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ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS ANNOUNCE PARTNERSHIPS TO IMPROVE FOREST HEALTH, WILDLIFE HABITAT AT NATIONAL FOREST HEALTH CONFERENCE

LITTLE ROCK, Ark., June 7, 2004 – Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman, Council on Environmental Quality Chairman James L. Connaughton and Interior Assistant Secretary Craig Manson today announced several action steps designed to help implement President Bush's Healthy Forests Initiative in the southern United States. The Bush Administration officials are here for a national conference on the President's Healthy Forests Initiative and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act.

The steps include partnerships to conduct two landscape-scale applied research projects and a 60,000-acre stewardship project to improve forest health and wildlife habitat, protect water quality and reduce the risk of fire to surrounding communities. In addition, an agreement with the National Association of Conservation Districts will help reduce wildland fire risks by promoting biomass utilization projects.

"Partnerships with local communities are essential to achieving the goals of President Bush's Healthy Forests Initiative," Veneman said. "The Initiative provides land managers with the tools to reduce wildland fire risks, control insects and disease and restore forest health. Through local partnerships, we can leverage these tools to achieve even greater results."

"President Bush's leadership on this important national issue put us well down the road to restoring our nation's forests to healthy and natural conditions," Connaughton said. "The application of the new tools provided by the President's policies is the critical next step to achieving safer communities, healthier forests and thriving ecosystems."

"Wildland fires are affecting many regions of the country," Manson said. "Because of decades of overgrowth, we are experiencing wildfires that burn hotter, faster and more intense. Through partnerships with the states and the tools we have under the President's Healthy Forest Initiative and the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, we are now able to do a better job of preparing and planning to reduce hazardous fuels and combating insect infestations that make our forests unhealthy."

Using authority provided under Title IV of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, the Forest Service will partner with southern universities and state forestry agencies to conduct two landscape-scale applied research projects on the Ozark-St. Francis National Forest to address infestations of the southern pine beetle and red oak borer, which threaten forest health in the region. The red oak borer alone has damaged 340,000 acres of the forest over the past few years.

The applied research projects, totaling 1,500 acres, aim to conduct and evaluate different land management practices that reduce problems associated with the current outbreak of the red oak borer and southern pine beetle, and to translate that information for practicing professionals, landowners, and the public. These projects will be instrumental in mitigating the damage caused by these destructive insects.

The Ozark-St. Francis National Forest also initiated a 60,000-acre stewardship project with The Nature Conservancy, National Wild Turkey Federation, Quail Unlimited, the Audubon Society, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Caddo Nation of Oklahoma to improve wildlife habitat, forest health, and reduce the risk of fire to surrounding communities. The project also seeks to protect the municipal water supplies of Hector, Dover, Russellville and Clarksville in nearby watersheds. The project will use both the stewardship contracting authority provided by Congress in December 2002 and the expedited procedures provided under Title I of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act.

In another forest restoration effort, the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior and the National Association of Conservation Districts signed an agreement to work together to reduce wildland fire risks and promote biomass utilization projects on federal and private lands adjacent to communities throughout the United States.

The agreement will allow the Federal agencies to tap into the extensive network of NACD's local partners nationwide. It also will assist the Departments in reaching out to citizens and private landowners to help them conserve, develop and protect forests, rangelands, and communities at risk to severe wildland fire. NACD will develop communication tools and sponsor workshops to spread the word that biomass removal and use can be an effective fuel reduction strategy.

Announced in August 2002, the President's Healthy Forests Initiative is a pledge to care for America's forests and rangelands, reduce the risk of catastrophic fire to communities, help save the lives of firefighters and citizens and protect threatened and endangered species. President Bush signed into law the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 in December 2003. It aims to reduce the threat of destructive wildfires by streamlining the process for approving high-priority fuels reduction and restoration projects while upholding environmental standards and encouraging early public input during project development.

The Departments have developed a new interagency website that will serve as a clearinghouse for information on the President's Healthy Forests Initiative and track the results of projects. For more information on Healthy Forests Initiative projects and other healthy forests information, see the new website at <http://www.healthyforests.gov>.