

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

April 11, 2024

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write to request your assistance to ensure private forest landowners in Mississippi have swift access to aid through the Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP), allowing them to carry out emergency measures to restore forest-related resources damaged by recent drought and subsequent insect infestations.

USDA has declared all 82 Mississippi counties as primary natural disaster areas due to last year's extreme drought, which triggered a major pine beetle outbreak. According to preliminary reports prepared by the U.S. Forest Service Southern Research Station and the Mississippi Forestry Commission, Mississippi has suffered nearly 80,000 acres of pine mortality, over 12.5 million dead trees, and conservative economic impact estimates indicating at least \$96 million in lost timber. Researchers anticipate the problem will worsen as the summer months approach, eventually affecting hardwood forests throughout the state.

Our request is consistent with the will of Congress illustrated in the joint explanatory statement accompanying division B of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024 (Public Law 118-42), which states:

“The agreement notes that recent droughts have contributed to a dramatic increase in southern pine beetle infestations. The agreement is concerned about the severity of observed tree mortality, as well as the economic and ecological challenges posed to private forest landowners. The agreement emphasizes that the Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP) was established to assist landowners impacted by natural disasters (including drought and insect infestations), and that previously appropriated funds are currently available to operate the program in fiscal year 2024. Of the unobligated balances available for EFRP, FSA is encouraged to address assistance to landowners impacted by southern pine beetle outbreaks in counties designated by USDA as primary natural disaster areas due to drought in the fourth quarter of fiscal year 2023 or first quarter of fiscal year 2024. The agreement urges the FSA National Office to work in coordination with the U.S. Forest Service and state forestry agencies to expedite the delivery of program assistance to landowners in areas impacted by drought and insect infestation.”

Further, we understand that EFRP funding is currently available, as noted in USDA's Explanatory Notes accompanying the President's Budget request for fiscal year 2025, which states:

“While the Budget does not request additional funding for EFRP it reflects more than \$100 million in unobligated balances available to aid producers following natural disasters.”

The Mississippi Farm Service Agency (FSA) State Office, the U.S. Forest Service Southern Research Station, and the Mississippi Forestry Commission are working diligently to help affected landowners. Should the USDA National Office receive requests for approval from the FSA State Office pertaining to streamlining or expediting the EFRP process, we ask that you prioritize those requests.

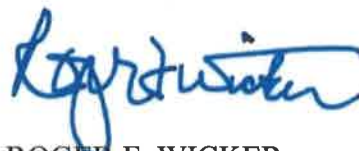
Lastly, we respectfully request that you examine any and all options within your authority to provide advance EFRP payments to eligible landowners, in a manner similar to those provided to Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) participants. Without access to proper financing up front, many affected landowners will be unable to take the initial steps to restore forest health and forest-related resources, which in turn will further impair, endanger, or materially affect future use of the land. While we recognize the statutory language (16 U.S.C. § 2206) or implementing regulations (7 CFR Part 701) for EFRP do not explicitly provide for advance payment options, we note that such options are not specifically prohibited.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. Please do not hesitate to contact us or members of our staff should you have any questions.

Sincerely,



CINDY HYDE-SMITH
United States Senator



ROGER F. WICKER
United States Senator



BENNIE THOMPSON
Member of Congress



TRENT KELLY
Member of Congress



MICHAEL GUEST
Member of Congress



MIKE EZELL
Member of Congress