, and we'll welcome Secretary Vilsack back, and he's going to present the Forest Service's National Volunteer of the Year Award to a local resident. Now I have the honor of introducing a true friend of the Forest Service. He is the longest serving member of the House of Representatives from the state of Washington. When he was elected to congress in 1976, he was named to the House Appropriations committee and with the state's three national parks and six national forests; the first subcommittee assignment he sought was Interior Appropriations Subcommittee. That choice was fateful. With all his years of experience, he now serves as chairman of that subcommittee, which is responsible not only for funding the Park Service and the Forest Service but also the Environmental Protection Agency. At his direction, the EPA is currently expanding its role in climate change and in cleaning up Puget Sound. He has encouraged a holistic approach to public resource management, recognizing in particular the key role that well-managed forests play in carbon capture as well as protecting clean water. One of his major initiatives since assuming the chairmanship of the Interior and Environment Appropriation subcommittee has been to establish the Legacy Roads and Trails Remediation Act, which has already made a major influence on northwest forests, resulting in a repair of washed-out roads and trails, the decommissioning of unnecessary roads, and the improvement of fish passage. He's a native of Bremerton, a graduate of the University of Washington and U-Dub's law school, and he's one of our state's most thoughtful environmental leaders. Please welcome me in a warm welcome for Congressman Norm Dicks. [Applause]

- **Congressman Norm Dicks:** Thank you, Mary, and I want to congratulate you and your regional staff for doing an outstanding job. I'm Congressman Norm Dicks. It's a great pleasure for me to be here today to introduce a great American, a thoughtful public servant, a man whose career in government has included leadership at all levels. Tom Vilsack has been a mayor, a state senator, a two-term governor, and now recognizing his impressive record and his conservation agenda in one of the nation's foremost food producing states, Iowa, President Obama has named him the 30th Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. And I'm glad that this Secretary of Agriculture knows that the Forest Service is in his department. That's not always been the case. And even more remarkable is that he has a vision for the Forest Service. Secretary Vilsack has already been one of the most active members of the Obama cabinet. In his first 100 days alone, he has helped to implement the

Economic Stimulus Act to save or create tens of thousands of jobs, including many here on the Olympic National Forest and the other national forests in our state. USDA, by the way, Rural Development Program is very highly thought of out here, Mr. Secretary and does a lot of good for our rural community. Mr. Secretary, I just want to mention-- I have to do this-- that Washington State is a significant agricultural producer, especially apples, wheat, and milk. And by the way, we produce more potatoes than that state east of us that you may have heard of. At the president's direction, Secretary Vilsack is now working to conserve, to restore, and to protect our national forest land. Mr. Secretary, as mentioned, when I became chairman, we created a new program, Legacy Roads and Trail Remediation. This year we funded it in the House at \$100 million. The backlog in Washington State alone, one state, is \$300 million. We need to work together on forest health and wildlife adaptation. We are worried about the loss of forest lands to development, and out here we have the Cascade Agenda and the Olympic Agenda to help our forest lands remain forest land free from development. Watershed restoration is also a huge priority in our effort to protect our salmon, orcas, and to restore Puget Sound. As the chairman of the House Interior and Environment Appropriation subcommittee, I am working with the secretary and his staff and in particular on encouraging collaboration among the Ag Department, the Interior Department, and the EPA to ensure we examine environmental changes that affect water quality and wildlife. At the same time, I look forward to working with Chief Vilsack and Forest Service Chief Tidwell to address the related problems that wildlife cost and wildfire cost in the Forest Service budget. Two decades ago, the fire portion of the Forest Service's budget was about 13%. Today it is just about half of the entire budget. And in recent years, the budget pressure has forced severe reductions in important programs that promote forest health and that ultimately reduce the dangers of devastating forest fires. All of these issues relate to the overall vision for the Forest Service in the Obama administration, which is the topic of the secretary's speech and the reason for his visit to the Pacific Northwest today. We are delighted that he has come to our region, and we look forward with great anticipation to his remarks. So please, let's give a warm Washington state welcome to the Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack. Mr. Secretary.

- **Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack:** Thank you very much. I appreciate it. [Applause] Thank you all. Thank you. Thank you. [Applause] Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for the kind introduction, but more importantly, thanks you for the leadership that you personally have provided on behalf of America's forests. You've been, I think, one of the most important champions of forests in this country and in the House of Representatives. You provided leadership in terms of funding our efforts to fight fires and our stewardship activities. And we all owe you a debt of gratitude, so thank you for being here today, and thank you for that kind introduction. I also want to thank and acknowledge Lieutenant Governor Brad Owen, who is also an environmental leader and leading the effort here in Washington State. Governor, I want to thank you for being here. Please give my regards to Governor Gregoire, a good friend of mine. The congressman didn't really have to remind me of the agricultural achievements of the state of Washington. Governor Gregoire was in Washington with a delegation not so long

ago, and I got a full briefing, congressman. Trust me. And I also want to acknowledge a couple of our friends from the state legislature. State Senator Brian Hatfield is here with us and State Representative Brian Blake is a former member of the Iowa legislature. I appreciate the role that the state legislatures play in environmental protection and in protecting our natural resources. So we thank you for being here. And I want to acknowledge that Mr. Kelly Fox, who is president of the Washington State Council of Firefighters, is also with us today. And I do want to take this opportunity, which I have not had a chance to, to publicly thank Anne Bartuska for her extraordinary leadership and work during this period of time and changing administrations. Anne, you've done a great job. You've been a great friend. You've provided us a lot of wise council. Would you please stand so we can acknowledge your efforts? [Applause] Well, it is certainly a pleasure for me to be here in Washington State, home to six of our national forests and to millions of acres of state, tribal, and private forest lands. It's particularly appropriate that we are in the home state of the forest named for our first Chief of the Forest Service, Gilbert Pinchot. He gave us a guiding principle still relevant today when he defined conservation. And I quote, "As foresighted utilization, "preservation, and/or renewal of forests, waters, "land, minerals for the greatest good of the greatest number for the longest time." A healthy and prosperous America relies on the health of our natural resources, particularly our forests. America's forests today supply communities with clean and abundant water, shelter wildlife, help us mitigate and adapt to climate change. Forests can also help generate rural wealth through recreation and tourism, through the creation of green jobs, and through the production of wood products and energy. They are too a source of cultural heritage for Americans and American Indians alike. And they are our national treasure, requiring all of us to protect and preserve them for future generations. Now, our new administration offers an opportunity for a new vision, a vision that will both guide the policies and the approach of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Forest Service towards forest conservation and management, a vision to address the challenges we face and to make the most of our opportunities to conserve and restore our forests. Our national forests are an enormously important environmental and economic asset. So too are our nonfederal forests, our state, tribal, and private forest lands. President Obama has made clear his interest in conserving our natural environment, and I intend to take that responsibility very seriously and to devote the time necessary to do it right. And I also know our new forest chief, Tom Tidwell, shares that commitment.

You know, I like to call our USDA an every way, every day department, because we do so many things each day to touch Americans' lives, from helping farmers to providing affordable housing to promoting clean energy. An every day, every way department, USDA helps American Farmers and ranchers provide a sufficient, safe, and nutritious food supply for all Americans. But our farmers and ranchers are also vitally important stewards of our working lands to ensure that in addition to food and fiber, those lands provide clean water and preserve wildlife habitats. In the same vein, our forests and our forest landowners provide more than wood products. Our forests too are sources of clean water and home to wildlife habitat. Let me just give you one measure often overlooked of how important America's farms, ranches,

and forests are to every American. It is America's forests, farms, and ranches that provide 87% of the surface supply of drinking water in America. Let me repeat that. It is our forests, our farms, and our ranches that provide 87% of the surface supply of drinking water in America. When Americans turn on the faucet, most don't realize the vital role that our rural lands and especially our forests play in ensuring that clean and abundant water flows out of that faucet. So while some may think it odd that I give a major speech on forests in a major urban area like Seattle, I do so in order to emphasize this important point. That is, while most Americans may live in urban areas, most of us are also dependent upon rural lands, particularly forest lands for clean water and a healthy climate. For these reasons, conserving our forests is not a luxury. It is, in my view, a necessity. Yet America's forests today are threatened like never before. Climate change, catastrophic fires, diseases and pests have all led to declining forest health. We're losing our privately owned working forest lands to development and fragmentation at an alarming pace. All of these changes have enormous impacts on drinking water, greenhouse gas emissions, the climate, local economies, and wildlife and recreational opportunities. Notwithstanding these trends, we have enormous opportunities. And one example is climate change, for it will create new markets for carbon storage and biomass energy which ought to significantly bolster sustainable forest management and forest restoration. Unfortunately, the debate about the future of our forests and our forest policy has been highly polarized for a long time. I don't think I need to remind anyone in Washington State about the debates surrounding spotted owls, clear-cutting, and other forestry issues. But given the threats that our forests face today, Americans must move away from polarization. We must work and must be committed to a shared vision, a vision that conserves our forests and the vital resources important to our survival while wisely respecting the need for a forest economy that creates jobs and vibrant rural communities. Our shared vision must begin with a complete commitment to restoration. Restoration, for me, means managing forest lands first and foremost to protect our water resources while making our forests far more resilient to climate change. The forest restoration effort led by the dedicated people of our Forest Service will open up nontraditional markets for climate mitigation and biomass energy while appropriately recognizing the need for more traditional uses of forest resources. Importantly, and this is very important, this vision holds that the Forest Service must not be viewed solely as an agency concerned only with the fate of our national forests but must instead acknowledge for its work in protecting and maintaining all of America's forests, including state, tribal, and private ones. Our shared vision must adopt an all-lands approach, requiring close collaboration with the NRCS and its work on America's private working lands. Now, why should restoration be the driving principle in forest policy? Well, there's no doubt that we're facing a health crisis in our forests. Climate change places them under increasing stress that exacerbates the threat of fire, disease, and insects throughout the West but in other parts of the country as well. A legacy of fire suppression has resulted in forests that are overstocked and much more susceptible to catastrophic fire and disease. Restoring forest ecosystems, particularly in fire adapted forests, will make our forests more resilient to climate induced stresses and will ensure that our forests will continue to provide

ample, abundant clean water. In many of our forests, restoration will also include efforts to improve or decommission roads, to replace and improve culverts, and to rehabilitate streams and wetlands. Restoration will also mean the rehabilitation of declining ecosystems. One example in the South is the long leaf pine ecosystem, a forest that has been reduced from 90 million acres to today a mere 3 million acres. Yet the Forest Service faces a number of barriers in pursuing a restoration agenda. For years, the Forest Service has struggled with a budget that has forced management funds to be shifted to firefighting. We must do better, and we can do better. The Obama administration is already working with Congressman Dicks and others in the congress to ensure that the Forest Service has the funds it needs to fight fires and to manage forests. Now, this is an important issue for our forests. But it is also important for the men and women who make up the Forest Service. It is our responsibility to give them the resources they need to succeed. A second barrier to accomplishing restoration is a history of distrust between environmentalists, the Forest Service, and the forestry community. The result has been seemingly countless appeals of forest management activity and subsequent litigation. Now, certainly appeals and litigation have served as a useful backstop against misplaced management decisions. But given the scale of restoration that must occur and the time in which we have to do it, a shared vision built on collaboration will help us move beyond the timber wars of the past. Litigation and conflict should become less prevalent because they can be viewed as less necessary. Now, fortunately, this process has begun. In many regions today, the Forest Service is already charting a path forward by building trust through diverse stakeholders through collaboration and engagement. A third barrier revolves around the loss of forest infrastructure represented by those who work in the forest industry. In large parts of the West we've lost timber mills, and those who worked in them have left the area. As a result, today we continue to lose the capacity to perform the important kinds of restoration work that must be done from thinning for habitat or watershed function to reducing hazardous fuels to removing trees to prevent the spread of insects and disease. Without a robust forest industry that includes both traditional markets and these new markets like biomass energy, it will be much more difficult and much, much more expensive to improve the health of our forests. Now, the Colville National Forest right here in Washington is a terrific example of the sort of collaborative effort that allows for appropriate forest management while providing timber supply to local mills. It is here-- the first national forest that is so - that engaged a diverse group of stakeholders in the most recent revision to their forest plan. Individuals and groups including elected officials, timber interest, motorized recreationists, conservationists; they all got together to discuss the common goals for the forest. The result: general acceptance was reached about where to concentrate future recreation and where to timber-- harvest timber. And tens of thousands, tens of thousands of additional acres in Colville were recognized for their roadless character and the potential for wilderness designation. It is no small testament to this effort and to the energy of those involved that this area has avoided litigation for more than five years since that process was initiated. Now, the experience here is not unique, but it can be more broadly applied. If we undertake restoration of our national forests at a scale commensurate with the need,

we will need to do more of this. The Forest Service planning process provides an important venue to integrate forest restoration, climate resilience, watershed protection, wildlife conservation, the need for vibrant local economies, and the collaboration necessary to manage our national forests. Our best opportunity to accomplish this is in the developing of a new forest planning rule for our national forests. As many of you may know, in late June, a federal court overturned a 2008 planning rule put forward by the Forest Service. This came on the heels of a similar court decision overturning the 2005 planning rule. Now, faced with this, the Forest Service has a decision to appeal these decisions or not. Well, we've decided not to seek further review of the latest court decision. And I've asked Chief Tidwell to develop a new planning rule to ensure management and restoration of our national forest with the goal and vision of protecting our water, climate, and wildlife while also creating economic opportunity. Another integral part of our shared vision must be adequate protection for roadless areas. President Obama was quite clear in his campaign in emphasizing his support for protecting roadless areas. He understood the important role they play in preserving water, climate, and recreational opportunities. Just last week, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the lower court's decision reinstating the 2001 Clinton roadless rule. I view this as a very, very positive development, yet the Forest Service is still subjected to a court injunction from a Wyoming district court judge in the tenth circuit in joining the Forest Service from implementing the 2001 rule. Let me be clear. We will seek to lift that injunction in light of the ninth circuit's decision. And if the courts remain conflicted, or it's not possible to protect roadless areas through the courts, we will initiate a new rule making process to do so. I recognize that some states are already taking action on their own. Colorado is moving forward with its own roadless rule as Idaho already has. We believe Idaho's rule is a strongly protective one for roadless areas. And we note wisely that Governor Ritter in Colorado has asked for additional input on his draft roadless plan for Colorado. He understands, as I do, that Colorado needs strong roadless protection, and so does the entire nation. Now, the threats facing our forests do not recognize property boundaries. So in developing a shared vision around forests, we must also be willing to look across property boundaries. In other words, we must operate a landscape scale operation by taking an all-lands approach. The reality is that 80% of the forest area in the United States is outside of the national forest system. And many of our national forests are adjacent to state and private land. Management decisions that are made both on and of the national forest obviously have important implications for that forest landscape. More broadly, privately owned forests across the country face a daunting set of challenges. As Congressman Dicks indicated, the Forest Service estimates that over 40 million acres, 40 million acres of private forest could be lost to development and fragmentation over the coming decades. Americans tend to think that deforestation is a problem only in tropical countries. Well, I'm here to tell you that we have our own deforestation problem right here in the U.S. of A. And this has enormous implications for the climate, our drinking water, our rural economies, and wildlife. Just keeping forests as forests remains a significant challenge. The good news is that conservation groups, forest industry, and government agencies are increasingly willing to unite to address the common threat

of the potential loss of forest lands on private land. I want the Forest Service and the USDA to partner with these stakeholders in protecting those privately owned forests. I believe, and I know Chief Tidwell agrees, that the Forest Service and the USDA can play an important role in working with these stakeholders to address forest loss. Indeed, our Forest Service has a long history in working with private landowners through its partnership with state foresters and others in addressing stewardship on privately owned forests. And USDA has its own unique strengths in this area as well. The 2008 farm bill provides new opportunities to use existing conservation programs and to focus those resources on the most pressing problems facing family owned forests. Many of our farm programs and conservation programs have much greater potential than the USDA has realized today to protect, rehabilitate, and conserve family forest land. An important goal of the USDA and the Forest Service should be to integrate the work of the Forest Service and our National Resources Conservation Service. This will be vital to embrace an all-lands approach. Now, government programs provide only part of what is needed to realize our shared vision. For forest ownership and stewardship to remain viable, it must remain economically rewarding as well for landowners. Markets for wood will remain important to those landowners and local communities. But private and public landowners must also access new markets for both low- and high-value products and services and forest uses in order to underwrite stewardship activities. Emerging markets for carbon and sustainable bioenergy will provide landowners with expanded economic incentive to maintain and restore our forests. Our Forest Service must play a significant role in the development of these new markets and must ensure their integrity. But carbon and bioenergy aren't the only new opportunity for landowners. Markets for water can also provide landowners with incentives to restore wetlands, watersheds, and to manage forests for clean and abundant water supplies. These markets can also create jobs in rural communities near forests. By generating rural wealth, we can make it possible again for landowners to sustain our forests and our working landscapes. I hope we'll examine other policies and approaches outside of the USDA and the Forest Service that can address both management and also potential loss of private forest land. I know Chief Tidwell and his counterpart, David White at NRCS, will seek out opportunities to work with conservation groups, with the forest industry, with state foresters and others to ensure that we maintain the private forests and utilize this all-lands approach. The loss of our private working lands and private forests deserve constant attention. Now, I've offered a broad vision today to guide the Forest Service and the Department of Agriculture in setting a new course for America's forests. I recognize that there is a great deal of work yet to be done to make this a reality. And so I'm tasking the Forest Service and USDA in partnership with all the stakeholders to make this vision a reality. In the short term, I'll ask Chief Tidwell to initiate that process to develop new planning rules to guide the management of our national forests consistent with this vision. We'll also monitor progress towards the protection of roadless areas in the courts, and we'll act to protect roadless areas as necessary. When it comes to restoring our forests, I want the Forest Service to improve its existing authorities and take advantage of new tools to restore all of our forests in order to protect our water and make our forests

more resilient to climate change. I'm asking Chief Tidwell and Chief White to work together in partnership with all groups, state forester, conservation groups, the forest industry, and others to develop a broad agenda for protecting our privately owned forests and our working lands. And I want the Forest Service and USDA to play an even more prominent role in developing those new markets I spoke of, carbon, bioenergy, and water, as a means to conserve our forests. The path ahead is challenging, but it is full of opportunity. We must encourage, catalogue, and expand the collaborative solutions that hold the most promise to protect our public lands and our working lands. We must dramatically accelerate the scale and pace of forest stewardship here on both public and private lands. On our national forests, we must restore more acres more rapidly if we are to prevent catastrophic fires, insect outbreaks, and other threats, particularly as climate change makes those threats more potent. On private land, we must move more quickly to protect our forest landscapes before they no longer can function to support watershed health, biodiversity, conservation, and viable wood markets. Americans often assume that our health and well-being are separate from the health of our natural world. But I return again to the simple act that we Americans often take for granted every day: turning on those water faucets. The clean water that emerges is made possible in large part by the stewardship of our working rural land and our forests in particular. My hope, and I trust you share it, is that together we can foster a greater appreciation in this country for our forests and that all Americans, regardless of where they live, see the quality of their lives, and the quality of their forests as inseparable. Thank you very much. [Applause]