

April 22, 2004

Dear Governor Bredesen,

From the bottomlands of the Mississippi to the peaks of the Smoky Mountains, the landscape of Tennessee is draped with a complex tapestry of biologically diverse forest ecosystems. These forests are cherished by the people of this state for the myriad of values they provide and for the critical role they have played in Tennessee's rich natural and cultural heritage. Forests provide Tennesseans with timber and wood fiber products, habitat for pollinators, places to hunt and fish, watershed protection, firewood, maintenance of soil fertility, splendid fall vistas, places for people to live, habitat for thousands of plant and animal species, hiking opportunities, and rural tourism.

Unfortunately, the State of Tennessee ignores this complex matrix of forest values when it defines a forest as a "crop" like cotton. The simple fact of the matter is that we expect far more from a forest than we do from an agricultural field. In order to maintain the ecological goods and services that forests provide, it is necessary to treat forests as the complex biological systems that they are. If these systems are to function properly, their various parts must be kept in good working order. Tracking the ecological integrity, health, and sustainability of our forests requires that we have a comprehensive, scientific understanding of forest dynamics and that we develop rigorous processes of forest assessment throughout Tennessee to track forest change.

The protection and sustainability of Tennessee's forests require not only that land-use decisions impacting forests be directed by the best possible science, but also that we develop a renewed sense of public and private stewardship and responsibility within the state. Leadership on both of these fronts must begin with state government. We currently lack a comprehensive forest policy in Tennessee, allowing only the market to control the rate and intensity of timber extraction and forest clearing. Such a situation might be fine if all of our forests were indeed just a crop, but this view of forestry fails to protect the diversity of values that people have come to expect from Tennessee's forests.

Throughout the state, forests are currently being impacted by a multitude of changes: urban development, conversion to pine monocultures, air pollution, and the invasion of exotic species. These changes are causing the degradation and loss of forest habitats and are associated with the local extinction of species within the state. Each forest ecosystem in Tennessee is unique and so are the subregional factors that currently impact these forests. For example, patterns of land-use change on the Cumberland Plateau are very different from patterns of land-use change in the Mississippi River region of West Tennessee. State-wide generalizations made over 10-year time periods by state government provide little value to Tennesseans who are concerned about what is happening right now in forests near their backyards. Computer mapping and remote sensing technology associated with Geographic Information Systems (GIS) has dramatically improved our ability to track the pulse of forest change in Tennessee. It is time for state government to step up to the plate and begin to take advantage of this technology for this purpose.

In Tennessee, the promotion of clear-cutting as the best silvicultural option ignores the tremendous ecological consequences that this activity can have on a landscape scale. Clear-cutting is not simply an aesthetic problem (as TN Department of Agriculture officials argue) but a serious ecological concern that can have major consequences for species habitats when applied to vast acreages. On the southern Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee, industrial scale clear-cutting and subsequent conversion of native hardwood forest to pine plantations has potentially resulted in significant declines in non-game wildlife habitat, stream water quality, and soil fertility. Unfortunately, there are no biologists employed by the TN Division of Forestry, the agency assigned the responsibility of overseeing the sustainability of Tennessee's forests, and landscape-level ecological impacts on forests (such as are occurring on the Cumberland Plateau) are not being assessed by state government.

Leadership is needed within state government to develop a progressive forestry policy that is premised on the understanding that our forests are complex biological systems. Such a forest policy must be developed using the best possible science and should take advantage of recent advances in technology to track changes and monitor forest conditions. We need to have the involvement of scientists representing the broad range of forest-related disciplines from institutions throughout the state. Because each part of the state has its own unique set of problems regarding forest change and loss, we need a progressive forest policy that reflects the fact that land-use decision-making and forest sustainability is a local issue. This policy should recognize that small, resident landowners in Tennessee are typically not responsible for the major changes to forests occurring across the landscape at present. We need a progressive forest policy that employs both a carrot and a stick approach: establishing an effective set of enforceable regulations that ensure proper forest stewardship while protecting private property rights, and offering a creative array of incentives that foster protection of public values. We need a progressive forest policy that encourages and promotes forest sustainability as a vital part of economic rejuvenation programs in rural counties. Finally, we need state natural resource agencies empowered with the appropriate personnel and policies so that state government can effectively promote the ecological values of Tennessee's forests.

We are at a crossroads here in Tennessee. Profitable forestry practices and the protection of ecological values can go hand in hand if we work together within the state to make this happen. We have an opportunity to put in place policies that will protect our forests for future generations while respecting private property rights. We can make Tennessee a leader among Southern states in the new field of ecosystem-based forest management. Our state has the intellectual resources and natural capital to make this happen. We urge your leadership on this issue.

The signers below bring a wide range of experience and expertise to forest-related issues in Tennessee. We would be pleased to assist you and your natural resource agencies with any policy development and implementation process you undertake in the coming months.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jonathan P. Evans
Associate Professor, Biology
Director, Landscape Analysis Laboratory
University of the South
Sewanee, TN

Dr. Edward O. Wilson
University Research Professor, Emeritus
Harvard University
Cambridge, MA

Dr. Ken Smith
Assistant Professor, Forestry and Geology
University Forester
University of the South
Sewanee, TN

Dr. David Haskell
Associate Professor, Biology
University of the South
Sewanee, TN

Dr. Charles Brockett
Professor, Political Science
University of the South
Sewanee, TN

Dr. Robin Gottfried
Professor, Economics
University of the South
Sewanee, TN

Dr. James R. Peters
Professor, Philosophy
University of the South
Sewanee, TN

Dr. Deborah McGrath
Assistant Professor, Biology
University of the South
Sewanee, TN

Dr. Chris Butler
Visiting Assistant Professor, Biology
University of the South
Sewanee, TN

Dr. Doug Williams
Associate Professor, Economics
University of the South
Sewanee, TN

Dr. George Ramseur

Professor of Biology, Emeritus
University of the South
Sewanee, TN

Dr. Harry Yeatman
Professor of Biology, Emeritus
University of the South
Sewanee, TN

Dr. Daniel Simberloff
Professor, Ecology and Evolutionary Biology
University of Tennessee
Knoxville, TN

Dr. Edward E. C. Clebsch
Professor of Botany and Ecology, Emeritus
The University of Tennessee
Knoxville, TN

Dr. Louis J. Gross
Director, The Institute for Environmental Modeling
Professor, Ecology and Evolutionary Biology
and Mathematics
University of Tennessee
Knoxville, TN

Dr. Nathan Sanders

Assistant Professor, Ecology and Evolutionary Biology

University of Tennessee

Knoxville, TN

Dr. David K. Smith

Associate Professor, Botany

University of Tennessee

Knoxville, TN

Dr. B. Eugene Wofford

Director of the Herbarium, Dept. of Botany

University of Tennessee

Knoxville, TN

Dr. Jon Jonakin

Associate Professor, Economics

Tennessee Technological University

Cookeville, TN

Dr. Katherine M. B. Osburn

Associate Professor, Environmental History

Tennessee Technological University

Cookeville, TN

Dr. John Harwood

Professor, Chemistry and Envir. Science
Tennessee Technological University Cookeville, TN

Dr. Christine Miller
Professor, Business
Tennessee Technological University
Cookeville, TN

Dr. G. Kim Stearman
Professor, Soil Chemistry
Water Center
Tennessee Technological University Cookeville, TN

Dr. J. Michael Redding
Professor, Biology
Tennessee Technological University
Cookeville, TN

Dr. Vincent Neary, P.E.
Associate Professor, Hydrology & Hydraulics Department of Civil and
Envir. Engineering Tennessee Tech University
Cookeville, TN

Dr. Eric L. Morgan
Professor, Biology
Tennessee Technological University
Cookeville, TN

Dr. Hayden T. Mattingly
Assistant Professor, Biology
Tennessee Technological University

Cookeville, TN

Dr. Wayne Barger

Assistant Professor, Biology

Tennessee Technological University

Cookeville, TN

Dr. Richard K. Clements

Professor, Biology and Envir. Science

Chattanooga State Technical Community

College

Chattanooga, TN

Dr. Carolyn Dodson

Associate Professor, Biology

Chattanooga State Technical Community College

Chattanooga, TN

Dr. Dennis M. Mullen

Professor, Biology

Middle Tennessee State University

Murfreesboro, TN

Dr. Sandra Johnson

Assistant Professor, Biology

Middle Tennessee State University

Murfreesboro, TN

Dr. Brian T. Miller

Professor, Biology

Middle Tennessee State University

Murfreesboro, TN

Dr. Frank C. Bailey

Associate Professor, Biology

Middle Tennessee State University

Murfreesboro, TN

Dr. Jeffrey L. Walck

Assistant Professor, Biology

Middle Tennessee State University

Murfreesboro, TN

Dr. Cindy Taylor

Associate Professor, Biology

Austin Peay State University

Clarksville, TN

Dr. Carol J. Baskauf

Associate Professor, Biology

Austin Peay State University

Clarksville, TN

Dr. David H. Snyder

Professor of Biology, Emeritus
Austin Peay State University
Clarksville, TN

Dr. Steven W. Hamilton
Professor, Biology
Principal Investigator, The Center for
Excellence for Field Biology
Austin Peay State University
Clarksville, TN

Dr. Gregory S. Ridenour
Director, CMC GIS Center
Associate Professor of Geography
Austin Peay State University
Clarksville, TN

Dr. A. Floyd Scott
Professor, Biology
Austin Peay State University
Clarksville, TN

Dr. Joseph R. Schiller
Associate Professor, Biology
Austin Peay State University
Clarksville, TN

Dr. Chris Wetzel
Associate Professor, Psychology
Rhodes College
Memphis, TN

Dr. Steven W. Brewer
Assistant Professor, Biology
Rhodes College
Memphis, TN

Dr. Foster Levy
Associate Professor, Biology
East Tennessee State University
Johnson City, TN

Dr. Rebecca A. Pyles
Associate Professor, Biology
East Tennessee State University
Johnson City, TN

Dr. Michael L. Kennedy
Professor, Biology
The University of Memphis
Memphis, TN

Dr. David E. McCauley
Professor, Biology
Vanderbilt University
Nashville, TN

John R. Hisey
Instructor, Biology
Lee University
Cleveland, TN

Dr. Michael Freake
Assistant Professor, Biology
Dept. of Natural Sciences and Math
Lee University
Cleveland, TN

Dr. Nancy Buschhaus
Associate Professor, Biology
University of Tennessee at Martin
Martin, TN

Dr. John P. Nelson
Professor, Biology
Bethel College
McKenzie, TN

Dr. Jim Carpenter

Associate Professor, Biology
Lipscomb University
Nashville, TN

John C. Tucker, J.D., LL.M.
Coordinator, Environmental Science Graduate Program Associate
Professor, Department of Biological and Environmental Sciences The
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, TN