



Office of the Secretary
Washington, DC 20250

September 9, 2024

MR. COLLIN O'MARA
Chair, Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council
5275 Leesburg Pie, MS EA
Falls Church, Virginia 22041

Dear Chairman O'Mara:

Thank you for your letter of September 19, 2023, cosigned by Vice Chair John Devney, regarding the appraisal policies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service. We appreciate the collaborative effort of groups on your council, and others in the conservation community, to ensure passage of the Great American Outdoors Act.

This bipartisan act is a true milestone in conservation history that fully funded the Land and Water Conservation Fund. It signaled a long-term commitment to a robust land conservation effort and is a key part of the Administration's initiative to conserve 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030.

I want to assure you that the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service is committed to policies which support a consistent approach to appraisals and lands projects. The Agency acknowledges your concerns and will utilize your input to improve program consistency by working more closely with our conservation partners.

In a June 2023 policy letter, National Forest System Deputy Chief, Christopher B. French, instituted direct policies to ensure consistency across regions. These policies included:

- 1) Clarifying that the Regional Lands Director, in consultation with the Regional Appraiser, has authority to share agency-approved appraisals with parties to the transaction who have a reciprocal business relationship with the Forest Service.
- 2) Realigning decision-making authority to provide that the Regional Director, in consultation with the Regional Appraiser, shall make the determination whether to authorize contracting appraisal services through a third-party partner.
- 3) Establishing a Deputy Chief Appraiser position to enhance our capacity to oversee our appraisal program, ensure consistency and efficiency across the regions, and support overall program management.
- 4) Directing Regional Offices to work with the Washington Office to align practices for lands projects, including release of appraisals, information sharing, and early communication to landowners and third-party facilitators regarding our processes, such as when partner-contracted appraisals are appropriate.

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Currently, the Forest Service is modifying policies to institute these changes and enhance partner relationships through consistent policy and practice. As Forest Service Chief Randy Moore says, "the Forest Service knows we can't succeed alone."

Working with and through partners is a powerful method for achieving shared goals on National Forest System lands. The U.S. Department of Agriculture appreciates the vital conservation work that you, and the groups on the Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council, do daily. We look forward to working with you to fulfill the potential of the Great American Outdoors Act.

Again, thank you for your letter and your commitment to the collective land conservation effort. A similar letter is being sent to Vice Chair Devney.

Sincerely,

THOMAS J. VILSACK
Secretary