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## **Sec. Vilsack sees economic & enviro gains in new forest policy**

**By Jon H. Harsch**

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Marking a sharp break with the Bush administration and a return to President Bill Clinton's policies for America's forests, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced sweeping forest policy changes August 14th in a major speech in Seattle, Washington.

In announcing his new policy, Vilsack tied restoring the health of America's forests to both climate change and economic recovery. He also noted that he picked an urban Seattle setting for his speech on forests to emphasize that America cities depend on forests for their supply of clean drinking water.

"A healthy and prosperous America relies on the health of our natural resources, and particularly our forests. America's forests supply communities with clean and abundant water, shelter wildlife, and help us mitigate and adapt to climate change," he said. "Forests help generate rural wealth through recreation and tourism, through the creation of green jobs, and through the production of wood products and energy. And they are a national treasure, requiring all of us to protect and preserve them for future generations."

Vilsack added that President Obama "has made clear his interest in conserving our natural environment." This reference to Obama was welcomed by long-time environmental activist Andy Kerr, a key figure in the fight to save the spotted owl who now runs his own Larch Company consulting firm. Following Vilsack's speech, Kerr told *Agri-Pulse* that "The predilection of this new administration is obviously much more conservation oriented. The question will be how high of a priority is it? Under Clinton, with the spotted owl controversy in the Northwest, forest policy was an issue that was getting the direct attention of the President and White House officials."

Kerr is hopeful that Vilsack will be able to implement his bold new vision for the nation's forests. But he also cautions that more scientific work needs to be done because "we're all forecasting. We don't know exactly what is the best way to manage these forests in the face of rising temperatures." He also says that even with the best administration intentions, Congress will have a role in new policies. He warns that Congress could continue to be influenced by major lobbies such as the timber industry which "wants to be credited for when their trees are growing, but doesn't want to be debited for when its

trees are cut down and release carbon” and the private firefighting/industrial complex which lobbies to maintain costly and discredited fire-suppression tactics.

Key points that Vilsack made in his Seattle speech included these:

- “Our nation’s forestlands, both public and private, are environmental and economic assets that are in critical need of restoration and conservation. By using a collaborative management approach with a heavy focus on restoring these natural resources, we can make our forests more resilient to climate change, protect water resources, and improve forest health while creating jobs and opportunities.”
- “Declining forest health and the effects of our changing climate have resulted in an increasing number of catastrophic wildfires and insect outbreaks. It is time for a change in the way we view and manage America’s forestlands with an eye towards the future. This will require a new approach that engages the American people and stakeholders in conserving and restoring both our National Forests and our privately-owned forests. It is essential that we reconnect Americans across the nation with the natural resources and landscapes that sustain us.”
- “Our shared vision begins with restoration. Restoration means managing forest lands first and foremost to protect our water resources, while making our forests more resilient to climate change. Forest restoration led by the dedicated people at the Forest Service opens non-traditional markets for climate mitigation and biomass energy while appropriately recognizing the need for more traditional uses of forest resources.”
- “Emerging markets for carbon and sustainable bioenergy will provide landowners with expanded economic incentives to maintain and restore forests. The Forest Service must play a significant role in the development of new markets and ensuring their integrity. Carbon and bioenergy aren’t the only new opportunity for landowners. Markets for water can also provide landowners with incentives to restore watersheds and manage forests for clean and abundant water supplies. These markets can also create jobs in rural communities.”
- “There is no doubt that we are facing a health crisis in our forests. Climate change places them under increasing stress that exacerbates the threats of fire, disease, and insects. Throughout the West – but in other parts of the country as well – a legacy of fire suppression has resulted in forests that are over-stocked and much more susceptible to catastrophic fire and disease. Restoring forest ecosystems, particularly in fire-adapted forests, will make forests more resilient to climate-induced stresses and will ensure that our forests continue to supply abundant, clean water.”