

Forest Service works to preserve open space

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WASHINGTON -- As homes and shopping malls proliferate, the United States loses about 6,000 acres of open space every day - four acres per minute.

Now the Forest Service is developing a national strategy to protect and conserve open space. The plan, announced Thursday, will use partnerships with private landowners and state and local governments to identify areas most in need of protection, said Forest Service Chief Gail Kimbell.

The Forest Service also will work with Congress to create tax breaks and other incentives to promote conservation and reduce development in ecologically sensitive areas, she said. The conservation plan takes effect immediately and does not require congressional approval.

The agency's vision stretches far beyond the 193 million acres of national forests, Kimbell said, noting that more than half the nation's 800 million acres of forest land is privately owned.

"If people have an incentive to hold on to wildlands (rather than develop them), we as a society benefit from that," she said in an interview. "We all benefit from keeping wildlands wild."

Kimbell said she was "not looking to turn that world green on a map," but said private landowners, local governments and others look to the Forest Service for expertise to preserve forests and other wildlands.

"Our vision for the 21st century is an interconnected network of open space across the landscape - one that supports healthy ecosystems, renewable resources and high quality of life for Americans," she said.

National forests and grasslands provide the largest single source of fresh water in the United States, habitat for a third of all federally listed threatened or endangered species and millions of recreation opportunities, Kimbell said. About 205 million visits are made annually to national forests.

Preserving open space is one of her top four goals, Kimbell said. The others are improving forest health to reduce the risk of wildfire, controlling invasive species and managing outdoor recreation.

The Forest Service calls those the "Four Threats" and devotes most of its resources to address them.

The agency predicts that more than 21 million acres of rural private lands near national forests and 44 million acres of private forest land will be developed by 2030.

"Growth and development in wildlands increases the risk of wildfire for people and property, affects the Forest Service's ability to manage the public lands ... and reduces the capacity of privately owned land to provide water, recreation and habitat," Kimbell said.

On the Net:

Forest Service Open Space Strategy: <http://www.fs.fed.us/openspace>