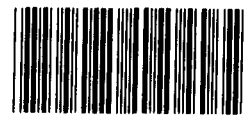


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Better Reporting Needed on Reforestation  
and Timber Stand Improvement

Statement of  
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Before the  
Forests, Family Farms, and Energy Subcommittee  
Committee on Agriculture  
House of Representatives



Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We are pleased to be here today to discuss the Forest Service's reporting of its reforestation and timber stand improvement (TSI) activities. Our testimony today is based on our March 15, 1991, report responding to the Subcommittee's request on this subject.<sup>1</sup>

In summary, our report shows that the Forest Service's reporting on reforestation and TSI activities is inaccurate and inconsistent. As a result, the Congress does not have reliable information to assess the progress the Forest Service has made in these areas and to make informed decisions on funding for forest management.

Specifically, we found that

-- Forest Service headquarters does not provide specific enough guidance to regional offices on how to identify and when to report reforestation and TSI needs. In its reporting, the Forest Service understated reforestation needs because it failed to report consistently or promptly acreage that required reforestation following forest fires or other natural disasters. In addition, the Forest Service reported TSI needs inconsistently because regional reporting practices differed.

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<sup>1</sup>Better Reporting Needed on Reforestation and Timber Stand Improvement (GAO/RCED-91-71, Mar. 15, 1991).

-- Forest Service headquarters also does not provide sufficient guidance to regional offices on how to certify and report the successful completion of reforestation and TSI activities. Forest Service reports to the Congress understated figures for land where reforestation and TSI activities were successful because none of the nine Forest Service regions certified and reported all reforestation and TSI achievements.

Before providing more detail on our findings, let me briefly describe the extent of Forest Service lands and the reporting requirements set out by the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA).

#### BACKGROUND

The Forest Service manages about 191 million acres of public land, mainly in 156 national forests in 9 regions. The Forest Service has designated 55.8 million acres as suitable for timber production. To provide the nation with a stable, continuous supply of timber, NFMA contains specific directives on regenerating national forest land. NFMA requires the Forest Service to identify land needing reforestation or TSI and to certify successful reforestation and TSI activities. When the Congress passed NFMA in 1976, a backlog of land in need of reforestation, totaling more than 3.1 million acres, had developed. NFMA required the Forest Service to report its progress in reforestation and identify the

funds necessary to eliminate this backlog within 8 years. The Forest Service reported that it had reduced the backlog by the end of fiscal year 1985 to approximately 827,000 acres. NFMA also required the Forest Service to identify the funds needed to prevent the development of a TSI backlog. At the beginning of fiscal year 1990, the Forest Service reported that national forest land needing reforestation and TSI stood at about 1.2 million acres each.

#### REPORTS ON REFORESTATION AND TSI NEEDS NOT RELIABLE

NFMA requires the Forest Service to report annually the amount of land that needs reforestation. While the Forest Service manual calls for the regions to report reforestation needs, it does not clearly specify how these needs are to be identified and reported. The nine Forest Service regions used several methods to identify and report reforestation needs resulting from forest fires or other natural disasters. One region had no firm reporting policy. Three regions based their needs on the number of acres they estimated had been burned or otherwise affected by natural disasters. Five regions reported reforestation needs for areas affected by fires, insects, or diseases only after silvicultural plans had been prepared. A silvicultural plan is a document prepared by a certified silviculturist--a person trained in the growth, care, and reestablishment of trees--describing the types of trees to be planted and the techniques to be used to improve a timber stand on national forest land.

By omitting acreage from reports until after the development of these plans, the five regions understated their reforestation needs. For example, in Region 5, a 1987 fire in the Stanislaus National Forest burned an estimated 60,000 acres of timber that the Forest Service believes should be reforested. By fiscal year 1989, the region had developed silvicultural plans for the reforestation of only 34,000 of these acres. The region will not report a reforestation need for the remaining 26,000 acres until silvicultural plans for those acres are developed. Of the approximately 476,000 acres of national forest land burned in fiscal year 1989, about 397,000 acres, or about 83 percent, were in these five regions that did not report reforestation needs until silvicultural plans had been prepared for the affected land. Forest Service personnel agreed that because the regions inconsistently identified and reported reforestation needs, Forest Service headquarters should provide them with better reporting guidance. The Forest Service is preparing such instructions, which it expects to finalize by the end of September 1991.

As in the case of reforestation needs, the Forest Service manual also requires regions to report TSI needs but does not clearly specify how these needs are to be defined. We found that each Forest Service region followed its own criteria. Four regions reported TSI needs only for land for which silvicultural plans had been completed. One region based TSI needs on estimates of work planned within the next 3 years. Another region reported TSI needs

in a similar way, but used estimates of work planned within the next 5 years. In the remaining three regions, practices varied even within the regions themselves. For example, in one region some ranger districts reported TSI needs based on estimates of work planned in the upcoming year without having completed a silvicultural plan, while other ranger districts reported TSI needs only for land for which a silvicultural plan had been prepared. In addition, the regions generally did not indicate which portion of their TSI activities were to be undertaken in any given year. This practice, along with inconsistencies in reporting, leaves the Congress and the Forest Service without reliable information for making funding decisions each fiscal year. As with reforestation, the Forest Service is preparing additional instructions to help the regions define and report TSI needs, and expects to finalize these instructions by the end of September 1991.

#### ACHIEVEMENT OF RESULTS UNDERREPORTED

NFMA requires the Forest Service to inspect lands on which reforestation or TSI activities have been conducted, certify that the activity has achieved the desired results, and report the certified totals to the Congress annually. We found that none of the nine Forest Service regions was certifying and reporting all reforestation and TSI achievements.

Regional officials gave various reasons why not all reforestation achievements had been certified, including lack of specific guidance on the process from Forest Service headquarters and lack of sufficient time on the part of regional line officers or certified silviculturists to complete the necessary documents. We believe that the responsibility for certifying reforestation achievements could be shared between silviculturists and forest technicians, allowing certification to be accomplished more efficiently and reported more accurately. When implementing the reforestation standards specified by certified silviculturists, forest technicians could also attest that reforested stands of timber complied with the standards. Regional officials said that forest technicians were already doing the field work necessary to judge compliance.

We also found that none of the nine regions certified all TSI achievements. Regional officials again cited lack of clear direction from headquarters and lack of time on the part of regional line officers and certified silviculturists as the reasons why. Delays in certifying these achievements are unnecessary. TSI achievements could be certified immediately after contractors perform the TSI activities because, at that time, regions have to review the work for compliance with contract requirements before making payment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of our work, we recommended that the Secretary of Agriculture direct the Chief of the Forest Service to

- ensure that the additional guidance the Forest Service is preparing on reforestation and TSI needs instruct the regions to (1) identify and report all reforestation needs resulting from forest fires or other natural disasters on a more consistent and timely basis, (2) identify and report all TSI needs on a more consistent and timely basis, and (3) report all TSI work planned for the coming year;
  
- improve guidance on the certification of reforestation achievements and permit forest technicians to certify these achievements; and
  
- improve guidance on the certification of TSI achievements and, in doing so, accept approvals of TSI contract payments as certification of successful TSI achievements.

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be glad to respond to any questions.