

# RURAL VOICES FOR CONSERVATION COALITION

WORKING TOGETHER TO FIND POLICY SOLUTIONS TO THE ECOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES OF THE RURAL WEST.

## 2010 Vision and Policy Agenda

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Our country needs solutions that recognize the interdependence of ecological, economic, and social sustainability. We must invest in building the capacity of rural citizens, businesses, local government, and community-based organizations to contribute to the implementation of environmentally sound, economically equitable, culturally appropriate, and socially responsible solutions that will benefit the entire Nation. This document puts forth such solutions, drawing from the many issue papers written and supported by the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC). The RVCC is comprised of western rural and local, regional, and national organizations that have joined together to promote balanced conservation-based approaches to the ecological and economic problems facing the West.

RVCC focuses on policy issues that affect rural communities, public and private lands management, and the continuation of a natural resource-based economy in the West. RVCC is committed to finding and promoting policy solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and the well being of rural communities. Coalition participants come from Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington and we partner with organizations, agencies and decision makers across the country. For more information about RVCC, visit: [www.sustainablenorthwest.org/rvcc](http://www.sustainablenorthwest.org/rvcc).

### Our Vision and Values

The protection, management, and use of nature's resources have provided the basis for every human civilization known to history. Even a consumer and technology-based society must recognize this interdependence and the necessity for balancing our human accounts with nature's own budget. RVCC is dedicated to taking up this challenge; to representing the interests of the people and landscapes of the American West in both the policy and practical arenas; to passing on a deeper connection between our region's bounties and beauty, and our responsibilities for their sustainability; to building a legacy of opportunity and understanding for our children and their children; and to uniting and including all those who join with us in subscribing to these core beliefs:

#### Interdependence:

The health of our rural communities and landscapes are very much inter-related. Restoration of the environment must occur in social symbiosis with the revitalization of rural communities.

#### Resilience and Diversity:

Resilience and diversity are the key components that provide for ecosystem productivity and economic well-being.

#### Power-sharing:

Collaborative decision-making, investigation, assessment, action, and monitoring are vital to all vibrant and democratic systems of resources management and stewardship.

#### Cooperative Processes:

Real cooperation is inclusive and based on mutual benefits, and on respect for the strengths, differences and interests that the involved parties bring together.

#### Sustainability:

Long-term resource security is more dependent on reinvestment in the associated ecosystems and rural economies than on the profits generated by their production.

#### Our Region:

The natural resources, recreation opportunities and cultural attributes of the West make a significant contribution to the Nation as a whole.

*Above all, we believe that the future of our region, our country, and our world will depend on how well we are able to manage for the protection and productivity of our landscapes, and on what we leave behind for the generations who will come after us in these places.*

## **2010 Policy Agenda: Rural Roles in Stewardship of Natural Resources in the American West**

### **Investment in natural and social assets is essential to rural revitalization**

Federal land management agencies must play a role in restoring and caring for our natural systems while building resilient rural economies through job creation and retention in neighboring communities. Integrated federal investment in an “all-lands” approach will contribute positively to ecosystem service values such as water quality and quantity, climate change mitigation and reduced wildfire suppression costs. These investments can foster green jobs that will strengthen rural economies across our nation. Collaborative processes and entities such as community-based organizations that support restoration, stewardship, and monitoring of land management practices on federally managed lands and intersecting private lands need to be strengthened and supported.

### **Rural green jobs and ecosystem service markets will create livable communities and a healthy environment**

Jobs that restore and steward our forests, rangelands, and watersheds are an essential part of our national green economy. Changes to federal procurement practices and infrastructure investments can be used to stimulate a rural, green, low carbon economy. Additionally, federal policies should ensure that ecosystem service markets develop in a manner that results in equitable access and benefits for public land communities and small private landowners.

### **Climate change policies should be socially equitable and environmentally responsible**

Rural communities and landscapes can contribute significantly to climate change adaptation and greenhouse gas reduction. Investments in forest, range, and farm management offer immediate opportunities to increase carbon sequestration and decrease carbon emissions. Federal climate change and renewable energy policies must consider the needs and infrastructure of rural communities and structure regulations and incentives programs in a manner which maximizes the contributions from rural America, while ensuring the safety, health and prosperity of these communities in the face of the environmental challenges that will come with a changing climate.

### **Integrated woody biomass strategies will achieve forest restoration and rural renewal**

Integrated utilization of woody biomass generates the highest and best uses of wood and energy products. In creating these products, rural communities have a tremendous opportunity to support ecologically based forest restoration and improve community economic health. The use of woody biomass as a renewable energy source also helps reduce our nation’s dependency on petroleum and reduces carbon emissions by displacing the combustion of fossil fuels. Federal policy should provide incentives for robust and rapid innovation in appropriately scaled thermal energy development in rural communities.

### **Fair and accessible federal contracting and equitable labor practices are essential to restoration and rural vitality**

The restoration of public lands and the revitalization of adjacent rural communities depend on accessible federal contracting mechanisms and a well trained, fairly compensated local workforce. Enforcing labor laws, making full use of best value contracting opportunities, employing stewardship contracting authorities, and requiring that federal land management agencies design and package projects that maximize opportunities for year round employment in rural communities allows for the implementation of the high-value work necessary to restore and maintain our public lands.

### **Public lands restoration and community stewardship are inextricably linked**

The health and productivity of public lands is inextricably linked to the health and well-being of the rural communities adjacent to these places. Restoring forests, rangelands, and waterways is critical to maintaining the vitality of rural communities, and to ensuring that the full range of ecosystem services and products are available to the American people and global marketplace. Public lands should be managed on a landscape scale, recognizing the social, economic and ecological connections between public and private lands, utilizing the best available science in an adaptive management approach that requires continuous monitoring to inform management decisions. Collaboration with local communities and other stakeholders is essential to effective public land management, and the assets and mechanisms that foster collaboration should be recognized, incentivized, and invested in by the federal government.

### **Working landscapes are essential to the health of rural America**

Privately owned forests, ranches and agricultural lands are vital components of a working landscape, providing wildlife habitat, clean water, recreational opportunities, and other goods and ecosystem services for society. Ecological health of private working lands is threatened by fragmentation through subdivision and related development. Federal programs should create alignment between landowner financial stability, protection of large, contiguous landscapes, and ecological objectives. Ensuring access to ecosystem service markets and fully funding conservation programs provides land owners with incentives for long-term stewardship, access to jobs and recognition of the public values provided by private land stewardship. Promoting strong community-based organizations, conservation easements, acquiring land for community benefit and tax incentives are among the tools that can forestall these trends.

## Opportunities for Immediate Action – 2010 RVCC Policy Platform

### Appropriations Priorities

#### *Restoration and stewardship*

- Create and fully fund the FS Integrated Resource Restoration Line Item (\$693.8 million).
- Create and fund a FS Community Capacity and Collaborative Support Grant fund using the authorities that supported the Economic Action Program (\$40 million).
- Fund the FS Community Forestry and Open Space Conservation Program at \$10 million.
- Fully fund, at the authorized level of \$900 million, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF).

#### *Renewable thermal energy*

- Fund the FS Community Wood Energy Program at \$5 million.
- Fund the FS Woody Biomass Utilization Grant Program at \$10 million (funded in Wildland Fire, Hazardous Fuels).
- Invest \$15 million in the FS Fuels for Schools and Beyond program.

#### *Private working lands*

- Fully fund the Department of Agriculture, NRCS Farm Bill Conservation Programs (\$4.3 billion).
- Allocate 10% of funding in FY2011 Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative for grants to partners (\$10 million).

#### *Federal contracting and jobs*

- Support USDA's Regional Innovation Initiative.

### Legislative Priorities

#### *Restoration and stewardship*

- Pass authorizing language that allows the National Forest System to administer grants.

#### *Renewable thermal energy*

- Extend the Production Tax Credit equal to the closed-loop rate for any biomass to electricity facility able to document system efficiency greater than 60%.
- Authorize Programs in Section 471 of the 'Energy Sustainability and Efficiency Grants' to Address Capitalization of Community Facilities by increasing the maximum amounts per project to \$5,000,000 or 60% of capital costs and allowing the States to administer the program through the state department of energy.
- Establish a grants program within the Department of Education to support retrofits of rural elementary and secondary schools using petroleum-based for space heating.
- Provide a 2:1 REC multiplier for electricity generation from newly constructed biomass systems that can achieve a minimum 60% system efficiency; Include a cap for the RECs fulfilled by multipliers.

#### *Climate change*

- Give the USDA a key role in climate change policy and program implementation.
- Ensure that climate change adaptation policy provides financial and technical assistance to rural communities.
- Require and fund federal land management agencies to collaboratively develop, implement and monitor climate change plans and integrate them with existing resource management and forest management plans.

#### *Private working lands*

- Ensure policy and programs that create markets for carbon and ecosystem services support access for small landowners.
- Pass the Community Forestry Conservation Act to create tax-exempt revenue bonds to acquire working forest or agricultural land.
- Pass estate tax reform that reduces the federal tax burden on those landowners whose heirs conserve working lands through conservation easements or other mechanisms that maintain the multiple benefits of working lands.

#### *Federal contracting and jobs*

- Reauthorize stewardship contracting to provide permanent authority for its continued use after September 30, 2013.
- Create a centralized revolving fund for utilization by both the Forest Service and BLM, which could be used to cover agency/bureau-wide cancellation ceiling requirements for long-term stewardship contracts.
- National jobs legislation should include workforce training and small business assistance in natural resource stewardship oriented fields, including biomass utilization and ecosystem services.

## **Administrative Priorities**

### *Restoration and stewardship*

- Eliminate traditional timber targets for the land management agencies and replace them with outcome-oriented measures.
- Reform budget allocation processes to support restoration, collaboration and community benefit.

### *Renewable thermal energy*

- During rulemaking for Section 471 of the 'Energy Sustainability and Efficiency Grants', the Department of Energy should establish a Revolving Loan Fund to support retrofits of institutional facilities that use petroleum-based fuels to generate thermal energy and require that existing facilities incorporate energy efficiency upgrades of 20% to qualify for the program.

### *Climate change*

- Engage in collaborative development, implementation and monitoring of comprehensive climate change adaptation plans at a landscape scale level and integrate them with agency management plans.
- Support efforts of rural communities to engage in climate change adaptation planning, implementation and monitoring.
- Invest in research that examines the social and economic impacts of climate change on rural, natural-resource dependent communities.

### *Private working lands*

- Incentivize and support collaboration and partnerships throughout the federal land management agencies.
- Ensure that programs that create markets for carbon and other ecosystem services support access for small landowners.

### *Federal contracting and jobs*

- Engage a diverse array of stakeholders in the development of the new stewardship contract template.
- Devolve authority to approve stewardship contracting and retained receipts projects to Forest Supervisors and BLM District Managers.
- Scale and structure federal contracts so that they are accessible to local businesses and workforce.

## **Additional RVCC Resources**

[www.sustainablenorthwest.org/resources/rvcc-issue-papers](http://www.sustainablenorthwest.org/resources/rvcc-issue-papers)

### **Investment in Natural and Social Assets**

- Appropriations Issue Paper
- Wildland Fire Suppression Budget Reform

### **Green Jobs**

- Green Jobs Issue Paper
- Economic Stimulus Proposal

### **Climate Change**

- Climate Change Adaptation Issue Paper
- Comments regarding the American Clean Energy and Security Act (H.R. 2454) - August 25, 2009
- Climate Change Issue Paper - 2009

### **Thermal Energy/Woody Biomass**

- Renewable Thermal Biomass Energy Policy Issue Paper
- Thermal Energy Uses of Woody Biomass Issue Paper
- Woody Biomass Issue Paper

### **Federal Contracting and Labor Issues**

- Stewardship Contracting Issue Paper
- Best Value Contracting Issue Paper
- Workforce and Labor Issue Paper

### **Public Lands Restoration and Community Stewardship**

- Community-based Organizations Issue Paper
- Scoping Comments on the Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for National Forest Management Act National Forest System Land Management Planning Regulation - February 16, 2010
- Building Community Capacity Issue Paper
- Performance Measures Issue Paper
- Collaboration Issue Paper

### **Private Working Landscapes**

- Private Lands Issue Paper
- Sustainable Ranching Issue Paper
- Private Forests and the 2007 Farm Bill Issue Paper
- Introduction to Community Forests

### **Other RVCC Resources**

- RVCC's Transition Proposal for a New Administration and Congress
- The National Rural Assembly's Policy Opportunity Snapshots