March 26, 2015

Mr. Tom Tidwell, Chief
US Forest Service
1400 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20250

Re: Forest Inventory and Analysis Funding in the South

Dear Chief Tidwell,

The Southern Group of State Foresters would like to take this opportunity to bring to your attention the current status of the Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program in the South and express our concern with the direction of the national FIA program in FY15. We are strong partners with the USFS in FIA program delivery, annually contributing between 30% and 40% of program expenditures throughout the South, and thus have a vested interest in how FIA funds are distributed and used.

We have long appreciated USFS recognition of the importance of the FIA program in the South – essential in tracking trends in forest health, species composition, and regional sustainability among many other uses. This importance was made apparent at the Region 8 Chief’s review, held in October 2014 in Charleston, SC, by federal staff and agency partners alike. It has always been our understanding that the USFS viewed maintaining a historical 7-year cycle in the South as one of the priorities within the national FIA program.

We are concerned that over the past 5 years the USFS has strayed from this priority. As you are well aware, the USFS was able to fund a 7 year cycle in the South with a national FIA budget of roughly $72 Million in the recent past. Unfortunate budget cuts from Congress resulted in a lengthening of that funded cycle to 10 years. With an increase in Congressional funding in FY15 to $70 Million, we were expectant that the historical 7 year cycle in the South would be resumed.

However, recent communication from the USFS Southern Research Station (SRS) indicates exactly the opposite. Despite a $3.2 million increase in the FIA program
nationally, the SRS is currently only able to fund 75% of a 10-year cycle in the South in FY15, leaving the States to contribute the remaining portion or suffer from reduced data utility. In comparison, it appears from discussions with the agency and with other States that the other FIA regions (Northeast and West) are still able to maintain a 10-year cycle. It makes no sense that the US South, the “woodbasket of the world”, would have a less frequent cycle than other forest regions. Additionally, it appears that the agency is moving forward with other aspects of the FIA program, for instance expanding the number of cities receiving urban inventory, without first addressing maintenance of the base program.

We ask that this incongruity be addressed as soon as possible. We recognize that one of the things that has helped maintain southern FIA cycles in the past has been the receipt of carryover and supplemental funding. We request that any such funds for FY15 be considered for SRS FIA program delivery as soon as they become available. As you know, our southern forests grow so quickly that lengthening cycles and delaying supplemental funding has immediate implications on the quality of FIA data and its many users, from federal and state analysts tracking forest health and sustainability to industries looking to site job creating mills and wildlife biologists monitoring habitat for endangered species.

We are fully supportive of the agency vision outlined in the FY16 Budget Justification of a 7 year cycle in the south as part of an $83 Million budget request. It is our hope that Congress will recognize the value of this Federal/State partnership and support the FIA program at that level. However, until such a funding increase becomes a reality, it is imperative that the agency focuses the program and funding on what has always been stated as a national base priority – maintaining historical cycles, especially in the South. Maintaining a consistent 7-year cycle is the top Southern Research Station funding priority for State Foresters. We request that the agency find a way to achieve this cycle frequency in FY15 and onward in recognition and support of our ongoing partnership in FIA program delivery.

Thank you for your attention, and please feel free to contact me at any time regarding this issue.

Sincerely,

George Geissler
State Forester, Oklahoma
Chair, Southern Group of State Foresters

CC: Jim Reaves, Greg Reams, Rob Doudrick, Bill Burkman