

H.R. 117-83 includes the following directive to Forest Service International Programs and Trade Compliance: *“To support efforts that could help expand international forests as a solution for climate mitigation and human and habitat wellbeing, the Committee directs the Service to provide a report, within 60 days of enactment of this Act, examining how the Service could work in coordination with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Department of State, other land management agencies, and a potential non-profit partner, to select and deploy volunteers internationally in concert with existing U.S. programs for forest management, reforestation, and other related conservation efforts. As part of this report, the Service should assess how it could leverage the skills of professionals with extensive relevant experience in the management of natural resources and protected areas, including individuals working for or retired from the Service and other federal land management agencies, and how locations for volunteer assignments will be identified that fit within larger USAID goals and strategies.”*

The Forest Service currently works internationally in over 80 countries. In 2019, the Forest Service supported over 1,000 international assignments to promote natural resource management, biodiversity conservation, climate change mitigation and adaptation, disaster management and response, and related activities. Many of these activities were in support of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and U.S. Department of State projects, as well as Forest Service-led activities that support conservation, reforestation, and forest restoration work within the broader U.S. Government goals for international development.

Internationalizing the Forest Service is a key objective of the Agency’s International Programs office, and the Agency is invested in providing a global perspective to its employees, which can benefit them in their domestic work. There is currently significant interest within the Agency from many skilled professionals to serve on short-term international assignments, which exceeds the available assignments. There are limited circumstances when the Forest Service is not able, within its existing cadre of employees, to identify the appropriate individual(s) for international assignments. The Agency does have authority to use volunteers, including retired Federal employees, for international assignments. In limited circumstances where engaging a volunteer would be appropriate, the assignment would likely be competitive and require significant time for recruiting and vetting the best qualified volunteers who have the technical, language (when necessary), and cross-cultural skills to support these types of assignments. It would also require coordinating with USAID and Department of State to identify locations for assignments appropriate for short-term volunteer technical assistance that fit within the larger USAID country goals and strategies, then matching volunteer skills with assignments. Many assignments do not have fixed dates, and it may be difficult to find volunteers who have the necessary flexibility. Additionally, USAID often relies on the ability of Forest Service staff to provide virtual assistance for several months, or years, before and after the actual in-country assignment, in addition to repeat visits by the same individual or team to provide support for programs which are often five years or longer in duration. Thus, it may be challenging to identify in a cadre of otherwise technically qualified volunteers who are willing to serve on these assignments.

There may also be significant health and safety risks for volunteers traveling as part of an official U.S. Government program. The volunteers would need to enter into an official U.S. Government Volunteer Agreement in order to be eligible for emergency evacuation services provided by the

Department of State to all U.S. Government employees on official travel orders abroad. However, the U.S. Embassy has the discretion to deny country clearance to any volunteer if it does not believe it is equipped to provide necessary support in the event of a natural disaster, security incident, or medical emergency. Volunteers would also need support while in-country, which would require significant staff time from the Forest Service, USAID, and the Embassy. The estimated cost of a program that would annually send 100 volunteers out for 3-week assignments is about \$2 million, or nearly \$20,000 per volunteer, which is approximately the full cost, including salary, to send out a Forest Service employee. A non-profit partner could be engaged to provide travel and logistical support while volunteers are in-country, but that would likely increase the overall cost of the program.

Table 1. Total Estimated Program Cost for International Volunteers.

| Travel | Rate | Units | Total |
|--|-------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Asia Pacific Airfare | \$4,500 | 25 | \$112,500 |
| Asia Pacific Per Diem | \$250 | 525 | \$131,250 |
| Africa Airfare | \$4,500 | 25 | \$112,500 |
| Africa Per Diem | \$250 | 525 | \$131,250 |
| Mexico, Central America & Caribbean Airfare | \$1,500 | 25 | \$37,500 |
| Mexico, Central America & Caribbean Per Diem | \$250 | 525 | \$131,250 |
| South America Airfare | \$2,500 | 25 | \$62,500 |
| South America Per Diem | \$250 | 525 | \$131,250 |
| Misc. Reimbursable Expenses | \$200 | 100 | \$20,000 |
| Total Travel | | | \$870,000 |
| | | | |
| Salary | Rate | Units | Total |
| Program Coordinator GS-14/DC Locality | \$166,640 | 1 | \$166,640 |
| Int'l Volunteer Specialists GS-11/ DC Locality | \$98,940 | 3 | \$296,820 |
| Country Program Specialists GS-13/DC Locality | \$140,684 | 4 | \$562,736 |
| Total Salary | | | \$1,026,196 |
| | | | |
| Total Estimated Program Cost | | | \$1,896,196 |

Conclusion

The Forest Service is grateful for Congress' recognition of the important role international forests play in climate mitigation and the ecosystem services forests provide that benefit human life. Congressional support is critical for federal agencies and international partners to continue to make strides in global forest management and conservation. We would like to continue to work with Congress on key challenges and ways forward for the international forestry sector.

The Forest Service currently has more interest than availability for short-term international assignments, and there are a number of logistical and funding challenges associated with engaging additional volunteers in these missions, as described above. The agency does tap into its pool of skilled professionals and retirees for assignments, leveraging their vast knowledge and expertise across multiple disciplines.