



Caring for our existing trees is just as important as planting new ones

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In recent days we've seen President Trump and members of Congress on both sides of the aisle recognize the value of trees and forests in tackling our environmental and economic challenges of today. Committing to the global Trillion Trees Initiative is a great example of this.

While it's energizing to see these leaders have the right sentiment, it is crucial in the coming months, that they get it right when it comes to the policy and implementation.

We can't just focus on planting trees if we want to unleash the potential of forests as we've heard in the media. We must take a multi-faceted approach—plant more trees and improve the management of existing forests that have been neglected, keep forests from being converted, and use more forest products, encouraging the investment cycle in more trees.

There is absolutely a need to plant more trees in the U.S. and around the globe. Across our country, there is an abundance of marginal and environmentally sensitive open farmland where planting new trees would be appropriate. There are also previously forested areas that have not been properly replanted after wildfires or hurricanes that would benefit greatly from a reforestation investment.

But we can't stop there. Our existing trees and forests provide us with vital resources that support us today: clean water, wildlife habitat, carbon capture and storage, products

Americans use every day, as well as good-paying rural jobs. These forests must be considered.

Caring for our existing trees is a proven scientific tactic to tackling climate change. Research led by The Nature Conservancy shows natural climate solutions represents one of the most significant solutions available to capture hundreds of millions of additional tons of carbon out of our atmosphere. In fact, natural climate solutions could support 37 percent of the needed mitigation globally through 2030 if implemented today. More specifically, the actions that would sequester the most carbon by far are reforestation (planting trees) and improved forest management of our existing forests.

As the president and Congress look to implement the Trillion Trees Initiative and other programs and legislation, they should consider how they can expand their efforts to include the full range of tactics and tap into the diversity of U.S. forests—rural and urban, public and privately held.

One key opportunity that must be at the forefront are the family-owned forests of the U.S. Rural families and individuals own the largest portion, 38 percent of our existing forests. Research from the American Forest Foundation found that 1 in 4 rural Americans owns forestland. Collectively, they own more forestland than the federal government. These hard-working individuals care about their land, and want to do the right thing, but often hit roadblocks – such as technical expertise, cost or access to markets – that keep them from affording the ability to plant and manage their trees for wood products, carbon and a range of other benefits.

Engaging this group of dedicated rural Americans to help with improved forest management and reforestation is a commonsense approach for addressing pressing environmental challenges, including climate change. What's more, tapping these lands will support millions of jobs in these rural communities too.

Already there are a host of conservation programs and tools available to help family forest owners, which can be enhanced. Second, continuing to create and sustain robust markets for forest products such as wood, carbon and others continues to create value in forests, and income for rural America. Last, policymakers can also create new innovative financing tools that enable public – private partnerships like the Family Forest Carbon Program, which helps small landowners access voluntary markets, such as carbon markets.

The opportunity to capitalize on trees and forests to help address today's environmental and economic issues, including climate change, can't be understated. And engaging rural family owners is a bipartisan solution that will help meet this challenge.

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