

**NOMINATION OF HOMER L. WILKES, TO BE
UNDER SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE FOR
NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY**

UNITED STATES SENATE

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**NOMINATION OF HOMER L. WILKES, TO BE
UNDER SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE FOR
NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT**

THURSDAY, AUGUST 5, 2021

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION & FORESTRY,
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:07 a.m., via Webex and in room 301, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Debbie Stabenow, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Stabenow, Brown, Klobuchar, Bennet, Gillibrand, Smith, Booker, Luján, Warnock, Boozman, Hoeven, Ernst, Hyde-Smith, Marshall, Tuberville, Grassley, Thune, Fischer, and Braun.

**STATEMENT OF HON. DEBBIE STABENOW, U.S. SENATOR
FROM THE STATE OF MICHIGAN, CHAIRWOMAN, U.S. COM-
MITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY**

Chairwoman STABENOW. Good morning. I call today's hearing of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry to order. We are here to consider the nomination of Dr. Homer Wilkes to be Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, which oversees the U.S. Forest Service.

Before going further, just as a personal note, I first met Dr. Wilkes with Senator Cochran on a tour of Mississippi, and Senator Wicker, and he just reminded me that he somehow goaded me into holding an alligator, and so I have the picture to prove it, so my first and last time. It is a pleasure to see you again.

On a serious note, this role that Dr. Wilkes will have will tackle wildfires and work to restore and protect the health of our public forests and grasslands. So important. The health of our forests, both public and private, is impossible to separate from the well-being of our country, frankly. Healthier forests mean cleaner air, safer water and fewer wildfires and destruction. It means being able to take in the fresh water on a hike—or fresh air on a hike in the Hiawatha National Forest in beautiful Michigan, go camping and fishing in the Ozark National Forest in my friend Senator Boozman's home State of Arkansas, or simply be able to stay safe from the destruction of wildfires out west thanks to the heroic work of our Forest Service firefighting crews who are, as we speak, putting their lives on the line to protect all of us.

Wildfires have been increasing in size, number and intensity every year, spreading like well, wildfires. Right now, there are 96

wildfires active in 14 States, 96. They have already consumed nearly 1.9 million acres and continue to threaten the livelihoods of the surrounding rural communities, including many farmers and ranchers.

With strong leadership in the natural resources and environment mission area and the Forest Service, we can restore our public lands. This includes replanting trees that have been affected by wildfire and are unlikely to regenerate on their own, adjusting land management practices to store more carbon and benefit wildlife, and pursuing targeted and science-based restoration of our forests that can prevent wildfires in the first place. All of this is done in close collaboration with State foresters, tribal government and private landowners.

President Biden nominated Dr. Wilkes because he has the skills to tackle these pressing challenges. Dr. Wilkes has had a 41-year career at USDA, leading efforts in conservation, ecological restoration and prescribed fire, all while working closely with private landowners and community-led organizations alike. He has existing relationships with many of the stakeholders, this missionary, overseas, including conservation, forestry, natural resource groups like the National Wildlife Federation, the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, the National Wild Turkey Federation, and many others.

I have a letter of support from several stakeholders for his nomination I would like to add to the record without objection.

[The letters can be found on page 36 in the appendix.]

Chairwoman STABENOW. If confirmed, Dr. Wilkes will work closely with the Forest Service's new chief, Randy Moore. Chief Moore started his career at the Natural Resources Conservation Service in 1978 and has over 20 years of experience at the Forest Service, most of them on the front lines of our wildfire challenges. Between the both of them, they have eight decades of experience in natural resource conservation and defense. I have every confidence that they will be a great team and work to restore and protect our public lands through responsible forest management practices, conservation, research, and recreational opportunities, all of which create jobs and drive rural economies.

I look forward to hearing from Dr. Wilkes about his vision for the future of the natural resources and environment mission area and the U.S. Forest Service. With that, I would recognize my friend Senator Boozman for any comments he has.

**STATEMENT OF HON. SENATOR JOHN BOOZMAN, U.S.
SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF ARKANSAS**

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Madam Chair. Today we welcome Dr. Homer Wilkes from Mississippi to the Committee as we consider his nomination to be Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, or NRE, the mission area at the Department of Agriculture. Our colleagues from Mississippi, Senator Wicker and Senator Hyde-Smith, will give a proper introduction of Dr. Wilkes, but he comes to us after serving at the USDA for 41 years in a variety of senior roles and positions.

Dr. Wilkes has also served in the U.S. Navy Reserves for many years. We are grateful for your service to our country in so many

different ways. Dr. Wilkes' dedication to service and leadership has demonstrated over the course of his career is a reason that this is not the first time he has been nominated for this position. Putting family first, he took his name out of contention for the Under Secretary position in 2009, choosing to remain in Mississippi. I deeply respect making your family your priority, and I am pleased that you are now ready for the challenge of the office.

I thank you for your willingness to serve because our Nation's forests are critical to so many families in our rural communities. Our nation's forests and grasslands serve a variety of functions, habitat for wildlife, areas for outdoor recreation, grazing for livestock, energy and mineral development, and timber for a vibrant wood products industry, which by the way, sequesters carbon in wood products long beyond the natural life of the individual tree.

The life cycle of planting trees, managing forests, harvesting timber and delivering this commodity to a growing wood products industry is a win-win for everyone. Carbon is sequestered in trees, which is then stored in the products derived from those trees. Rural communities benefit from a wood products industry that converts trees to products we all use and depend on.

In Arkansas, we are seeing some of these exciting innovations of mass timber. For instance, the University of Arkansas Adohi Hall is a 202,000-square-foot student residence constructed almost entirely of mass timber. It is one of the largest mass timber buildings in the U.S., estimating to store the equivalent of over 3,000 metric tons of carbon.

Also, Walmart is constructing its new corporate headquarters in Bentonville with 1.7 million cubic feet of mass timber harvested and manufactured in Arkansas. As a result of that project, Structurlam will be opening a new facility in Conway, Arkansas that will create over 100 new jobs in the State. These projects are just a microcosm of the win-win opportunities tied to healthy, well-managed working forests and communities they support.

However, the success of keeping our forests healthy and working with carbon sequestration, wood products, recreation, wildlife and resources, is only as strong as our forest management. I am deeply concerned about the future of our forests because they are so vitally important to so many stakeholders. Multiple years of delayed management and neglect have left some of our forests vulnerable to insects, diseases and catastrophic wildfire, which is why reenergizing efforts to actively manage our forests, from hazardous fuel reduction to restoring lands damaged by fires or diseases or pests, is critical in keeping our forests working and healthy for generations to come.

If confirmed, Dr. Wilkes will be taking the helm at the NRE and overseeing the Forest Service in the middle of what is shaping up to be another record wildfire season with over 1.8 million acres burned on over 90 large wildfires. His leadership will be critical in mitigating the impacts of this fire season and ensuring that the Forest Service has the right tools to do the right work on the right acres in the months and years to come.

Dr. Wilkes has immense experience at NRCS in leveraging their programs and building partnerships with a variety of stakeholders. Throughout Dr. Wilkes' career he has engaged farmers, ranchers,

landowners and rural communities in decisionmaking and program implementation. If confirmed, I am hopeful that Dr. Wilkes will bring the same qualities and characteristics demonstrated during his tenure at NRCS to his role as Under Secretary at NRE, as that type of engagement is crucial to keeping our forests healthy and working.

If confirmed, I trust Congress will also be able to work with Dr. Wilkes and rely on his professionalism and candor as he leads the NRE in this important work. Along those lines, I ask you, Dr. Wilkes, if confirmed, to be responsive and prompt in answering our questions and providing assistance to the Committee. As we have seen before, the Committee's best work is done when working together in collaboration and with the benefit of technical assistance from the Department.

Dr. Wilkes, again, congratulations on your nomination, and we look forward to hearing from you today. With that, I yield back.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you so much, Senator Boozman. We are so pleased to have the senior senator from Mississippi here today. Dr. Wilkes, you have both of your senators, as you know, distinguished member of our Committee, as well as your senior senator, with us today. Senator Wicker, I will turn it over to you for the formal introduction.

**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ROGER WICKER, U.S.
SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI**

Senator WICKER. Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair and Senator Boozman and distinguished members of the Committee.

I certainly hope this is a proper introduction for this distinguished nominee because I could not be more delighted to be here, nor could I be more supportive of my friend and fellow Mississippian, Dr. Homer Wilkes, of the beautiful Mississippi River county of Claiborne County, Mississippi and its picturesque county seat, Port Gibson. I invite you all to come there and see for yourselves.

Dr. Wilkes holds a bachelor's, a master's, and a Ph.D. from Jackson State University. He has devoted his career to public service for over 41 years. Since 2013, he served as director of the Gulf of Mexico Ecosystem Restoration Division—that is a mouthful—where he has played a critical role in restoring the health of the Gulf Coast following the BP oil spill. Previously he served as chief financial officer for the Mississippi State Conservationists, as well as acting associate chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, NRCS. He has also served as a supply officer in the U.S. Navy Reserve.

Dr. Wilkes has a track record of working for large-scale solutions in partnership with the private sector, communities, organizations and agencies, and he has shown a unique ability to balance economic and environmental needs, and that is exactly what we need in this position. Notably, during his tenure at NRCS, Mississippi's forests ranked top in the Nation in removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. That is what trees do for a living, and in the most board feet of timber harvested from national forests.

Dr. Wilkes was previously nominated for this position in 2009, as Senator Boozman mentioned, but he withdrew because he had his priorities straight. He wanted to stay close to his three sons until

they could graduate from high school in Mississippi. This was a sign not just of his commitment to his family, but also a long-standing support he has enjoyed for this role.

Again, I am utterly delighted to be here. I join my dear friend Senator Hyde-Smith in strong support of Dr. Wilkes. Thank you.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you so much, Senator Wicker, for being here today and for your very positive words. Now I will ask Senator Hyde-Smith if she would like to also share some remarks.

**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE CINDY HYDE-SMITH, A
UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI**

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Thank you, Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Member Boozman for today's hearing. Dr. Wilkes, thank you for being here. Could not be more proud that you have been nominated for this.

I will not use my five minutes of questioning, because his leadership has no questions. He is so strong. He is so well-respected in Mississippi. I have known him for many, many years, and he is a delight to work with. He knows what he is talking about. He is so well-qualified and I just could not be more excited about him being at the Department, because he knows the inner workings of the Department. He is a man of such character. His work ethic is beyond comparison, and I am absolutely thrilled to be able to strongly support Dr. Wilkes and so proud you are a Mississippian. Thank you.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. I am tempted to just end the hearing right now, quit while we are ahead so with such strong introductions. Dr. Wilkes, if you would join us, please, at the table.

The first thing, I need to administer an oath that we do for all of our nominees, so if you would please stand and raise your right hand.

Do you swear or affirm that the testimony you are about to provide is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Mr. WILKES. I do.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you. Second, do you agree that if confirmed, you will appear before any duly constituted committee of Congress if asked to appear?

Mr. WILKES. I will.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Wonderful. Well, thank you very much again, and welcome. I will look forward to hearing more about your vision and priorities for the Department of Agriculture. You are welcome to take a seat and we, of course, will share for the record, beyond your five minutes anything that you would like to share with the Committee as well. Again, Dr. Wilkes, welcome.

**STATEMENT OF HOMER L. WILKES, PH.D., NOMINATED TO BE
UNDER SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE FOR NATURAL RE-
SOURCE AND ENVIRONMENT**

Mr. WILKES. Good morning Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman and members of the Committee. I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and for your consideration of my nomination to be Under Secretary for Natural

Resources and Environment for the United States Department of Agriculture.

Senator GRASSLEY. Can you turn your microphone on?

Mr. WILKES. Yes. I am good now?

Chairwoman STABENOW. All right, there you go.

Mr. WILKES. I would like to thank the——

Senator GRASSLEY. Could you pull the microphone closer to you?

Mr. WILKES. Can you hear me now?

Senator GRASSLEY. Yes.

Mr. WILKES. Good morning again. Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman and members of the Committee, I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today for your consideration of my nomination to be Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment at the United States Department of Agriculture. I would like to thank Senator Roger Wicker and Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith from the great State of Mississippi for their kind introductions and remarks.

I want to also thank all those who are responsible for my success in life, especially my family and the many men and women who I have served with during my tenure at USDA. A special thanks to my wife, Kim, of 39 years, and my three sons. I thank President Biden for nominating me to serve in this role, and Secretary Vilsack for his support. If confirmed, I look forward to working with Secretary Vilsack and the Congress to build upon the Administration's commitment to rural America through the conservation of our national forests and grasslands.

I have been a public servant for more than 41 years, serving as a State conservationist for the State of Mississippi, acting associate chief for the Natural Resource Conservation Service, and director of the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Division. I understand how important a role USDA plays in the conservation of America's natural resources. Like our working lands, American forests, both public and private, are vital to the economic prosperity of rural America. Forests provide clean water, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities and a host of other benefits. It is a critical time for the work of the natural resource environment mission area at USDA.

I would like to highlight a few priority areas I intend to focus on if I am fortunate enough to be confirmed. First and foremost, wildfire management and prevention. Second, providing a safe and inclusive work environment for employees. Third, addressing the forest sustainability and supporting and creating markets for forest products. We are facing steep challenges when it comes to wildfire management and prevention. Management and longer fire seasons is increasingly challenging to USDA and the entire wildfire management community. Many of our forests in the West are overstocked due to decades of excluding all fires.

On top of this, record-setting temperatures and drought are contributing to the intense fire activity already this season. Last month, the National Multi-Agency Coordination Group moved the Forest Service to Preparedness Level 5, and that is probably the earliest it had placed over the last 10 years, the highest level available, because of significant fire activities occurring across multi-

geographical areas and other factors. This is the earliest we have reached this level.

It is important to protect from the loss of life and property and to ensure the safety and support of thousands of personnel battling wildfires in multiple regions across the country. We must ensure agencies like the Forest Service fighting fires are well-equipped with the resources needed to ably handle the monumental task that we have ahead of us. In addition, we must make sure that we have the resources in place to take necessary steps to prevent wildfires, and then when they happen, we have the capability to properly recover.

If confirmed, not only will it be my priority to make sure our men and women on the front lines have what they need, but will be advocating for increasing the scale of forest restoration and fuel reduction activities on the Forest Service lands. This is how we will protect at-risk communities and make them more resilient. If confirmed, I pledge an unwavering commitment to working with members of the Committee to address the challenges in front of us when it comes to combating, preventing and recovering from wildfires and managing our communities are for sure.

My second priority is to support a safe, inclusive work environment for all employees. If confirmed, I will be personally responsible for providing leadership to ensure that everyone is treated fairly, the instances of harassment are quickly identified, and accountable actions are taken. If confirmed, my first briefing from the NRE staff will be on these issues, to access the current status of where we are as far as those issues are concerned.

Secretary Vilsack has strongly stated his commitment to racial justice and equality, and if confirmed, I too pledge to not tolerate discrimination in any form within U.S. Forest Service.

Our national forests play a critical role in the economy of the local communities by providing opportunities for all types of outdoor recreation, demand for which has skyrocketed in the face of the Corona pandemic. Management of the lands support markets for food products. If confirmed, I will increase sustainable, active land management on public and private land and ensure we are working to support the outdoor economy.

The U.S. has a natural resource treasure in its forests. It is unique to any place in the world. If I am confirmed, I pledge to see that these forests and grasslands have a sustainable future. If confirmed as the Under Secretary, I will continue to emphasize the importance of partnership and collaboration with farmers, ranchers, forest owners, forest industries, local communities to conserve our working lands and our forests.

I will conclude by once again thanking President Biden, Secretary Vilsack for their confidence in me, and thank you, Madam Chairman, Senator Boozman and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to appear before you today. I will look forward to answering questions, and thank you again.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Wilkes can be found on page 32 in the appendix.]

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much for your opening statement. I would first like to talk a little bit more about restoring forests. You were talking about that. Because responsibly restoring

the national forests to prevent severe and unnatural wildfires, particularly near where people live, needs to be a top priority, as you know. Your predecessors in the job have repeatedly told the Committee that the Forest Service lacks capacity and resources to actually meet the restoration goal, so I wonder if you might speak about that. Do you agree with that? If you had additional resources, what would your priorities be when we are looking at the needs here in restoration?

Mr. WILKES. Thank you, Madam Chair. I want to start off by acknowledging the fact that what is taking place in California last evening, there were catastrophic events that is continuing. There were three towns that was actually lost and we really want to lift up those folks in our prayers and consideration. I just want to acknowledge that is taking place.

As I said early on, that will be one of my No. 1 priorities. As we begin to think about life and property, we really need to do that. I want to thank this Committee for the efforts that have been made in order to make sure we do have those resources. You know better than I that we do have a need for the resources. If confirmed, I would like to work with this Committee to make sure that the Forest Service does have those resources.

I think the Forest Service knows what needs to be done, but as I said early on, this season—there was a time we had a fire season, but now, it is more or less a fire year. We are constantly working on trying to suppress those fires, do what we can to protect those communities. As far as the resources are concerned, I applaud this Committee for the efforts that are being made to do that. We do need additional resources. If confirmed, I will be willing to work with, or want to work with this Committee to make sure that we have those resources that we need.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Thank you very much. Let's talk a little bit more. We know that climate change is hurting the forest, but do you agree that forests can also be part of the solution to climate change? How would you use the Forest Service's considerable authority, both national forest land and through State and private forestry divisions, to help drive what we are calling climate smart forestry?

Mr. WILKES. Madam Chair, thanks for that question, because it is a broad question. I think just over the years, as Senator Wicker stated, trees sequester carbon, and as we know, that carbon sequestration could be a major, a major part of actually controlling and helping with climate change. The Forest Service, the public side that is over 193 million acres—and then we also work with somewhat over four or five hundred million acres on private land, so I think that in itself will be an opportunity to do that.

At the same time, I think we can work through some of these tools that have been given to us, whether the joint chief, whether it be the shared stewardship, and more importantly, the Good Neighbor Authority. Because fires and climate change does not stop at a public or a private boundary. They actually—they cross boundaries, for lack of better word. I think taking those things into consideration, we will work with those communities at large and talking about what we can actually do.

Now, the Forest Service has a lot of data. We have some of the world-renowned researchers, but I think more importantly, if I am confirmed, I would like to bring the collaboration, the work ethics that we have had, the communication, and get those communities involved. I believe that not only do we need to have people that buy into a product's success, we need to have them to be in it, because I believe that way they will have an integral part of wanting to make sure we resolve those issues.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Great, thank you. Let me talk more specifically for a moment about the Department, the men and women that you will be overseeing, and you have spoken about this. Sexual harassment and misconduct has, unfortunately, been a pervasive problem at the Forest Service for decades. This inexcusable behavior has been the subject of national news as well, as you know.

What will you do to build on the work of your predecessors to root out the misconduct in the agency? What new steps would you take to ensure that this does not resurface?

Mr. WILKES. Madam Chair, thanks for that question, and that is very, very important to me. I start off by saying that our employees are our most valuable resources. As you look at and read some of the things that have taken place in the Forest Service, I am reminded of a story that a former chief said, and he was talking about that. It came to be—and he got real frustrated, and I am frustrated. Whenever an environment is not conducive to the employees and they do not have the chance to really, I say, strive, not just survive, it is just—I am going to use this term because it was used—it was just ungood. It is ungood to have that type of environment.

People should feel safe. They should feel respected and they should feel that they have the opportunity to express their concerns. Now, from my personal standpoint, what I will do, if I am confirmed, the first thing I would like to do is to meet with the management team there and find out where are we on these issues? What has been done to make sure that we correct and regularize some of the concerns that is being reported? Upon that, I will make sure—I will make a personal statement to say that folks, you know, you are accountable and you are responsible, and if you are a bad actor, then there are some consequences.

I was often told that we make choices, but someone else determines the consequences, so I will tell folks that this is the way we are going to do business here. We need to make sure that these employees are treated like family. The NRCS employees I have worked with over these years, that is my family. We spend one-third of our time with those folks, so this becomes a part of your family. You do not treat your family badly, and I will communicate that and I will be passionate about it. I will make sure that the management team know from the very beginning, from top down from bottom up, that we are just not going to operate in this manner.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Well, thank you very much. As you know, this is very important, and appreciate your commitment. Let me turn now to Senator Boozman, and then next will be Senator Klobuchar.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Madam Chair. A question that we ask every nominee before our Committee, Dr. Wilkes, is if confirmed, will you commit to responding to staff inquiries in a timely fashion and will you commit to providing our Committee with timely responses to our outreach and inquiries, whether that be official inquiries from our Committee members or other outreach at the staff level?

Mr. WILKES. Senator Boozman, the answer to that question is yes, I am committed to working with this Committee to provide timely information and have an engaged process.

Senator BOOZMAN. Good. Thank you very much. Federal and State land management agencies and private timberland owners recognize the need to increase the pace and scale of hazardous fuels reduction on Federal lands and across-boundary landscapes, but we are witnessing the catastrophic impacts which you just mentioned, the wildfires, all that has on our national forest systems and lands and rural communities, large communities now, when land management agencies do not properly and actively manage those resources.

Dr. Wilkes, what is your view on the role and value of active forest management as a tool to help prevent, mitigate and address catastrophic wildfire, and if confirmed, how will you lead the Forest Service to promote and conduct increased active land management on national forest lands?

Mr. WILKES. Senator Boozman, thank you for that question. I will go back to my experience as National Resource Conservation Service manager for over 41 years, and what I will say is that working with private landowners, that land is actually managed, because if you are looking for that bottom line, that income comes from there. If I am confirmed as the Under Secretary for NRE, I will take those same type of mindset to get out there and work with those communities and find out what do they need, as well as taking from where we are.

I see that the government serves as a catalyst, but it is those folks on the country side that really get it done. We have to involve them. If we are going to have a quality product, we need to have those folks actually involved in it.

Now, a little bit about active management. I think that that is needed. In the part of the country that I come from, that is—we do that. As you heard earlier, you know, we have been able to have that balance. We have managed our forest land. We have gone in there. We have done thinning. We also have done some prescribed fires. That is just a way of doing business.

I hope—I know that we are dealing with a low—different area scores, the topography and the—just the land masses and just how difficult it may be to get to some of those areas. Most of the work that is done in the western States are primarily done by hand, so it is a little slower. We can still use those same prescriptions that we use when we use that private land. We can take that to public lands also.

Senator BOOZMAN. Good.

Mr. WILKES. If I am confirmed, I hope to take that same type of a collaboration, the tools that have been given from the standpoint

of the joint chief, the shared stewardship, as well as the Good Neighbor Authority, to make that happen.

Senator BOOZMAN. Good. Thank you. As you know, Arkansas is a major forestry State. While much of our timber comes from private lands, we are blessed to have the Ouachita and Ozark-St. Francis National Forests that play a vital role for our local forest industry, providing high-quality sawtimber that helps supply mills and creates jobs in small towns scattered throughout Arkansas.

I note that the current sawtimber sales are well below the forest plan levels. Traditionally, the Ouachita National Forest, in particular, has used timber sales to generate revenue for other needed work, such as prescribed fire and activities to improve habitat for species like turkeys and the Red-cockaded Woodpecker. I would like to work with you to see how we can move this forest forward and generate more revenue and healthier habitat. If confirmed, will you commit to working with me to achieve these goals?

Let me go further. This truly is a win-win situation, because the Forest Service generates revenue as a result of this, so that they can do activities that they desperately need to do to manage the forests. The mills provide work for individuals and then for these—particularly in these small communities that desperately need the jobs. Then the other thing is the industry needs the product.

What I do not want to hear in the future or now is that we do not have the resources for the individuals in the Forest Service to provide what it takes to do the contract. In other words, if they cannot afford to provide the manpower and do what it takes to do the contract when they are actually making money out of the contract, that makes no sense. Can you comment on that? I know you are familiar with that.

Mr. WILKES. Senator Boozman, as I listen to that question, I go back to, and I really think about, and I have always believed, so goes rural America, so goes America. We have a real opportunity and a real challenge and a real, I would say, a commitment. We owe it to make sure that rural America is actually sustained. I think by working with the community, I am big on collaboration. I mean, I just believe that we should be able to sit down and work with those local folks and find out what needs to be done and how can we actually, you know, handle those things. Because what I will tell you is that I think if folks, they want to do the work. We really want to do the work. Right now our resources are somewhat actually, you know, stretched, because again, we are trying to protect life and property first.

You asked the question, am I committed to working with you to see if we can resolve those questions? The answer is yes.

Senator BOOZMAN. Well, thank you. Again, I would say it makes no sense to not spend money to make money. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much, Senator Boozman. Senator Klobuchar.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Well, thank you. Thank you very much, Senator Stabenow, for this really important hearing. I want to start out with a topic that has come up a few times, and that is wildfires we are seeing all across our country.

We are seeing them in a big, big way in Minnesota. These fires that are raging in Canada, it has created air quality not only in Northern Minnesota, but all the way down to the Twin Cities, where people have been staying inside for days, where it is hazardous for anyone with a preexisting condition to go out.

Dr. Wilkes, I know you have gotten a few questions on this. I lead an effort with Secretary Kozak to deploy the air resource advisors in the Interagency Wildland Fire Air Quality Response Program to address the public health risk so we have all the information we need.

Could you talk about how you will work with me and my colleague, Senator Smith, to ensure that we have the resources and staffing in place to assess and communicate the risks posed by the fire. We obviously have the underlying causes of the fire and how we can reduce this, but there is also letting people know what the risk is.

Mr. WILKES. Thank you, Senator.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you, Dr. Wilkes.

Mr. WILKES. As I said earlier, I believe in collaboration. I think we have to get out there and actually talk to the folks that is being impacted by these fires. We can talk about the wildfires. We can talk about how we are going to suppress them and put them out. I think people need to know what are the risks. I know—it seems as though people are willing and ready to get engaged with resolving this issue. This is such a big issue for everyone now.

I do not know how it has been in the past, but I do know that people really want to get engaged and they want to try to help resolve those issues. That would mean that they will need to have communication, honest, open communication to let themselves know what are the consequences of those actions or inaction.

The question is that yes, I will be willing to work with you to make sure we get those words out there and the community at large know some of the risks that is associated with it.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. All right. We have over half of our counties right now are at some kind of risk for the fires. We have been, as I mentioned earlier, particularly concerned about while we have fires in our own State, the air coming across, the smoke from Canada. Could you talk about what we could be doing through your plan to implement and use tools to fight forest fires and improve management?

In the budget agreement, I actually worked on a provision, a bipartisan provision called Expanding to Expand the Good Neighbor Authority, which reduces wildfire risk and promotes stewardship projects. Could you talk a little bit about what tools we can be using, particularly some of those to fight these fires?

Mr. WILKES. Senator, thank you. You mentioned two of the tools that are in the toolbox, and the two that I am particularly proud of, shared stewardship. That is a space I think we can share with our State and private land forests, some of those communities at large. I think that is where the opportunity will come to really—when I say shared stewardship and shared responsibility, that we can actually sit down and talk about those things. Again, I just do not believe that Washington has all the answers. I think that the

community at large will have to help address some of those particular issues.

Talking about the Good Neighbor Authority, that is very, very important, because in my part of the country, those producers, those landowners, they stand at the fencepost and they talk to each other about how can they reduce or actually have an impact on whatever the cause is. I think if we would really implement it and exercise and communicate that, that could go a long way as far as trying to help resolve those issues, because they can help us with those answers. We have the resources and the folks that is actually in the Forest Service that is there. If confirmed, I will actually make sure that I make that a priority, that we communicate—

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay.

Mr. WILKES [continuing]—with those local communities to find out what is going on.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay, very good. Last question.

How do you view the role of advanced biofuels—very important in the Midwest—and biobased products made from forest residues as part of the broader goal of meeting our emissions reductions when it comes to climate change?

Mr. WILKES. On that particular question—thank you, Senator—what I will say is that the forest does—they sequester carbon. That is just what trees does. That is the work they do, as Senator Wicker stated. At the same time, there is some best management practices that we really need to look at and see how we can address some of those concerns. It may be from a standpoint of doing some thinning. We go there, we do prescribe fire. We can do some of those things to try to make sure we mitigate some of the actual things that take place there.

I think that we can do some things to try to help the drought. There is a number of things that we could actually do in that particular arena to try to do what we can to mitigate some of those concerns that you just raised.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. All right, thank you.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much.

Now Senator Hyde-Smith from Mississippi.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Thank you, Chairwoman Stabenow, and really, I have very few questions. I just want to reiterate that I think this is a very qualified nominee.

The only question is Doctor, is what do you think the greatest challenge that you will face when you get there, Dr. Wilkes?

Mr. WILKES. Thank you, Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith. The bottom line is this. It may be somewhat of a paradigm shift. I mean, in Mississippi—I would have to go back to what I know, and in Mississippi, we actually just believe in actually communicating. I hope that the same type of atmospheric exists. I believe that we bring all of the folks to the table. We can talk about regulations, all those type of things, but each agency has some type of authority and we need to just find out what they are.

I will tell you case in point, when Katrina hit, that was an all-hands evolution. I mean, that was probably one of the biggest catastrophic issues that could have taken place, but we have an all-hands evolution. We brought everyone to the table and we communicated open and honest, and everyone had a mission and we had

something to do. We rolled up our sleeves and really went to work. I hope, I hope that that is the type of attitude to take here. I just do not know. I am not going to see it as far as a challenge. I am going to look at it as an opportunity to make sure we expand our partnership and our collaboration efforts to get the job done.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Now Senator Smith, and then we will turn to Senator Tuberville.

Senator SMITH. Thank you so much, Madam Chair, and Ranking Member Boozman. Dr. Wilkes, it is so great to see you in front of the Committee today. I really appreciated our conversation, gosh, I think it was earlier this week, and you are clearly well-qualified and will, I hope, be an excellent—be able to serve our country in an excellent way in this role.

I want to just also call out, as you are responding to Senator Hyde-Smith, and a theme that came through loud and clear in our conversations, which is that often the best ideas for what to do, for what will work, come from folks on the ground who are doing the work themselves and are—I so appreciate your understanding of that, and I know that in Minnesota that that will be greatly appreciated by people who often feel, as you and I say, that it is too often people from Washington show up with all of the answers and not enough questions and not willing to really hear from the grassroots, so thank you for that.

I want to start with the question about the Forest Service. As Senator Klobuchar indicated, Minnesota's national forests are extremely important in our State. Over the last few years, we have heard that there is low morale amongst career Forest Service staff and, of course, this has impacts on hiring and recruiting and retaining qualified personnel and has a direct impact on the capacity of the Forest Service to do the work that it needs to do to meet its mission.

I think you are uniquely positioned to understand this because of your long career in public service. Could you address this, tell us a little bit about how you see this and what you would do to address this challenge?

Mr. WILKES. Thank you, Senator Smith. As I said, and I want to repeat that I have a passion for that. These employees are actually—well, I will say the employees of the Forest Service are actually our most valuable resources and if I am confirmed, I will make a commitment to make sure that it is communicated how important they are and how important they are to the mission of the Forest Service. Because you cannot get work done if folks have these other outliers that they are concerned about. It just cannot—they have to be focused on the job at hand.

We have those firefighters out there that is actually doing that work and it is very dangerous work, so if you are worried about what may happen, whether it be harassment or you are not going to get paid and those type of things, it is problematic. I think we just need to make sure that from the leadership, that everything that we can possibly do to make them feel that they are important, is where we need to be.

As has been stated, Chief Randy Moore is in place. That communication will take place with him early on and often, if need be, be-

cause we want to see some real changes that take place. We want to make sure that the surveys that come out from the standpoint of employees—and you can check that through finding out what is the status? How do they feel about their jobs? How do they feel about the work they are actually doing?

I will take those kind of actions to make sure that I try to keep my hands on the pulse. Not try. I will keep my hands on the pulse to make sure that I understand their concerns and how we can address them.

Senator SMITH. I thank you so much for that response. I think everybody on this Committee would agree that those public servants deserve our respect and our support, and I am grateful to know that you will always keep that front and center.

When you and I spoke, we also had a conversation about the trust challenges that USDA has with farmers of color and especially black farmers across the country and the work that we need to do to rebuild that trust and to make sure that the USDA is working for all farmers, especially farmers of color. I think about in Minnesota where we have a very diverse agricultural economy, including lots of beginning farmers. Many of them are farmers of color, Hmong farmers, Latino farmers, black farmers. Could you talk a little bit about how you see that and in your role what you would do to address that challenge?

Mr. WILKES. Senator Smith, thank you very much. I have to share a story, and I always go back to Mississippi. As this Committee knows, that there is things that is out there as far as the lawsuits, the Pigford and all those lawsuits that have been out there. I would say, there are some bad actors. Let's just face it, there are some bad actors. In my role, there are three unique tools that we actually have, and one that is probably the most advantageous one is the joint chiefs. That is an opportunity for both the chief of the Natural Resource Conservation Service and the chief of the Forest Service to talk about things and those ideas.

At NRCS, we have not been squeaky clean, make no bones about it. In Title VI, which is program delivery, we have to make sure that folks feel comfortable, that the work—when they come into those offices that they are going to be treated—they are going to be treated fairly. We have to look at ways that we can possibly have dollars that we can spend toward those issues and get them involved with those local workgroups that exist in those communities.

That is how those things actually come up. When you start at that local level and get the folks involved and those different boards and things, that means you have to be inclusive of those folks. Then I think we get better decisionmaking when we do those type of things. I will have an active role in there and working with—fortunately, I have had a chance to work with the Natural Resource Conservation Service, and if I am confirmed, I will have a chance to work with the Forest Service. I will bring those years of experience that I have had as far as making sure that folks are included. I have this philosophy.

Senator SMITH. Thank you.

Mr. WILKES. If you help anybody and everybody, you will not leave out nobody. That is where we want to be in this particular climate for sure.

Senator SMITH. I greatly appreciate it. Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Senator Tuberville.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you, Madam Chair. Dr. Wilkes, welcome to the Senate Ag Committee. You know, this is a hugely important position, but first of all, I would like to say Jackson State University, been there many times. Home of Coach Deion Sanders. I do not think a lot of people know that. You know, we have 191 national forests, 191 million acres. That is a lot of walking, Dr. Wilkes. That is a lot of walking.

You know, in our State, we have four national forests that cover 668,000 acres, and we are proud of them. I am a landowner, forest owner myself in Alabama, and we are proud of what we have. I was glad to hear what you said about maintaining our forests. I mean, it is so important, plus we can make money. I would like to invite you to come to Alabama to see our timber plots and the ones that are ready to be replanted. I think we do a great job there. I was glad to hear that.

I want to talk a little bit about the Forest Legacy Program under the U.S. Forest Service and its conservation practices, to encourage protection of our privately owned lands. I am sure you know that. I want you to talk a little bit about that, and hopefully you will continue that legacy with our programs.

Mr. WILKES. Senator Tuberville, thank you very much. I will say that Alabama has a very, very strong forestry program. The work that has been done with Tuskegee and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives there, Alabama has a very strong program. I have been there several times, and thank you for the invite.

As you have requested, yes, sir, the legacy program will actually be continued. The work with those private landowners that is so important, that is where I think the Good Neighbor Authority will be so important that we can actually work across those boundaries, that we can work with those individuals. Get out there and work those communities large and find out what is needed to be done. If we do that, I think we can still have that sustainable forest program and land management program that is needed in order to protect and conserve these forests for generations to come.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you. I was glad to hear one of your top priorities is forest sustainability if confirmed. What ideas and initiatives do you want to see to ensure a vibrant and robust forests across our country?

Mr. WILKES. I am sorry, Senator?

Senator TUBERVILLE. What initiatives do you see that you can implement to really improve and enhance in our forests all over the country?

Mr. WILKES. Thank you, Senator, for that question. I guess I will have to go back to just land management. Land management is something that takes place. I have had some—a few years of doing that, particularly working with private lands, and over the last seven years, I have had the opportunity to actually work dealing

with public lands with this Coast Ecosystem Restoration. One of the things that we took place on is that it became a big item to make sure that we had the dollars in order to do that, and the States, including Alabama, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida, they actually put \$10 million in each one of those States in order to make sure that land management sustainability took place.

What I will do is continue to have those. It took a lot of collaboration to make sure that people understood that. As you stated, that we need to have that sustained, because people need to make a profit. I will make sure that communication takes place in those particular arenas, working with those landowners, whether it be public/private, or using those tools out there, whether it be joint chiefs, whether it be shared stewardship, or whether it be the Good Neighbor Authority, to make sure that we are using those best methods and practices.

I will say, Alabama is one of those States that actually we do thinning. You actually do prescribed burn, and we have those firebreaks that we can actually do those type of things there. If confirmed, I will continue to make sure that those type of communication things take place with the community and those leaders at large.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you, Dr. Wilkes. Looking forward to working with you. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Senator Gillibrand.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Thank you so much, Madam Chairwoman.

Dr. Wilkes, congratulations on your nomination and thank you for appearing in front of the Committee today. New York, like many States in the Nation, has had portions of its forest land devastated by invasive pests. The emerald ash borer, which has now spread to 36 States, is a prime example.

The USDA, through Forest Service research and other programs, has done considerable work over the years in an effort to stem the spread of invasive pests. Could you talk a little bit about your priorities, what they would be to address invasive pest outbreaks should you be confirmed for this position? Do you believe that there should be more coordination between the Forest Service and other agencies within the USDA, such as the Plant and Animal Health Inspection Service, to combat some of the issues currently facing our Nation's forest? Can you also describe how you plan to collaborate with other agencies outside the USDA, such as the Department of Interior?

Mr. WILKES. Thank you for that question, Senator.

First of all, I will say that yes, we need to do more. If confirmed, I will advance the notion of doing more with invasives. They do not have boundaries. I will work on private land as well as public land. The first answer is that yes, we need to do more in that particular arena. I do not know all the concerns that is actually there, but I will tell you, we need to do more.

You asked the question, how will I make sure that we have—that more collaboration and communication among other Federal agencies. Senator, that has been my life story, to making sure that we do that. It is not a hard task from the standpoint that as a Federal agency, they are a responsibility each one of us have.

I will actually continue with the collaboration process, the communication process, and bring people together. Someone has to start more dialog and I am not afraid to call in and say, we have some issues out here and we need to address them. Because the American people, they deserve it and we need to do all we can in order to implement as many of the projects that local folks want.

Now, the third part of that question, you ask, do I think that USDA agencies should work close together? Absolutely. Absolutely. That will be one of the things—sometimes people have a tendency to not want to get on someone else's turf.

I have to say I might be a little guilty of doing that because in order to get the job done, sometimes it is not to take over, but more or less to ask the question of how can we be helpful? How can we work together? I think we need to do more of that, so I will actually work actively to try to engage all of USDA to make sure that we are addressing the concerns that rural America has.

That has been something I have had to do with the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration. One of the things I did, I actually brought all the agencies together, rural development, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Farm Service Agency, and all those folks, because people need to know what was the tools that was out there, and each agency has some authority that others do not have.

If we collectively work together and communicate those tools, I think we can get some issues resolved that may be of concern to members of this Committee and the public at large.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Well, thank you. I have a question about climate smart forestry. Due to carbon sequestration capacity of forests, they should play a crucial role when we are crafting solutions to address the impact that climate change has had on our rural communities. It is imperative that our forests are brought to the table to promote smart climate, smart forestry solutions, and foresters must have access to the necessary funding and technical assistance to implement this growing climate smart forestry practices.

Dr. Wilkes, can you speak to the importance of having forester input and buy-in when developing climate smart forestry practices?

Mr. WILKES. Thank you for that question, and if I am confirmed, I will definitely support the idea, even for foresters to be actually a part of that discussion. One of the major issues that happens in the forest is that we grow trees, reforestation, those type of thinning thing. Trees actually sequester carbon, so it is very, very important that—because I think carbon sequestration is a major part of climate change and what can be done to actually address those concerns here.

Yes, I do think that it is actually important that we are at the table, and we are looking forward—if I am confirmed, looking forward to being part of those discussions in order to address some of those resource concerns that are being raised.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Thank you, Mr. Wilkes. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you so much. We will now turn to Senator Hoeven.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you, Madam Chairman, and appreciate the opportunity to visit with you again, Dr. Wilkes. Thanks for coming in to visit with me and appreciate that very much.

One of the things we talked about is the national grasslands, which are part of the Forest Service, which would be under your purview. If confirmed, would you be willing to come out and visit us in the national grasslands and get a sense not only of what we have there, but talk to the people that live and work out there?

Mr. WILKES. Absolutely, Senator.

Senator HOEVEN. As we talk, you know, we have a very—it is multiple use. We have got a very diverse group out there that wants to access the grassland. We have the ranchers and allottee who live and work out there. We have the energy industry, we have the national parks, Teddy Roosevelt National Park. Obviously, there is just a lot going on.

Tell me how you would balance all those in a way that is fair to the people that live and work out there.

Mr. WILKES. Senator, thank you for that question. I will tell you, I think that that would lend itself very appropriately for the collaboration efforts. There is multi demands that is out there, as we talked about. It is going to take really sitting down and talking to folks to find out, and then working with the local folks there to get the priorities on the things that need to be done.

As we talked about, there is probably never going to be enough resources to address everything, but if we use those tools that is actually there, whether it be the joint chiefs, whether it be the shared stewardship, or whether it be the Good Neighbor Authority, I think that we can actually do some leveraging and work through some of those concerns that you have just talked about.

I think the most important thing would be to actually get out on the ground, visit with those local folks, those associations, particularly with the grassland issues and the grazing issues that are there, to find out what are their concerns and how to best resolve some of those issues. I think, again, that the Federal Government can serve as the catalyst, but it is still local folks that is going to have to have involvement in order to help resolve some of those issues out there.

Senator HOEVEN. Do you have some background working with farmers and ranchers? Tell me how—so it is not just not working with the ranchers, but we have the grazing associations as well. Talk to me about how, you know, in your background you have worked with farmers and ranchers, your understanding of the ag and the ranching industry and how you would work—how you would approach the grazing associations in terms of building a relationship.

Mr. WILKES. It starts at that local level, Senator, and I would use that same approach. When I first came to Mississippi, and I had this gentleman, we had an issue, and I can say it was an opportunity. What happened is that I drove up to that person, and I had a car at that time. I did not know any better. I was just coming into the State and I drove up on that person's place in a car, and he told me, he said that, "Mr. Wilkes," he said, "Get yourself something to ride in, because I need to show you my back 40." What I—because his problem did not exist on the front part of it.

It is really just getting out there, having that open communication with them. Now, I can go into a lot of the technical issues and things that naturally need to be, but it is that one-on-one relationship, sitting down at that person's table and finding out what their concerns are and really getting an understanding of the things that are concerning to them, is the way that I would use this program.

Collaboration, shared stewardship, shared responsibility would be some of the tools that I will actually use in order to get to know what is needed and how to get the work done.

Senator HOEVEN. One of the things that we included in the Great American Outdoor Act was funding for deferred maintenance out in the grasslands and other areas. In North Dakota, what we have put together is a working group where we have the grazing associations and we have the State ag commissioner and the Governor's office and then my office and the Forest Service all together in a collaboration, a steering committee that is utilizing not only monies that we get on an annual basis now for deferred maintenance in the grasslands as a result of the Federal legislation, but also some State and some, you know, counties, local money.

We put all those together to really develop a plan that works for not only the road maintenance, which helps the counties, but also for access to water and other things, which helps the ranchers, as well as, you know, funding for the campgrounds and so forth, which obviously the tourism and recreational industry alike.

Do you—are you willing to support that collaborative effort, and do you see that as something that, you know, really can help that multiple use in terms of how we work on the grasslands?

Mr. WILKES. Senator, I was listening as you described that model, and I think that is what is needed, because it gives you leveraging opportunities. Also, you are bringing everybody to the table and then people can hear those concerns. That is how we get things done, to actually get to that table and talk about those issues. Then it is there that you make those decisions, and if there are any, for lack of a better word, angst in the system, you will know it at that particular time. Would I support a collaborative effort like that? Yes, sir.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you, Dr. Wilkes. I appreciate it very much.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Next we have Senator Booker and then Senator Thune.

Senator BOOKER. Thank you so much, Madam Chairwoman. Congratulations on your nomination Mr. Wilkes. It has been great to hear the bipartisan support you are receiving.

You know that as climate change continues to accelerate, we are seeing more and more instances of extreme heat across our country, and in June, more than 60 Americans died from excessive heat in the Pacific Northwest. The extreme heat presents the greater danger really in low-income communities and communities of color, like the community where I live in Newark and so many of our senators have within their States.

That is significantly less though where there is a tree canopy and where temperatures can be as much as 20 degrees hotter than in neighboring communities that have those tree canopies. I believe that addressing this heat island effect is really critical to our over-

all strategies as a country, and as we are working on environmental justice issues, it is something that I am continuing to push.

I introduced a bill that would provide \$25 billion in funding to the Forest Service for urban tree planting. It has a multiplier of effect in those communities, and obviously, our overall climate change goals. This type of large-scale urban reforestation would not only lower temperatures, it would also reduce air pollution, which is in trouble, problem with asthma and other respiratory diseases in low-income communities. It would actually lower residential energy bills, which helps the low-income communities. It actually increases property value.

Again, there is just so many values to this. If confirmed, will you make urban re-forestry a real policy in your administration?

Mr. WILKES. Senator Booker, thanks for those comments and thanks for the question. I agree with you. Let me just tell you a little bit about where I stand. You take an example; you can be out in the middle of a field and there can only be one tree. It does not have to be a large tree, but if you can actually go there and actually stand under that tree, it cuts the temperature on you. The direct sunlight that is actually being blocked, it is amazing.

I am hearing exactly what you are asking there. One of the things is that in the current job that I am in, as we look at how do we defend the waters, we have the soil, we have the trees, and we have the ocean. Brown soil going through green trees produce blue waters. Think about that concept. Because trees do so much, and you are talking about the lowering of temperatures and things of that nature.

Yes, I will be more than willing to work with you and get engaged in the process to see how we can actually make that a reality as far as having forestry in the city areas.

Senator BOOKER. I am so grateful. Real quick, I was really happy to see the decision by the Forestry Service to fully restore the roadless rural protections for the Tongass National Forest. Our forests not only, again, sequester that carbon, but they also reduce flooding and protect our drinking water, as you just said, and provide critical habitat for wildlife.

Again, if you are confirmed, as part of your efforts to address climate change, will you not only protect the Tongass, but will you work to keep all of our really old growth forests here in the United States intact?

Mr. WILKES. Senator Booker, I will just say that Secretary Vilsack actually announced the Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy, and those initiatives are in there. Absolutely I will support what the Secretary has said as far as making sure that those areas are actually sustained.

Senator BOOKER. Well, I am grateful for that. In deference to my more senior senator, Thune, and the magnanimity I feels toward him, I am going to yield the rest of my time to the great Senator from South Dakota.

Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much, Senator Booker. Senator Thune, you need to remember this. Senator Thune.

Senator THUNE. Oh, I will, and I am sure the good Senator from New Jersey will remind me if I do not.

Chairwoman STABENOW. That is right.

Senator THUNE. I thank him for his indulgence, and as always, generous spirit. Thank you, Madam Chair, and Ranking Member Boozman, for holding today's hearing to consider Dr. Wilkes' nomination to serve as Under Secretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and Environment. Dr. Wilkes, thank you for appearing before the Senate Ag Committee and for your willingness to serve in this position.

Let me just start by saying that the Black Hills National Forest is a critical component of South Dakota's landscape and economy. The national forest provides recreation opportunities, it supports wildlife, and contributes significantly to the local and regional economy. It also plays a critical role in supporting the local forest products industry.

In sharp contrast to the recent high demand for lumber, unfortunately, a sawmill in Hill City, South Dakota closed earlier this year. The Black Hills National Forest is a primary landowner in the Black Hills and the Hill City mill relied heavily on the Black Hills National Forest timber sale program, which has faced reductions in recent years. This closure led to the loss of approximately 150 jobs in this small community, and I can tell you huge impact in a place like that where so many families are affected when a mill like that closes.

It also jeopardizes the ability to implement forest management projects going forward, which is critical to caring for the forest to reduce the threat of insect and disease infestations and ultimately catastrophic wildfires. I am concerned that without continued proactive forest management, the Black Hills National Forest may be at an increased risk of pine beetle infestations and wildfires which threaten local communities and the health of the forest.

Dr. Wilkes, if confirmed, what actions would you take to prioritize proactive management to maintain the health of the Black Hills National Forest and its timber sale program?

Mr. WILKES. Senator Thune, thank you for that question. What I will tell you as far as the land management piece that is there, each area of the United States, you know, has a—there are some nuances there that has to be addressed. Now, you talked about the industry and those type of things, but what I will say is this, is that I will be willing to work with you to make sure we address those concerns, and if I am confirmed, that is an issue that I really would like to visit with the management team, the issues that upset the Forest Service, to find out exactly what is going on and what can be done in order to address the concerns that you just raised.

What I would ask is that—the people want to do the work. I just want to say the employees of USDA and the Forest Service as a whole, I think, want to get the work done. We just need to make sure that we have—visit with the local folks, along with you and whoever you want to have engaged in that process, to see how we can actually come up with a constructive outcome.

Senator THUNE. Thank you. We will look forward to that engagement. I think if you hear from the local folks there, they will tell you how very interested they are in having an active forest management program that has a significant timber component to it.

Let me just—I was also pleased to read in your testimony that if confirmed you would advocate for increasing the scale of forest restoration and fuels reduction activities on Forest Service lands, and I am deeply concerned about the backlog of management activities on our national forests, and I think this needs to be a top priority for the Forest Service.

These unhealthy acres are at high risk of insect and disease infestations and wildfires that continue to have devastating effects on so many in the West. To address this, I recently reintroduced the Expediting Forest Restoration and Recovery Act, which would require the Forest Service to expedite treatment of more than 70 million acres identified during the Obama Administration as landscape scale insect and disease areas in need of treatment. Unfortunately, many of these acres remain at risk today.

Dr. Wilkes, if confirmed, will you commit to working on expedited treatment of these acres?

Mr. WILKES. Senator, thank you very much. Let me say this, is that we do know that there are some acres out there that is in need of work, and that is the one across these United States. If I am confirmed, I am committed to actually do more increased forest management as a whole. To answer that question, I am willing to work with you and the local communities there to address the needs and try to get the right prescription for what is needed in order to address those concerns.

Senator THUNE. All right. My time has expired, but if you could just followup on that. If you could be more specific and talk about what actions you would take to prioritize treatment of insect and disease areas.

Mr. WILKES. I will. The thing is, and what I would ask is that, as I said, we want to get the work done. The employees want to get the work done. I would like to actually spend some time with the staff to find out exactly okay, what is going on in that particular area. Now, there are some places we can go in and do some things with the insect control and those type of things, but in order to give you a fair and a responsive answer, I would like to actually get back with you and address those concerns that you have specifically.

Senator THUNE. Very good. We will look forward to that. Like I said, welcome. Your engagement on these issues, it is something that we think is long overdue.

Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chairwoman STABENOW. That you very much, Senator Thune. We have Senator Luján and then Senator Marshall.

Senator LUJÁN. Thank you so much, Chair Stabenow. It is an honor to be with you and all of our colleagues. I want to thank Dr. Wilkes as well for being with us today.

Dr. Wilkes, in New Mexico, we are proud of our traditional land use and heritage, our acequia system. We have these community ditches. They are three feet across, maybe three feet deep. They are older than the United States of America. They were carved into our land by our ancestors to be able to bring water from the watersheds and from waterways into other areas. They serve as the lifelines of our communities and contribute over \$180 million to New Mexico's economy.

Even within my family we have our own history and traditions for cleaning and maintaining those small ditches, those acequias that run through our small farm, and it is something that I do annually with my brother and my nephews and my family still that I learned from my grandfather and from my father.

Unfortunately, we have been hearing from these acequias, pisantes—these are members of the acequias—that the Federal Government, including the Forest Service, is not adhering to a court case that provided clarity for permitting requirements for routine maintenance and construction. I have been working on legislation that passed the House last Congress that would address this issue.

If confirmed, will you commit to working with me to ensure that these traditional communities are able to maintain this much needed infrastructure? This legislation also protects the historical and traditional uses of land grants, which I would be proud to share with you and your team, which goes back to the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which we are proud to say there is a copy over at the Library of Congress, an original.

Will you commit to working with me to ensure that these historical communities, such as land grant communities, are properly recognized and supported, so both on the infrastructure legislation and also on land grants?

Mr. WILKES. Senator Luján, thank you for that question. I have heard your comments and what I would—I will commit that I will actually work in an effort to find out more about exactly what is going on, the impact it could have on your community. I would also like to visit with the staff and let's have an engaged conversation with you and members of the community at large that have those issues. Because I would like to get a complete understanding of exactly what are the concerns that is out there and how could we address those.

I would definitely like to get back with you on that and followup with that.

Senator LUJÁN. I appreciate that. Chair Stabenow, I look forward to working with the staff as well to see how we can get the Forest Service to adhere to that court case to be able to permit requirements for routine maintenance and construction as well, which seems to be evading everybody, so we want to get that done and also this important legislation. Once confirmed—

Chairwoman STABENOW. Absolutely. Absolutely, Senator.

Senator LUJÁN. Thank you, Chair Stabenow. Once confirmed, I also would like to invite you out to New Mexico to see first-hand how communities are using these traditional irrigation systems, the food that they are raising, some of these incredible recipes that families have had for generations, but especially how vitally important they are to the social and economic fabric of my State. Hopefully you will be able to join, Dr. Wilkes, and we would love to get you out there.

As States and communities across the West continue to be impacted by drought and climate change, States like New Mexico are facing hotter and more extreme fire seasons. These fire seasons not only have direct impacts on people's lives, but have economic and environmental repercussions for the rest of the State.

Given your past experience at USDA and with other conservation-related mission areas, what are some of the actions you are planning to take to address these events?

Mr. WILKES. Senator, thank you for that question. Land management is land management, and as we began to address some of those concerns from a technical standpoint, that I will actually continue to have the collaboration with the local communities. I will actually put—if confirmed, I will actually work with addressing those issues from the standpoint of what are some of the best management practices out there. I will always, always want to get the local community involved.

I can go through a litany of things from a technical standpoint. You have Xavier Montoya, who is the State conservation out there, that is working with NRCS, and we have done some joint things as far as in those particular issues there. What I will commit to you is that we will continue to work to address those issues using the best management practice in order to mitigate drought, whether it be cover crops and some of those type of things right there.

It is just a whole plethora of things that we can actually do. I would like to follow with you, and more importantly, follow with your constituents to find out what are the specific issues that they would like to have addressed and how can we do that in a constructive manner.

Senator LUJÁN. Appreciate that, Dr. Wilkes. I will work with Javier to make sure we have a good invitation once you are confirmed and make sure we get New Mexico on your calendar. I look forward to welcoming you to our State.

With that, Madam Chair, thank you so very much. I yield back.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Senator Marshall, you have been bumped by Senator Braun, who returned, so we will turn to Senator Braun and then Senator Marshall.

Senator BRAUN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

I enjoyed our conversation last evening, and share the passion of forest management with you. I have done that for probably nearing 40 years on land that I have been fortunate enough to live on and help manage.

As mentioned earlier by Senator Gillibrand, the emerald ash borer, in fact, on my own farm, that probably—I think it was 8 percent of all trees, hardwoods, before it hit. In some places, if you had bottom ground, it could have been as much as 30 percent of a stand. It is gone basically. Whenever it comes in, it has been systematically wiping it out. Western States have the same issues with beetles.

On the ground that the Federal Government owns, which is going to be more exposed to invasive species than probably anything, what is your thinking about salvaging timber that has been impacted by it, as well as maybe doing some preemptively, so in the vast expansion, especially Western forests, that you do not even add more tinder to the tinderbox?

I know that has been a real delicate conversation in our Hoosier National Forest, which is going to be very, very small. I think maybe in our State, our presence of the national forest system, they have been very kind of reluctant to manage in a way that I think would be better in terms of making sure you do not have a

fire that is going to be fueled by poor management practices and tie in invasive species as well.

Mr. WILKES. Senator Braun, I too enjoyed our conversation. As a private landowner, I have had some experience as far as working with it. You asked a couple questions there, and I guess from the standpoint of land management is something that is going to be required, period. I think when we do good land management, then you reduce the fuel load that is actually there.

Now, as far as the forestry issue, I want to actually sit down and we are going to follow the science on that. There is a lot of things that is out there and you have to look at it and see what has happened based on the circumstances. What I would like to do is to actually sit down with the management team and followup with you with a discussion to find out okay, what—and with the constituent groups that you will have come to the table so we can hear what are those concerns out there and make a real, real technical decision, as well as trying to make sure we have a constructive outcome so the end-user can be a beneficiary of those particular areas.

As I stated early on, we really need to do some work with invasive species. I can always go back to the lack of the resources, and it is a reality. We have people fighting fires so much until maybe we have not as been as intense as far as land management and working on some of those other concerns that we have out there, particularly in the area of invasive species.

I will tell you that if confirmed, I will make a commitment to get with that group and making sure we address those concerns. Because I have heard invasive species over and over and over, so that is a big-ticket item. If I am confirmed, I will make that a priority to find out what those research groups, to making sure we are addressing those concerns.

Senator BRAUN. It is the most challenging component, not only when you are looking at climate, to make sure you have healthy, growing forests to sequester more CO₂. We are being bombarded with it.

There is a thing called stealth grass that most people do not know the difference between it and a native grass. Well, even deer will not eat it, and it is almost impossible to generate a seedling through it. It makes, like the emerald ash borer, look simple in terms of how we are going to fight it. A lot of this stuff came over to where we were not even aware of it. Then we have kind of created some of our own issues by importing invasive species, exotics, through nurseries. It is a big challenge.

I am hoping that where the Forestry Service, in my observation, has not probably put in that science that you are talking about, has maybe had a little bit of an attitude that let nature take its course, which, you know, that is not working currently, especially places in the West. I think going in and having a plan, being ahead of the beetles before they turn woods into an inferno, that it has got to be proactive there. It is going to get worse rather than better.

I am going to stick with that point of being proactive on management and keeping a real careful eye out for stuff that does not grow here naturally and that devastates the civil culture. Enjoyed our conversation last night and look forward to continuing it down the road.

Mr. WILKES. Thank you, Senator. Duly noted, your comments there. I will assure you that after we have some discussion, I will get back with you and I would like to followup on that discussion.

Senator BRAUN. Appreciate that.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Senator Marshall.

Senator MARSHALL. All right, Madam Chair, thank you so much. Dr. Wilkes, welcome. Thank you for your service in the Navy. Appreciate you being here in person as well. These are so much easier decisions for me to make when I get to meet a person in person, look him in the eye and shake their hand. We look forward to supporting your nomination. Everything I see about you is a man of quality and we look forward to working with you.

Probably my first question we discussed yesterday, the importance of government/private sectors working together, cooperation, and a term I use, voluntary cooperation. Could you just kind of share for my folks back home how important of a priority is that for you working with the private sector.

Mr. WILKES. Senator Marshall, thank you again. I enjoyed our conversation too. As I share with you, that is my DNA. That is what I live by, that communication and actually the local-lead process. As I stated, and I will keep on stating, that government serves as a catalyst to get things done, but it is through those efforts, if you work your constituent groups, to find out what needs to be funded. We do not lobby Congress for funds, but those local folks there, they inform you of what is needed to be done.

It is so important that we go back visiting with those local folks, those local communities, and hear what their concerns are and take all that information back and work through it. I mean, I just believe that sometimes people think that the process is slow, but again, I think people need to be in the process. If they be in it and they feel a part of it, they are going to be much more ready and willing to make sure that it is seen through to the very end.

You will not have any problems out of me actually getting out on the ground there in Kansas and finding out what is going on and visiting with those local folks. That is the same type—if I am confirmed, that I will take it to the management team and ask Chief Moore and other folks that is there, to get out in the countryside and let's find out what is going on.

Senator MARSHALL. We appreciate that. Again, I think there are so many opportunities, especially when it comes to environment improvements. The terms "Forestry" and "Kansas" are oxymoron. They are seldom used in the same sentence together. Probably the bigger concern we have from a forestry standpoint are the invasive species, and we briefly touched on this yesterday, salt cedars and then red cedar. The red cedars are polluting our prairies, and frankly, it hurts some of the species like the Lesser Prairie Chicken. Where those cedars are, the Prairie Chicken do not like to breed.

As I think about our rivers of Kansas that are dry and just the importance of getting water downstream and refilling our aquifers, they are lined with salt cedars, and each one of those salt cedars is sucking out thousands, hundreds of gallons, maybe thousands of gallons of each. The Arkansas River—some people call it the Ar-

kansas River, but we call it the Arkansas River—are lined with salt cedars.

Do you see any opportunity to help us with those particular problems under your purview?

Mr. WILKES. Senator, what I will say is that if I am confirmed, I would like to bring the agencies together. I am not familiar with what the Forest Service can do in that particular arena, because as you stated, that the trees is something that if I am confirmed that we will be doing. At the same time, there are programs out there that may be able to help you from the standpoint of the Natural Resource Conservation Service. There are a lot of agencies.

I just believe that we need to bring those agencies together and see what kind of tools they have in their toolbox to address those resource concerns. I will be committed to work with you on seeing how we can get some of those issues resolved.

Senator MARSHALL. Great. We have had some successful projects already with the folks at Quivera Federal Wildlife Refuge actually on our own land with some of these projects and I think we are going for it and we could do more.

Maybe the last thing I would just talk about is even in Kansas right now we are getting significant pollution from all the forest fires out west of us. Why do we never see large forest fires in the southeast, but large forest fires in the western part of the country? What can you do to impact that?

Mr. WILKES. Well, what I will say about that—and thank you for that question. There is a—there are different conservation practices. The prescriptions are the same, but you just have to have a larger dose of the prescription in some places. In the South, there is a culture there to do thinning and more importantly, prescribed burns. It is done on a scale there and it is just a way of doing business.

In the western part of these United States, air quality is a major issue. It is an issue, you know, even in the southern and places like Kansas, but at the same time, there you have the, I guess, the population growth and we have just been somewhat, for lack of a better word, reluctant to actually put fire in those—and fire is actually a good thing for land management and for the trees.

We have to work on that paradigm shift to say okay, let's do those things right there. I think that is maybe some of the issues out there. There is just more or less a cultural and a paradigm shift that needs to take place. If I am confirmed, I will work with those local communities, those cities, those municipalities and things. I think folks are more ready now to accept some of the best management practices that is available.

Senator MARSHALL. Thanks so much, Madam Chair. I yield back.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Having, I believe, completed the questions from the senators, let me just thank you again, Dr. Wilkes, for being here today. Appreciate it very much. Your 41 years of public service clearly reflects your strong dedication to caring for the land and diversity surrounding communities that it serves. I have to say that your knowledge is something that we are grateful to have you being willing to share in this new position. Your experience and knowledge, I think, is going to be very valuable to us on these important issues. I am strongly

supportive of you moving forward into this position and look forward to having the opportunity to work with you.

This concludes today's hearing. The record will remain open until tomorrow at 5 p.m. for members to submit additional questions or statements. Thank you.

Mr. WILKES. Thank you, Madam Chair.

[Whereupon, at 11:38 a.m., the Committee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

AUGUST 5, 2021

**Opening Statement of Homer L. Wilkes Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry**

August 5, 2021

Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, and members of the Committee, I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, and for your consideration of my nomination to be Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment at the United States Department of Agriculture. I would like to thank Senator Roger Wicker from the great State of Mississippi for his kind introduction. I want to also thank all those who are responsible for my success in life, especially my family and the many men and women who I have served with during my tenure at USDA.

A special thanks to my wife Kim and our three sons. I thank President Biden for nominating me to serve in this role and Secretary Vilsack for his support. If confirmed, I look forward to working with Secretary Vilsack and Congress to build upon this Administration's commitment to rural America through the conservation of our national forests and grasslands.

I have been a public servant for more than 41 years serving as the State Conservationist for the State of Mississippi, Acting Associate Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Director of the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Division. I understand how important of a role USDA plays in the conservation of America's natural resources. Like our working lands, America's forests both public and private, are vital to the economic prosperity of rural America. Forests provide clean water, wildlife habitats, recreational opportunities, and a host of other benefits.

It is a critical time for the work of the Natural Resources and Environment mission area at USDA. I would like to highlight a few priority areas I intend to focus on if I am fortunate enough to be confirmed. First and foremost, wildfire management and prevention. Second, providing a safe, inclusive work environment for employees. Third, addressing forest sustainability and supporting and creating markets for forest products.

We are facing steep challenges when it comes to wildfire management and prevention. Managing longer fire seasons is increasingly challenging to USDA and the entire wildland fire management community. Many of our forests in the west are overstocked due to decades of excluding all fires. On top of this, record setting temperatures and drought are contributing to intense fire activity already this season. Last month, the National Multi-Agency Coordination Group moved the Forest Service to Preparedness Level 5, the highest level available, because of significant fire activity occurring across multiple geographic areas and other factors. This is the earliest we have reached Level 5 in 10 years.

It is important to protect from the loss of life and property and to ensure the safety and support of the thousands of personnel battling wildfires in multiple regions across the country. We must ensure agencies like the Forest Service fighting fires are well-equipped with the resources needed to ably handle the monumental task we've given them.

In addition, we must make sure to have the resources in place to take necessary steps to prevent wildfires, and then when they happen, we have the capability to properly recover. If confirmed, not only will it be my priority to make sure our men and women on the front lines have what they need, but so will be advocating for increasing the scale of forest restoration and fuels reduction activities on Forest Service lands. This is how we will protect at-risk communities and make them more resilient.

If confirmed, I pledge an unwavering commitment to working with members of the Committee to addressing the challenges in front of us when it comes to combating, preventing, and recovering from wildfires, and making sure our communities are protected.

My second priority is to support a safe, inclusive work environment for all employees. If confirmed, I will be personally responsible for providing leadership to ensure that everyone is treated fairly, that instances of harassment are quickly identified, and accountable actions are taken. If confirmed, my first briefing from NRE staff will be on these issues to assess current state.. Secretary Vilsack has strongly stated his commitment to racial justice and equity and, if confirmed, I too pledge to not tolerate discrimination in any form within the U.S. Forest Service.

Our national forests play a critical role in the economy of local communities by providing opportunities for all types of outdoor recreation, demand for which has skyrocketed in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. And management of lands supports markets for wood products. If confirmed, I will increase sustainable active land management on public and private lands and ensure we working to support the outdoor economy.

The U.S. has a natural resources treasure that is unique, and if I am confirmed, I pledge to see that these forests and grasslands have a sustainable future. If confirmed as Under Secretary, I will continue to emphasize the importance of partnership and collaboration with farmers, ranchers, forest owners, forest industry, and local communities to conserve our working lands and our forests.

I will conclude by once again thanking President Biden and Secretary Vilsack for their confidence in me and thank you Madame Chairman, Senator Boozman, and members of the committee for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I look forward to answering any questions.

**DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE
RECORD**

AUGUST 5, 2021

July 26, 2021

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Member Boozman:

We, the undersigned organizations, representing millions of sportsmen and women and other conservationists across the country, are writing to respectfully express our support for the nomination of Dr. Homer Wilkes to serve as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment (NRE). The NRE Under Secretary position is critical in overseeing a wide variety of USDA natural resource conservation and forestry programs that work across public and private lands to serve the diverse needs of the United States.

Dr. Homer Wilkes is a collaborative leader with a track record of working towards large-scale solutions in partnership with communities, organizations, and a wide range of agencies like the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). During his 41-year tenure at USDA, he previously served as Chief Financial Officer, Mississippi State Conservationist, and Acting Associate Chief of NRCS. Since 2013, Dr. Wilkes has served as the director of the Gulf of Mexico Ecosystem Restoration Division where he has been integral to restoring the health of the Gulf Coast ecosystem following the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. Throughout his career with NRCS, Dr. Wilkes has also played a key role in directing engineering, natural resource, and watershed projects and took a keen interest in forestry. Under his leadership, Mississippi's forests rose to number 1 in the nation when it comes to removing carbon from the atmosphere while at the same time rank number 1 or 2 in the nation in the most board feet of timber harvested from its national forests, demonstrating his ability to productively balance diverse needs within the systems that he oversees.

In 2009, Dr. Wilkes was nominated for the same position, but withdrew his name so his three sons could graduate from high school in Mississippi, a sign of the long-standing support he has maintained in this position. Dr. Wilkes also previously served as a supply officer in the United States Navy Reserve. He holds his Bachelors, Master of Business Administration, and Ph.D. in urban conservation planning and higher education from Jackson State University. Like us, he is also an avid angler and hunter and understands the important roles that these users play in the scientific management of wildlife.

We are confident in Dr. Wilkes leadership abilities, and we enthusiastically support his nomination for the position of USDA Undersecretary of Natural Resources and Environment.

Sincerely,

Archery Trade Association
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
Boone and Crockett Club
Catch-A-Dream Foundation
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation
Council to Advance Hunting and the Shooting Sports
Delta Waterfowl
Ducks Unlimited
Houston Safari Club
Izaak Walton League of America
Masters of Foxhounds Association
Mule Deer Foundation
National Deer Association
National Shooting Sports Foundation
National Wild Turkey Federation
National Wildlife Federation
North American Grouse Partnership
Orion: The Hunter's Institute
Pheasants Forever
Pope and Young Club
Quail Forever
The Conservation Fund
Texas Wildlife Association
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Wildlife Forever
Wildlife Management Institute
Wildlife Mississippi

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U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION & FORESTRY
Questions for Executive Nominees
117th Congress

1. Basic Biographical Information

Please provide the following information.

<i>Position to Which You Have Been Nominated</i>	
<u>Name of Position</u>	<u>Date of Nomination</u>
Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment	6/23/2021

<i>Current Legal Name</i>			
<u>First Name</u>	<u>Middle Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Suffix</u>
Homer	Lee	Wilkes	

<i>Addresses</i>					
<u>Residential Address</u> (do not include street address)			<u>Office Address</u> (include street address)		
			Street: 7578 Old Canto Road		
City: Ridgeland	State: MS	Zip: 39157	City: Madison	State: MS	Zip: 39110

<i>Other Names Used</i>						
<u>First Name</u>	<u>Middle Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Suffix</u>	<small>Check if Maiden Name</small>	<u>Name Used From</u> (Year) (Check box if estimate)	<u>Name Used To</u> (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)
N/A					Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est <input type="checkbox"/>
					Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est <input type="checkbox"/>

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<i>Birth Year and Place</i>	
Year of Birth (Do not include month and day.)	Place of Birth
1956	Vicksburg, MS, Warren County

<i>Marital Status</i>					
Check All That Describe Your Current Situation:					
Never Married	Married	Separated	Annulled	Divorced	Widowed
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

<i>Spouse's Name</i> (current spouse only)			
<u>Spouse's First Name</u>	<u>Spouse's Middle Name</u>	<u>Spouse's Last Name</u>	<u>Spouse's Suffix</u>
Kim	Teresa	Wilkes	

<i>Spouse's Other Names Used</i> (current spouse only)						
<u>First Name</u>	<u>Middle Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Suffix</u>	<small>Check if Maiden Name</small>	<u>Name Used From</u> (Year) (Check box if estimate)	<u>Name Used To</u> (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)
Kim	Teresa	Burkhead		X	09/1960 Est <input type="checkbox"/>	07/1982 Est <input type="checkbox"/>
					Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est <input type="checkbox"/>

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<i>Children's Names (if over 18)</i>			
<u>First Name</u>	<u>Middle Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Suffix</u>
Justin	Makenzie	Wilkes	
Austin	Lloyd	Wilkes	
Harrison	Lee	Wilkes	

2. Education

List all post-secondary schools attended.

<u>Name of School</u>	<u>Type of School</u> (vocational/technical/trade school, college/university/military college, correspondence/distance/extension/online school)	<u>Date Began School</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate)	<u>Date Ended School</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate) (check "present" box if still in school)	<u>Degree</u>	<u>Date Awarded</u>
Jackson state University	College/University	05/2004 Est X	05/2006 Est Present X	PhD	05/2006
Jackson State University	College/university	08/1978 Est X	05/1980 Est Present X	MBA	05/1980
Jackson State University	College/University	08/1974 Est □	05/1978 Est Present X	BS	05/1978

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3. Employment

(A) In reverse chronological order, list all your employment activities, including unemployment and self-employment. If the employment activity was military duty, list separate employment activity periods to show each change of military duty station. Do not list employment before your 18th birthday unless to provide a minimum of two years of employment history.

<u>Type of Employment</u> (Active Military Duty Station, National Guard/Reserve, USPHS Commissioned Corps, Other Federal employment, State Government (Non-Federal Employment), Self-employment, Unemployment, Federal Contractor, Non-Government Employment (excluding self-employment), Other)	<u>Name of Your Employer/Assigned Duty Station</u>	<u>Most Recent Position Title/Rank</u>	<u>Location</u> (City and State only)	<u>Date Employment Began</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate)	<u>Date Employment Ended</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate) (check "present" box if still employed)
Other Federal Employment	USDA-NRCS	Director -SES	Madison MS	08/2012 Est	Present Est
Other Federal Employment	USDA-NRCS	Acting Associate Chief GS-15	Washington DC	12/2010 Est X	08/2012 Est X
Other Federal Employment	Mississippi State University	Special Assistant to the President	Starkville, MS	05/2009 Est X	10/2009 Est X
Other Federal Employment	USDA-NRCS	State Conservationist	Jackson, MS	08/1994 Est X	12/2010 Est X
Other Federal Employment	USDA-NRCS	Acting Chief, Financial Officer	Washington, DC	08/1994 Est X	03/1995 Est X
Other Federal Employment	USDA-NRCS	Deputy State Conservationist	Jackson, MS	05/1994 Est X	08/1994 Est X
Other Federal Employment	USDA-NRCS	Administrative Officer	Fort Worth, TX	07/1987 Est X	05/1994 Est X
Other Federal Employment	USDA-NRCS	Budget Analyst	Washington, DC	02/1985 Est X	07/1987 Est X
Other Federal Employment	USDA-NRCS	Financial Manager	Washington, DC	04/1983 Est X	02/1985 Est X
Other Federal Employment	USDA-NRCS	Financial Manager	Amherst, MA	04/1980 Est X	04/1983 Est X

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Other Federal Employment	United State Navy Reserves	Naval Supply Officer	Washington, DC	11/1984	Est X	04/2007	Est X
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(B) List any advisory, consultative, honorary, or other part-time service or positions with federal, state, or local governments, not listed elsewhere.

<u>Name of Government Entity</u>	<u>Name of Position</u>	<u>Date Service Began</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate)	<u>Date Service Ended</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate) (check "present" box if still serving)
N/A		Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est <input type="checkbox"/> Present <input type="checkbox"/>
		Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est <input type="checkbox"/> Present <input type="checkbox"/>

4. Honors and Awards

List all scholarships, fellowships, honorary degrees, civilian service citations, military medals, academic or professional honors, honorary society memberships and any other special recognition for outstanding service or achievement.

- Certificate of merit for Performance rating of Outstanding, United States Department of Agriculture, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2015
- Achievement Award for national NRCS Strategic Plan Development 2010
- Outstanding Alumnus Award, Jackson State University, College of Business 2009
- Award of Recognition for "Outstanding Achievement in Government," GEM National Consortium for Minorities in Natural Resources, 2008
- Delta Council achievement Award for farm Policy 2007
- Certificate of Merit for "Improving Outreach to the Scientific Community through Grantsmanship Workshops," United States Department of Agriculture, 2006
- Golden Helm Award from Secretary of Navy 2001
- President Award from Mississippi Association of Conservation Districts, 1995 and 1999
- Certificate of Merit for official performance rating of "Outstanding," United States Department of Agriculture, 1994-1999

5. Memberships

List all memberships that you have held in professional, social, business, fraternal, scholarly, civic, or charitable organizations in the last 10 years.

Unless relevant to your nomination, you do NOT need to include memberships in charitable organizations available to the public as a result of a tax deductible donation of \$1,000 or less,

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Parent-Teacher Associations or other organizations connected to schools attended by your children, athletic clubs or teams, automobile support organizations (such as AAA), discounts clubs (such as Groupon or Sam's Club), or affinity memberships/consumer clubs (such as frequent flyer memberships).

<u>Name of Organization</u>	<u>Dates of Your Membership</u> (You may approximate.)	<u>Position(s) Held</u>
Coley and Lee LLC	5/2013 to the present	President
OMEGA PSI PHI Fraternity	03/1978 to the Present	Member

6. Political Activity

(A) Have you ever been a candidate for or been elected or appointed to a political office?

Yes No (If yes, please complete the chart below)

<u>Name of Office</u>	<u>Elected/Appointed/ Candidate Only</u>	<u>Year(s) Election Held or Appointment Made</u>	<u>Term of Service</u> (if applicable)
N/A			

(B) List any offices held in or services rendered, including volunteer services, to a political party or election committee during the last 10 years that you have not listed elsewhere.

<u>Name of Party/Election Committee</u>	<u>Office/Services Rendered</u>	<u>Responsibilities</u>	<u>Dates of Service</u>
N/A			

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(B) List any formal speeches you have delivered during the last 10 years relevant to the position to which you have been nominated, and all speeches you have delivered related to any topic for the last five years. Include any testimony to Congress or any other legislative or administrative body. Please provide the Committee with copies of all listed speeches via email or other digital format and list all known required speeches even if no copy is available to provide.

<u>Title/Topic</u>	<u>Place/Audience</u>	<u>Date(s) of Speech</u>
Energy and Environmental Leaders Day – Event with Senator Sheldon Whitehouse <i>No transcript available</i>	University of Rhode Island's Center for Biotechnology and Life Sciences Building	May 1, 2012
Testimony, Senate Committee on Appropriations, Homeland Security Subcommittee <i>Testimony available</i>	Washington, DC	October 12, 2011
NACD Southeastern Summer Meeting – Speech, topic: Working Together for Conservation <i>No transcript available</i>	Alabama	August 3, 2011

UNITED STATES OFFICE OF
GOVERNMENT ETHICS



July 1, 2021

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,
and Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Madam Chairwoman:

In accordance with the Ethics in Government Act of 1978, I enclose a copy of the financial disclosure report filed by Homer Wilkes, who has been nominated by President Biden for the position of Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, Department of Agriculture.

We have reviewed the report and have obtained advice from the agency concerning any possible conflict in light of its functions and the nominee's proposed duties. Also enclosed is an ethics agreement outlining the actions that the nominee will undertake to avoid conflicts of interest. Unless a date for compliance is indicated in the ethics agreement, the nominee must fully comply within three months of confirmation with any action specified in the ethics agreement.

Based thereon, we believe that this nominee is in compliance with applicable laws and regulations governing conflicts of interest.

Sincerely,

David J. Apol
General Counsel

Enclosures



May 21, 2021

Mr. Stuart Bender
Designated Agency Ethics Official and
Director, Office of Ethics
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 347-W
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Mr. Bender:

The purpose of this letter is to describe the steps that I will take to avoid any actual or apparent conflict of interest in the event that I am confirmed for the position of Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, U.S. Department of Agriculture. It is my responsibility to understand and comply with commitments outlined in this agreement.

SECTION 1 – GENERAL COMMITMENTS

As required by the criminal conflicts of interest law at 18 U.S.C. § 208(a), I will not participate personally and substantially in any particular matter in which I know that I have a financial interest directly and predictably affected by the matter, or in which I know that a person whose interests are imputed to me has a financial interest directly and predictably affected by the particular matter, unless I first obtain a written waiver, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 208(b)(1), or qualify for a regulatory exemption, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 208(b)(2). I understand that the interests of the following persons are imputed to me:

- Any spouse or minor child of mine;
- Any general partner of a partnership in which I am a limited or general partner;
- Any organization in which I serve as an officer, director, trustee, general partner, or employee; and
- Any person or organization with which I am negotiating or have an arrangement concerning prospective employment.

In the event that an actual or potential conflict of interest arises during my appointment, I will consult with an agency ethics official and take the measures necessary to resolve the conflict, such as recusal from the particular matter or divestiture of an asset.

If I have a managed account or otherwise use the services of an investment professional during my appointment, I will ensure that the account manager or investment professional obtains my prior approval on a case-by-case basis for the purchase of any assets other than cash, cash equivalents, investment funds that qualify for the regulatory exemption for diversified mutual funds and unit investment trusts at 5 C.F.R. § 2640.201(a), obligations of the United States, or municipal bonds.

I will receive a live ethics briefing from a member of the ethics office after my confirmation but not later than 15 days after my appointment pursuant to the ethics program regulation at 5 C.F.R. § 2638.305. Within 90 days of my confirmation, I will submit my Certification of Ethics Agreement Compliance which documents my compliance with this ethics agreement.

I understand that as an appointee I will be required to sign the Ethics Pledge (Exec. Order No. 13989) and that I will be bound by it. Among other obligations, I will be required to recuse from particular matters involving specific parties involving my former employer or former clients for a period of two years after I am appointed, with the exception of federal, states and local governments.

I will not modify this ethics agreement without your approval and the approval of the U.S. Office of Government Ethics pursuant to the ethics agreement requirements contained in the financial disclosure regulation at 5 C.F.R. § 2634.803(a)(4).

SECTION 2 – RESIGNATIONS

Upon confirmation, I will resign from my position as President of Coley and Lee, LLC, a residential property management company. I will continue to have a financial interest in this entity, but I will not provide services material to the production of income. Instead, I will receive only passive investment income from it. I will not participate personally and substantially in any particular matter that to my knowledge has a direct and predictable effect on the financial interests of Coley and Lee, LLC, unless I first obtain a written waiver, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 208(b)(1).

SECTION 3 – USDA CONSERVATION PROGRAM

I will continue to participate in the USDA Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). My 5-year contract with CSP ends in 2023. I have not, and I will not, participate personally and substantially in any particular matter that to my knowledge has a direct and predictable effect on any payments I receive from USDA programs, unless I first obtain a written waiver, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 208(b)(1).

SECTION 4 – PUBLIC POSTING

I have been advised that this ethics agreement and the Certification of Ethics Agreement Compliance will be posted publicly, consistent with the public information law at 5 U.S.C. § 552, on the website of the U.S. Office of Government Ethics with ethics agreements of other Presidential nominees who file public financial disclosure reports.

Sincerely,



Homer Wilkes

**Executive Branch Personnel
Public Financial Disclosure Report (OGE Form 278e)**

Filer's Information

Wilkes, Homer

Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, Department of Agriculture

Other Federal Government Positions Held During the Preceding 12 Months:

Director, Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Team, Natural Resources and Conservation Service, USDA (8/2012 - Present)

Names of Congressional Committees Considering Nomination:

- Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

Electronic Signature - I certify that the statements I have made in this form are true, complete and correct to the best of my knowledge.

/s/ Wilkes, Homer [electronically signed on 03/30/2021 by Wilkes, Homer in Integrity.gov]

Agency Ethics Official's Opinion - On the basis of information contained in this report, I conclude that the filer is in compliance with applicable laws and regulations (subject to any comments below).

/s/ Bender, Stuart, Certifying Official [electronically signed on 06/25/2021 by Bender, Stuart in Integrity.gov]

Other review conducted by

U.S. Office of Government Ethics Certification
/s/ Apol, David, Certifying Official [electronically signed on 07/01/2021 by Apol, David in Integrity.gov]

1. Filer's Positions Held Outside United States Government

#	ORGANIZATION NAME	CITY, STATE	ORGANIZATION TYPE	POSITION HELD	FROM	TO
1	Coley and Lee, LLC (Residential Property Management Company)	Madison, Mississippi	Corporation	President	1/2008	Present

2. Filer's Employment Assets & Income and Retirement Accounts

#	DESCRIPTION	EIF	VALUE	INCOME TYPE	INCOME AMOUNT
1	IRA #1	No			
1.1	U.S. brokerage account (cash)	N/A	\$1,001 - \$15,000	Dividends	None (or less than \$201)
1.2	Clear Bridge Appreciation A Fund (SHAPX)	Yes	\$15,001 - \$50,000		None (or less than \$201)

3. Filer's Employment Agreements and Arrangements

None

4. Filer's Sources of Compensation Exceeding \$5,000 in a Year

None

5. Spouse's Employment Assets & Income and Retirement Accounts

#	DESCRIPTION	EIF	VALUE	INCOME TYPE	INCOME AMOUNT
1	IRA #2	No			
1.1	U.S. brokerage account (cash)	N/A	\$1,001 - \$15,000		None (or less than \$201)
1.2	Clear Bridge Appreciation A Fund (SHAPX)	Yes	\$15,001 - \$50,000		None (or less than \$201)

6. Other Assets and Income

#	DESCRIPTION	EIF	VALUE	INCOME TYPE	INCOME AMOUNT
1	U.S. bank #1 (Cash)	N/A	\$50,001 - \$100,000	Interest	\$201 - \$1,000
2	U.S. bank #2 (cash)	N/A	\$1,001 - \$15,000	Interest	\$201 - \$1,000
3	U.S. Credit Union Money Market (cash)	N/A	\$1,001 - \$15,000	Interest	\$201 - \$1,000
4	Undeveloped Farmland Property (Madison County, Mississippi)	N/A	\$15,001 - \$50,000		None (or less than \$201)
4.1	USDA Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)	N/A		Conservation Payments	\$9,000
5	US Saving Bonds	N/A	\$15,001 - \$50,000		\$201 - \$1,000
6	Coley and Lee, LLC (Residential Property Management Company)	N/A			None (or less than \$201)
6.1	Residential Rental Property - Claiborne County, Mississippi	N/A	\$15,001 - \$50,000		None (or less than \$201)
6.2	Residential Rental Property - Claiborne County, Mississippi	N/A	\$50,001 - \$100,000		None (or less than \$201)

#	DESCRIPTION	EIF	VALUE	INCOME TYPE	INCOME AMOUNT
6.3	Residential Rental Property - Warren County, Mississippi	N/A	\$15,001 - \$50,000	None (or less than \$201)	

7. Transactions

(N/A) - Not required for this type of report

8. Liabilities

#	CREDITOR NAME	TYPE	AMOUNT	YEAR INCURRED	RATE	TERM
1	Navy Federal Credit Union	Promissory Note	\$10,001 - \$15,000	2019	2.5	3

9. Gifts and Travel Reimbursements

(N/A) - Not required for this type of report

Endnotes

PART	#	ENDNOTE
6.	4	This undeveloped farmland consists of approximately 20 acres of land and it is primarily used for family outdoor recreation (walking trails, riding four-wheelers, and an occasional garden. This land is not used for commercial farming purposes and it is not engaged in commerce...

PART	#	ENDNOTE
6.	4.1	CSP is an NRCS program that assists private landowners in building upon existing land conservation efforts to improve the land in environmentally beneficial ways, such as improving soil and water conditions on the land and developing wildlife habitats. I am currently in a 5-year CSP payment contract with NRCS that began in 2018 and will end in 2023.
6.	6	At this time my three rental properties are not yet ready for rental so this LLC does not have much activity at the present time.
6.	6.1	The property is a small house which is being prepared for short-term rentals. It is not currently being rented, so there is no income.
6.	6.2	The property is a small house which is being prepared for short-term rentals. It is not currently being rented, so there is no income.
6.	6.3	The property is a small house which is being prepared for short-term rentals. It is not currently being rented, so there is no income.

Summary of Contents

1. Filer's Positions Held Outside United States Government

Part 1 discloses positions that the filer held at any time during the reporting period (excluding positions with the United States Government). Positions are reportable even if the filer did not receive compensation.

This section does not include the following: (1) positions with religious, social, fraternal, or political organizations; (2) positions solely of an honorary nature; (3) positions held as part of the filer's official duties with the United States Government; (4) mere membership in an organization; and (5) passive investment interests as a limited partner or non-managing member of a limited liability company.

2. Filer's Employment Assets & Income and Retirement Accounts

Part 2 discloses the following:

- Sources of earned and other non-investment income of the filer totaling more than \$200 during the reporting period (e.g., salary, fees, partnership share, honoraria, scholarships, and prizes)
- Assets related to the filer's business, employment, or other income-generating activities (1) that ended the reporting period with a value greater than \$1,000 or (2) from which more than \$200 in income was received during the reporting period (e.g., equity in business or partnership, stock options, retirement plans/accounts and their underlying holdings as appropriate, deferred compensation, and intellectual property, such as book deals and patents)

This section does not include assets or income from United States Government employment or assets that were acquired separately from the filer's business, employment, or other income-generating activities (e.g., assets purchased through a brokerage account). Note: The type of income is not required if the amount of income is \$0 - \$200 or if the asset qualifies as an excepted investment fund (EIF).

3. Filer's Employment Agreements and Arrangements

Part 3 discloses agreements or arrangements that the filer had during the reporting period with an employer or former employer (except the United States Government), such as the following:

- Future employment
- Leave of absence
- Continuing payments from an employer, including severance and payments not yet received for previous work (excluding ordinary salary from a current employer)
- Continuing participation in an employee welfare, retirement, or other benefit plan, such as pensions or a deferred compensation plan
- Retention or disposition of employer-awarded equity, sharing in profits or carried interests (e.g., vested and unvested stock options, restricted stock, future share of a company's profits, etc.)

4. Filer's Sources of Compensation Exceeding \$5,000 in a Year

Part 4 discloses sources (except the United States Government) that paid more than \$5,000 in a calendar year for the filer's services during any year of the reporting period.

The filer discloses payments both from employers and from any clients to whom the filer personally provided services. The filer discloses a source even if the source made its payment to the filer's employer and not to the filer. The filer does not disclose a client's payment to the filer's employer if the filer did not provide the services for which the client is paying.

5. Spouse's Employment Assets & Income and Retirement Accounts

Part 5 discloses the following:

- Sources of earned income (excluding honoraria) for the filer's spouse totaling more than \$1,000 during the reporting period (e.g., salary, consulting fees, and partnership share)
- Sources of honoraria for the filer's spouse greater than \$200 during the reporting period
- Assets related to the filer's spouse's employment, business activities, other income-generating activities, (1) that ended the reporting period with a value greater than \$1,000 or (2) from which more than \$200 in income was received during the reporting period (e.g., equity in business or partnership, stock options, retirement plans/accounts and their underlying holdings as appropriate, deferred compensation, and intellectual property, such as book deals and patents)

This section does not include assets or income from United States Government employment or assets that were acquired separately from the filer's spouse's business, employment, or other income-generating activities (e.g., assets purchased through a brokerage account). Note: The type of income is not required if the amount of income is \$0 - \$200 or if the asset qualifies as an excepted investment fund (EIF). Amounts of income are not required for a spouse's earned income (excluding honoraria).

6. Other Assets and Income

Part 6 discloses each asset, not already reported, (1) that ended the reporting period with a value greater than \$1,000 or (2) from which more than \$200 in investment income was received during the reporting period. For purposes of the value and income thresholds, the filer aggregates the filer's interests with those of the filer's spouse and dependent children.

This section does not include the following types of assets: (1) a personal residence (unless it was rented out during the reporting period); (2) income or retirement benefits associated with United States Government employment (e.g., Thrift Savings Plan); and (3) cash accounts (e.g., checking, savings, money market accounts) at a single financial institution with a value of \$5,000 or less (unless more than \$200 in income was received). Additional exceptions apply. Note: The type of income is not required if the amount of income is \$0 - \$200 or if the asset qualifies as an excepted investment fund (EIF).

7. Transactions

Part 7 discloses purchases, sales, or exchanges of real property or securities in excess of \$1,000 made on behalf of the filer, the filer's spouse or dependent child during the reporting period.

This section does not include transactions that concern the following: (1) a personal residence, unless rented out; (2) cash accounts (e.g., checking, savings, CDs, money market accounts) and money market mutual funds; (3) Treasury bills, bonds, and notes; and (4) holdings within a federal Thrift Savings Plan account. Additional exceptions apply.

8. Liabilities

Part 8 discloses liabilities over \$10,000 that the filer, the filer's spouse or dependent child owed at any time during the reporting period.

This section does not include the following types of liabilities: (1) mortgages on a personal residence, unless rented out (limitations apply for PAS filers); (2) loans secured by a personal motor vehicle, household furniture, or appliances, unless the loan exceeds the item's purchase price; and (3) revolving charge accounts, such as credit card balances, if the outstanding liability did not exceed \$10,000 at the end of the reporting period. Additional exceptions apply.

9. Gifts and Travel Reimbursements

This section discloses:

- Gifts totaling more than \$415 that the filer, the filer's spouse, and dependent children received from any one source during the reporting period.
- Travel reimbursements totaling more than \$415 that the filer, the filer's spouse, and dependent children received from any one source during the reporting period.

For purposes of this section, the filer need not aggregate any gift or travel reimbursement with a value of \$166 or less. Regardless of the value, this section does not include the following items: (1) anything received from relatives; (2) anything received from the United States Government or from the District of Columbia, state, or local governments; (3) bequests and other forms of inheritance; (4) gifts and travel reimbursements given to the filer's agency in connection with the filer's official travel; (5) gifts of hospitality (food, lodging, entertainment) at the donor's residence or personal premises; and (6) anything received by the filer's spouse or dependent children totally independent of their relationship to the filer. Additional exceptions apply.

Privacy Act Statement

Title I of the Ethics in Government Act of 1978, as amended (the Act), 5 U.S.C. app. § 101 et seq., as amended by the Stop Trading on Congressional Knowledge Act of 2012 (Pub. L. 112-105) (STOCK Act), and 5 C.F.R. Part 2634 of the U. S. Office of Government Ethics regulations require the reporting of this information. Failure to provide the requested information may result in separation, disciplinary action, or civil action. The primary use of the information on this report is for review by Government officials to determine compliance with applicable Federal laws and regulations. This report may also be disclosed upon request to any requesting person in accordance with sections 105 and 402(b)(1) of the Act or as otherwise authorized by law. You may inspect applications for public access of your own form upon request. Additional disclosures of the information on this report may be made: (1) to any requesting person, subject to the limitation contained in section 208(d)(1) of title 18, any determination granting an exemption pursuant to sections 208(b)(1) and 208(b)(3) of title 18; (2) to a Federal, State, or local law enforcement agency if the disclosing agency becomes aware of violations or potential violations of law or regulation; (3) to a source when necessary to obtain information relevant to a conflict of interest investigation or determination; (4) to the National Archives and Records Administration or the General Services Administration in records management inspections; (5) to the Office of Management and Budget during legislative coordination on private relief legislation; (6) when the disclosing agency determines that the records are arguably relevant to a proceeding before a court, grand jury, or administrative or adjudicative body, or in a proceeding before an administrative or adjudicative body when the adjudicator determines the records to be relevant to the proceeding; (7) to reviewing officials in a new office, department or agency when an employee transfers or is detailed from one covered position to another; a public financial disclosure report and any accompanying documents, including statements notifying an employee's supervising ethics office of the commencement of negotiations for future employment or compensation or of an agreement for future employment or compensation; (8) to a Member of Congress or a congressional office in response to an inquiry made on behalf of and at the request of an individual who is the subject of the record; (9) to contractors and other non-Government employees working on a contract, service or assignment for the Federal Government when necessary to accomplish a function related to this system of records; (10) on the OGE Website and to any person, department or agency, any written ethics agreement, including certifications of ethics agreement compliance, filed with OGE by an individual nominated by the President to a position requiring Senate confirmation; (11) on the OGE Website and to any person, department or agency, any certificate of divestiture issued by OGE; (12) on the OGE Website and to any person, department or agency, any waiver of the restrictions contained in Executive Order 13770 or any superseding executive order; (13) to appropriate agencies, entities and individuals when there has been a suspected or confirmed breach of the system of records, the agency maintaining the records has determined that there is a risk of harm to the agency, the Federal Government, or national security, and the disclosure is reasonably necessary to assist in connection with the agency's efforts to respond to the suspected or confirmed breach or to prevent, minimize, or remedy such harm; and (14) to another Federal agency or Federal entity, when the agency maintaining the record determines that information from this system of records is reasonably necessary to assist the recipient agency or entity in responding to a suspected or confirmed breach or in preventing, minimizing, or remedying the risk of harm to individuals, the recipient agency or entity, the Federal Government, or national security. See also the OGE/GOVT-1 executive branch-wide Privacy Act system of records.

Public Burden Information

This collection of information is estimated to take an average of ten hours per response, including time for reviewing the instructions, gathering the data needed, and completing the form. Send comments regarding the burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to the Program Counsel, U.S. Office of Government Ethics (OGE), Suite 500, 1201 New York Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20005-3917.

Pursuant to the Paperwork Reduction Act, as amended, an agency may not conduct or sponsor, and no person is required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number (that number, 3209-0001, is displayed here and at the top of the first page of this OGE Form 278e).

August 3, 2021

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow, Chairwoman Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Boozman, Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Member Boozman:

Please be advised that pursuant to section 101(b) of the Ethics in Government Act of 1978, as amended, I have informed the appropriate ethics officials that the information required by section 102(a)(1)(A) of the Act with respect to income and honoraria contained in OGE Form 278e (Executive Branch Public Financial Disclosure Report) executed by me on March 30, 2021 is correct.

This information is current as of Tuesday, August 3, 2021. This date is within five days prior to the date of the first hearing scheduled to consider my nomination.

Sincerely,

Homer Wilkes

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

AUGUST 5, 2021

Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

To consider the nomination of the Honorable Homer Wilkes, Ph.D. to be Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment

Thursday, August 5th, 2021

Questions for the Record

Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow

1. If you are confirmed, I look forward to working with you, including on the upcoming Farm Bill and other issues of importance to American farmers, ranchers, and families. If confirmed, do you agree, without reservation, to:
 - a. Promptly reply to requests for information from me or any duly constituted committee of the Congress?
 - b. Respond to my requests for data and technical assistance in informing or drafting legislation or implementation of the law?

Yes, I do.

2. Our national forests are designed, by law, to have multiple uses. Whether it's snowmobile trails in northern Michigan, putting up timber sales in the Southeast, or preserving wilderness areas for hunting and fishing across the country; our national forest lands provide a multitude of benefits to the American people. Do you agree with this multiple use mandate, and what types of strategies will you use to strike the oftentimes difficult balance between the competing users of our federal forest lands?

National forests and grasslands do support a multitude of values and benefits. The Forest Service's multiple use mandate provides a critical foundation to support a variety of uses important to the American public. I support this mandate and if confirmed, I will commit to ensuring we work with partners, and stakeholders and consult with Tribes to find common ground and opportunities to support the full suite of activities, uses, values and benefits Americans expect from these public lands.

3. The Forest Service's Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program, established after the Senate Ag Committee passed the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Research Act of 1978, provides a variety of benefits to the American people through the data collected under the program. However, some in Congress have called for a modernization of the program to address the new and evolving challenges facing the country's forests. Can you talk about what you see as the most valuable aspects of the FIA program and what changes you might make, given new resources, to ensure it continues to provide sustained benefits to the American people?

FIA is an important program that provides data on forest resources across all US forests. Today, FIA is valuable not just for tracking growth and yield of forests and timber supply, but it is increasingly important for tracking forest health and particularly carbon storage in forests. In the last decade, the Forest Service has improved the use of FIA data for tracking carbon storage, but more needs to be done. With support from Congress, the Forest Service should look at ways to increase frequency of surveys and to invest in analysis and tools that can improve the accuracy of data for purposes of measuring carbon storage.

4. The Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry (ANF) has provided the Forest Service a host of new forest management tools over the past 7 years through the Forestry Titles of the 2014 and 2018 Farm Bills, as well as ANF's robust contribution to Division O of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018. Do you agree that these new tools constitute a significant amount of recent new authority that the Forest Service can now use to restore our forests and protect communities from wildfire? If confirmed, will you commit to working with me and the Committee to implement these new authorities consistent with the best available science and the underlying forest plans?

The Senate Committee has indeed provided a number of important tools to help the Forest Service increase the pace and scale of forest restoration across federal lands, and, with Good Neighbor Authority, across neighboring state and other lands. If confirmed, I will work with you to implement these new authorities using the best available science. I do believe it is important to note that the greatest barrier to getting more work done on the National Forests more quickly are financial resources to support forest management and restoration.

Ranking Member Boozman

1. If confirmed, do you agree to reply promptly, with any requested information, to any request from me or my staff, and to notify me or my staff in advance of making public any significant policy positions USDA takes during your tenure?

Yes, I do.

2. There is a longstanding history of USDA providing technical assistance to the Committee as we write legislation. This assistance has been provided to ensure the pragmatic workability of the legislation, without regard to whether or not the bill reflects the Administration's priorities. Will you commit to continuing to provide agency resources and subject matter experts towards any technical assistance requested by me or my staff?

Yes, I will.

3. The legislative process, for instance, the farm bill, sometimes yields results where the Secretary is delegated significant authority. During implementation of legislation, including when engaging in the rule-making process, will you commit to consulting with Congress if statutory language has rendered legislative intent unclear?

Yes I will, as appropriate.

4. Congress expanded the purposes for the national forests through the Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act of 1960. Today, the Forest Service manages 193 million acres of National Forest System lands under that multiple-use mission, including: livestock grazing, energy and mineral development, timber production, watershed protection, recreation, and wildlife habitat. Balancing these multiple uses across the national forest system often leads to certain constituencies disagreeing with management decisions, practices, and access. If confirmed, how will you approach resolving the varying interests or disagreements among constituencies to ensure the Forest Service continues to meet its multiple-use mandate?

The Forest Service multiple use mandate provides a critical foundation to support a variety of uses important to the American public. I recognize that people don't always agree on what uses are appropriate in some instances. I have a strong track record of working with others to find solutions and if

confirmed, I will strive to work with all of our partners and consult with Tribes to find common ground and opportunities to support the full suite of activities Americans expect from these public lands.

5. It is no secret the Forest Service has faced challenges with workplace harassment and misconduct issues. Various OIG and GAO reports have indicated some of these complaints and allegations go back over decades.
 - a. What is your understanding of the Agency response to the allegations documented in various OIG and GAO reports?
 - b. If confirmed, what actions do you plan to take, as the Mission Area leader, to prevent these types of incidents from occurring in the workplace, and if they do occur, what actions would you take to ensure the Forest Service responds to such an allegation appropriately?

Let me be clear, no workplace harassment or misconduct is acceptable. It is critical that employees have a safe working environment, free from harassment, discrimination or misconduct. Our employees are – and must be treated as – our most valuable resource. I know the Forest Service has taken a number of steps to address its history of challenges with harassment in the workplace and has done important work focused on accountability, prevention, and changing agency culture –but there is more work to do. This has been a strong and personal priority of mine throughout my time in government service, and if confirmed, this would be a priority for me as a mission area leader, as well as a priority of this Administration.

6. The Forest Service’s State and Private Forestry program area plays a critical role in providing financial and technical assistance to partners outside National Forest System jurisdictional lands - states, tribes, communities and non-industrial private landowners -- to help sustain the nation’s forests and grasslands, protect communities from wildland fire and restore fire-adapted ecosystems. If confirmed, how will you engage public and private land managers, who are outside the NFS lands, but whose management, or lack thereof, can have a significant impact on NFS lands and surrounding communities?

Working with public and private partners across jurisdictional boundaries will be critical to address today’s resource challenges. In my work with NRCS, I have led projects that depend on a landscape-scale approach to ecosystem protection and restoration. If confirmed, I would look forward to bring that background to bear, and working with the Forest Service to support the critical role of State and Private Forestry programs in providing financial and technical assistance to support state, Tribes, communities and private landowners.

7. Recently, there has been a great deal of focus on the intersection of various climate and carbon sequestration initiatives. Certain initiatives propose simply locking forest lands out of production into perpetuity. Active management helps mitigate pests & diseases and minimizes the severity and intensity of catastrophic wildfires. When we manage our forests properly, we support our rural communities and the growing wood products industry, which sequesters carbon in products beyond the life of the individual tree. The alternative, locking working forests out of production, leads to more vulnerable forests, and ultimately, catastrophic wildfires. What is your view on the importance of keeping our forests working and healthy?

US forests and forest products are an enormous carbon sink equivalent to up to 15% of carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuel use in the United States annually. There are two threats to that carbon sink: (1) disturbance, particularly wildfire, and (2) loss of working forests to development. With respect to the former, restoring forests to be more resilient in the face of climate change and fire will require science-

based thinning and reintroduction of fire through prescribed burns. Markets for forests products will play an important role in supporting restoration on public lands and in maintaining incentives for keeping forests as forests and addressing the second threat.

8. Over the past 15-20 years, Congress has provided the Forest Service with additional tools and flexibilities, such as Categorical Exclusions, Good Neighbor Authority, and NEPA reforms, in an effort to streamline and expedite federal agency coordination and forest management projects in an effort to facilitate the active management needed on NFS lands. Unfortunately, Forest Service lands have not benefited from these additional authorities and science-based flexibilities due to litigation, regulatory processes impediments, or other obstacles preventing the management and hazardous fuels reductions that is so badly needed.
 - a. Do you believe the Forest Service has the appropriate statutory authorities and regulatory flexibilities to conduct the appropriate management work on the right amount of acres needed to prevent and mitigate the catastrophic impacts of wildland fire, such as those we are seeing today?
 - b. If so, what impediments are preventing the Forest Service from conducting and completing the appropriate management work on the right acres?
 - c. If not, what additional statutory authorities and/or regulatory flexibilities does the Forest Service need to conduct and complete the appropriate management work on the right acres?
 - d. If confirmed, will you commit to working with this Committee to ensure the Forest Service has the appropriate authorities and flexibilities needed to conduct the appropriate management on the right acres needed to prevent and mitigate the impacts of catastrophic wildland fire?

The greatest obstacle to the Forest Service increasing the pace and scale of forest restoration and management on the National Forests to reduce the threat of catastrophic fire is not lack of authorities and flexibilities in designing and moving restoration projects. The Forest Service now routinely spends over half of its budget on wildfire response. This means staff resources are also spent in large part on wildfire response as well, to the detriment of being able to focus on forest management and other important areas such as recreation. Further, because much of the hazardous fuels that need to be removed on the National Forests are pre-commercial timber markets, while vital, will not in and of themselves be sufficient to underwrite large scale restoration. Even with the fire funding fix passed in 2018, the Forest Service does not have the financial resources it needs to more than double the acres treated on National Forests as the science suggests is necessary to meet the challenge. The most important thing Congress can do to address the wildfire crisis is to boost resources for forest restoration and management across all lands.

There may be additional tools that could improve the ability of the Forest Service to address catastrophic wildfire on the National Forests. If confirmed, I look very forward to working with the Committee to ensure that the Forest Service has the appropriate authorities to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration on the National Forests and support work on adjacent lands.

9. Timber sales from national forests benefit many stakeholders from preventing pest and disease outbreaks, to removing hazardous fuels, and supporting the local communities who rely on mills as the lifeblood of their economies. Despite these benefits, the Forest Service is currently below their timber target for FY2022.

- a. What is your view on the value and importance of timber sales as they relate to supporting healthy forests and rural communities?
- b. If confirmed, will you commit to working with this Committee to ensure the Forest Service increases the current pace and scope of its timber sales across National Forest System lands?

Forest management decisions on the National Forests should be driven by sound science and multiple-use objectives. Well-designed timber sales have an important role to play in addressing catastrophic fire and forest health while supporting jobs and industry in rural communities. If confirmed, I will commit to working with the Committee to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration on the National Forests.

10. In 2015, the Ninth Circuit Court ruled in *Cottonwood Environmental Law Center v. United States Forest Service* (“Cottonwood”) that the Forest Service needed to reinstate consultation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service following the 2009 designation of critical habitat for the Canada lynx. This decision established a new, ambiguous threshold for Section 7 ESA consultations on completed programmatic actions. The Obama Administration, including Secretary Vilsack, asked the Supreme Court to review Cottonwood in 2016, but was denied. In 2018, Congress passed a partial legislative fix, but “new information” claims under the Cottonwood ruling continue to have damaging implications for forest management and forest plans. Since January 2016, there have been at least 28 lawsuits and 50 notices of intent (NOIs) to sue the Forest Service involving ESA new information claims, challenging both plan-level and project-level decisions. At the moment, this is the single most disruptive legal barrier to forest management on our National Forests. More than 400 Million Board Feet – enough to build roughly 14,000 houses – is tied up in litigation due to this flawed precedent. The previous administration published a proposed rule on January 12, 2021 to amend the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) interagency ESA Section 7 consultation regulations. The proposed revision would clarify consultation obligations for finalized forest and land management plans.
 - a. If confirmed, will you commit to working with Forest Service career subject matter experts and leadership at the FWS and NMFS to complete this rulemaking?

I am aware that the Cottonwood decision has been challenging for the Forest Service, and if confirmed, will work with the Forest Service and others to identify a solution space.

11. In August 2020, Congress passed the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) provided permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and established a new National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF) to address the deferred maintenance backlog for five federal land management agencies over the next 5 years. The Forest Service administers more than 370,000 miles of roads, 13,800 bridges, 159,000 miles of trails, 1,700 dams and reservoirs, 1,500 communications sites, 32,000 recreation sites, and 40,000 facilities of other types. The Forest Service estimates its current maintenance backlog on this infrastructure to be approximately \$5.9B.
 - a. If confirmed, will you commit to ensuring the timely review, implementation, and completion of GAOA projects on NFS lands?

Yes, if confirmed, I will work with the Forest Service to successfully implement the Great American Outdoors Act.

12. In August 2018, the Forest Service released its Shared Stewardship Strategy to develop a collaborative approach to cross-boundary land management by emphasizing partnerships with

states, tribes, and other groups to identify joint priorities and to make the right impact at the right scale. To date, the Forest Service, often in partnership with NRCS, has entered into over 25 Shared Stewardship agreements, some of which include multiple states.

- a. What is your view on the approach and effectiveness of Shared Stewardship as a tool in addressing cross-boundary management and forest health priorities?
- b. If confirmed, do you intend to continue to utilize Shared Stewardship practices to achieve management goals and other priority work on NFS lands?

Today's natural resource challenges are complex and span all jurisdictions and ownerships. Wildfire, drought, and water do not respect land boundaries. I believe it is essential to work together in an all hands-all lands approach such as what Shared Stewardship envisions, if we are to be successful in meeting these challenges, and have years of experience doing just that. If confirmed, I intend to continue to use the principles of Shared Stewardship to help achieve management goals and priority work on NFS lands.

13. President Biden's Executive Order 14008, *Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad*, included a goal of conserving "at least 30 percent of our lands and waters by 2030" – the "30x30" goal.
 - a. What role do you believe NRE-FS has or should play under the 30x30 initiative?
 - b. If confirmed, how you will ensure this initiative will not conflict with Congress' multiple use mandate for NFS lands?

The American the Beautiful initiative emphasizes locally-led conservation, honoring private property rights, and incentive-based approaches. As a leading agency in collaborative conservation and its work with state forestry agencies and others to conserve working forest lands, Forest Service has an important role to play in this initiative. Given the Initiative's emphasis on working lands, I am confident it will not conflict with the multiple use mandate of the US Forest Service.

14. In response to President Biden's E.O. 14008, USDA and other federal agencies submitted a preliminary report ("Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful") to the Administration's National Climate Task Force. Among other recommendations, the Report outlines the need for conserved lands to be made available for greater public use. The Report directs agencies to unlock access to public lands that are currently inaccessible, and suggests prioritizing management planning to identify lands and waters that could be conserved and managed for outdoor recreation. Often, active management and greater access on public lands are in conflict with federal management restrictions, such as quarter-mile riparian corridors that do not allow for the use of motorized equipment in wild and scenic river designations and, in many cases, exacerbate wildfire risk and decrease firefighter safety. Further, dictating better access may require access across private property in many instances.
 - a. What role do you believe NRE-FS should play in implementing the Report's finding to unlock access to public lands?
 - b. What is your view on how federal land management agencies, such as the Forest Service, should balance the, sometimes conflicting, interests of enhanced public access with private property ownership rights?

In implementing the America the Beautiful initiative and through opportunities like the Great American Outdoors Act and relevant Farm Bill programs, the Forest Service will be able to work with other agencies and partners to improve access to public lands, including for outdoor recreation, in ways that are consistent with and honor private property rights.

Senator Sherrod Brown

1. In Ohio, there is significant interest in creating Ohio's first Backcountry Area in the Wayne National Forest. It's my understanding that local governments, small businesses, and others are supportive of this effort. They understand both the economic benefits of increased tourism in the region, as well as the environmental benefits. If confirmed, can I count on the USFS to work with local stakeholders on this designation that would protect 30,000 acres of the forest and more than 100 miles of hiking trails?

Yes, I recognize the importance of recreation and tourism for local economies, and will commit to supporting the Forest Service's work with stakeholders on this effort.

2. The Forest Service oversees the Urban and Community Forestry Program. This program helps communities invest in forestry plans and tree planting, but frankly, it is not up the challenges facing our cities and towns. We know that tree cover is associated with better health outcomes, lower energy costs, and increased property values. Yet, we also know that a history of redlining in our country too often means that neighborhoods of color have smaller tree canopies compared to wealthier communities. If confirmed, will you commit to increasing the Forest Service's support for and engagement with this program?

The Urban and Community Forestry program is doing important work. Forest Service research has helped identify the importance of tree canopies for mental and physical health, as well as the other values you mention. It is critical that communities have equitable access to the multiple benefits trees provide. If confirmed, I look forward to supporting this work and the ways in which the Forest Service is working with underserved communities to support equitable access to green space.

3. There is an unprecedented and growing demand for outdoor recreation -- especially on our public lands. In the Athens Unit of the Wayne National Forest, work has already begun on a mountain bike trail that local officials expect will increase attendance at the forest. Do you see the Forest Service placing more emphasis on outdoor recreation? If so, what might a recreation emphasis look like?

We have seen during the pandemic just how critical access to outdoor recreation is for families and community. Not only is it one of the largest drivers of economic opportunity, outdoor recreation supports community well-being and physical and mental health. Ensuring that our national forests and grasslands provide safe, inclusive, and sustainable access to positive outdoor experiences will be a priority for me, if confirmed. The Wayne National Forest's partnership work is a great example of how the Forest Service and local communities can collaborate to identify opportunities for outdoor recreation access and uses that reflect shared priorities.

4. Most forest land in Ohio is privately owned. How can USDA help ensure that interested private landowners have the resources they need to manage their land for carbon sequestration, wildlife habitat, and conservation?

Our private forests lands in the east support most of the carbon sequestration in US forests. The Forest Service works with state foresters and state forestry agencies in partnership to provide assistance to those landowners to keep and management their forests sustainably. In addition, the Forest Service can also work with NRCS to provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners. I look forward to strengthening the bond with state foresters and NRCS in support of our private forests.

Senator Michael Bennet

1. Several counties in the Grand Mesa Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forest (GMUG) have expressed concerns to me that the soon to be released Draft GMUG Forest Plan places too much of an emphasis on commercial timber production over wildfire mitigation treatments that are designed to protect communities and watersheds. They are also concerned that the plan prioritizes resource extraction over wildlife habitat, climate mitigation, and recreation infrastructure. They want to see a plan that prioritizes wildlife habitat, climate resilience and mitigation and recreation infrastructure which are the uses that their communities are dependent on.
 - a. If confirmed will you work with counties in Colorado to address their concerns and ensure that the final GMUG Forest Plan prioritizes community-driven forest restoration and climate mitigation?

The 2012 National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule requires land management plans to include direction for ecological, social and economic sustainability, including direction for wildlife habitat, climate resilience, recreation, forest restoration and watershed protection. If confirmed, I will work with the Forest Service to understand how the 2012 Planning Rule is being implemented, including with regard to the GMUG.

2. Climate change is fueling longer and more severe wildfire seasons, posing a significant threat to our national forests, our communities, and our way of life in the West. That is why in April I reintroduced the bipartisan, bicameral Outdoor Restoration Partnership Act (ORPA), which would invest \$60 billion in forest and watershed restoration in high priority areas across the country.
 - a. If confirmed, will you work with Congress to make a significant new long-term investment in our forests at the scale needed to safeguard communities and protect watersheds across the West?

The most important thing Congress can do to address the wildfire crisis is to boost resources for forest restoration and management across all lands. If confirmed, I commit to working with Congress to ensure that the Forest Service has the resources needed to support wildfire risk reduction and resilience at the scale needed to protect communities and watersheds across the country.

3. Last year, Colorado experienced the three largest wildfires in the state's history. We are still experiencing the aftermath of these fires as monsoon season has sparked flash floods in burn scar areas. In Colorado, our National Forests will likely need on the order of hundreds of millions of dollars over the next few years to restore landscapes and repair burned areas, including recreational facilities. At my request, the Forest Service provided my office estimates that they may need between \$300 to \$800 million to recover from 2020 wildfires, and that was before this summer's significant fires across the West.
 - a. If confirmed, will you request funding when needed to ensure the Forest Service has the resources to restore and rehabilitate burned areas on National Forest System land?

If confirmed, I look forward to working with Congress to ensure there is understanding of the resources needed to restore and rehabilitate burned areas.

- b. If confirmed, will you work with Congress to improve interagency coordination between the Forest Service and NRCS to support wildfire recovery efforts across public and private land boundaries?

Burned area response is vitally important in the wake of wildfires. If confirmed, I will work with Congress to ensure Forest Service has the resources needed to address this important issue. As a current NRCS employee, I look forward to strengthening the relationship between Forest Service and NRCS.

4. Finding affordable housing in Western mountain communities can be very challenging. Ranking Member Boozman and I were able to pass the Flexible Partnership Act as a part of the 2018 Farm Bill. This bill authorized the Forest Service to lease unused administrative sites to support local affordable housing and infrastructure needs. Despite strong interest from many counties, cities, and towns in Colorado, it appears that the Forest Service is only pursuing a small number of projects under this new authority. I am concerned with the pace and scale of implementation.
 - a. If confirmed, will you prioritize and look to expand the Forest Service's leasing authority to support more affordable housing projects in Colorado?

Thank you for bring this to my attention. If confirmed, I will obtain a briefing on this issue in particular and explore ways in which the Forest Service can be part of solutions on access to affordable housing, including working with our partners in Rural Development.

5. The Berlaimont Estates proposal in Eagle County, Colorado aims to improve an access road to build luxury homes in the White River National Forest. The local community is deeply concerned that the proposal would compromise sensitive winter wildlife habitat. Despite protests from the community, local and state elected leaders, and objections from the State of Colorado, last month the Forest Service issued a final Environmental Impact Statement and is poised to release a final Record of Decision any day. I have urged this Administration to hold off on a final decision and address local concerns.
 - a. If confirmed, will you address state and local concerns with the Forest Service's final EIS and draft ROD before issuing a final decision?

I recognize that the Berlaimont Estates proposal is controversial. If confirmed, I will obtain a briefing on this matter and seek to understand state and local community concerns in the context of the agency's authorities and applicable laws.

6. The Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy (CORE) Act is a balanced public lands bill that designates new wilderness and special management areas on public land, including National Forest System land, across Colorado. The CORE Act also includes a new historic designation – what we've called a National Historic Landscape - at Camp Hale, where the 10th Mountain Division trained before leading our nation to victory in World War II and then returning to create the outdoor industry that we know today.
 - a. Do you agree that Camp Hale is worthy of a protective historic designation?
 - b. If confirmed, will you work with my office to pass the CORE Act?

Thank you for bringing this to my attention. If confirmed, I look forward to meeting with your office to learn more about the CORE Act and Camp Hale.

Senator Reverend Raphael Warnock

Dr. Wilkes, congratulations on your nomination to be Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment. I am proud to say that Georgia is the leading forestry state in the nation. My state is home to over 22 million acres of privately-owned forest land, generating an annual economic impact of \$36.5

billion. Georgia is also home to the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, which would fall under your jurisdiction if you are confirmed.

1. In your testimony, you mentioned your desire to focus on partnerships and collaboration with private stakeholders and local communities. This is particularly important for states like Georgia with a large number of private landowners. How can the U.S. Forest Service improve collaboration and outreach to private landowners, particularly those who are small-scale or historically underserved, to improve forest health and boost rural economic resiliency?

The Forest Service State and Private Forestry programs provide a suite of opportunities to engage with private landowners, and the Forest Service works with state foresters and state forestry agencies in partnership to provide assistance to landowners. In addition, the Forest Service can also work with NRCS to provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners. I look forward to strengthening the bond with state foresters and NRCS in support of our private forests. If confirmed, I will commit to ensuring we have the capacity to do the necessary outreach to all private landowners who could benefit from these important programs, including specific efforts to connect with those who may be historically underserved or unfamiliar with these opportunities. Our rural communities are critical to the fabric of our economy and these Forest Service programs are an important piece of creating and maintaining resilient communities.

2. If confirmed, will you commit to prioritizing outreach and engagement with farmers and private foresters who have historically been left behind by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, including those who are small-scale, socially disadvantaged, or have limited resources?

My background at NRCS has given me years of experience with outreach and engagement with farmers and private landowners, including those who have historically been underserved or socially disadvantaged. It will continue to be a priority for me, and if confirmed, I will commit to working with partners and others to support outreach and engagement so that all are included and that Forest Service programs are equitably accessible.

3. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of access to greenspaces and fresh air. How can the U.S. Forest Service work to increase accessibility and expand opportunities for outdoor recreation in forests such as the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests?

Forests like the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest in Georgia have provided valuable respite for people and communities during the pandemic, which has highlighted the importance of access to the outdoors and to opportunities for outdoor recreation. It will be critical for the Forest Service to work with partners and communities to increase equitable access to public lands and expand positive, safe and inclusive opportunities for sustainable outdoor recreation. It will also be important to invest in rebuilding the Forest Service's capacity for recreation programs and infrastructure, and address the need for deferred maintenance including by implementing the Great American Outdoors Act. The Civilian Climate Corps can provide additional opportunities to support equitable access to the outdoors while training the next generation to be conservation stewards and leaders.

Senator Chuck Grassley

1. If confirmed, what policies can you commit to put in place to increase the amount of timber harvested on national forests so that we can lower the price of lumber?

The Forest Service produces less than 10 percent of US domestic timber production for lumber; the agency's ability to influence lumber prices is limited. Further, recent high prices in lumber are not due to lack of standing timber volume across all US forests but instead result from lack of processing capacity at mills.

Robust timber markets support private investment in forests and forest jobs while benefiting the climate. And well-designed timber sales have an important role to play in addressing catastrophic fire and forest health while supporting jobs and industry in rural communities. If confirmed, I will commit to working with the Committee to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration on the National Forests.

2. From the 1950s through the 1980s annual harvest volume from Forest Service lands often exceeded 10 billion board feet. What amount of board feet do you believe would be a sustainable amount for our nations' forests?

Timber targets in the 1950s to 1980s were not sustainable and created a strong public backlash. Today, there is broad recognition that the Forest Service needs to increase the pace and scale of forest management to address catastrophic wildfire and forest health challenges. If Congress provides additional resources, it should be both desirable and possible to increase the number of acres being treated on the National Forests and the timber production that results from many of these treatments.