Members of the Forest Resources Association (FRA) congratulate President-Elect Biden and Vice President-Elect Harris and look forward to working with the new Administration on policy issues that affect the wood supply chain. FRA is the only national trade association representing every link in the forest products industry—from forest landowners and loggers to wood products manufacturing facilities and pulp and paper mills. We have members in 48 states and 318 Congressional districts. FRA represents an industry that employs nearly 1,000,000 workers in the U.S. and contributes nearly $300 billion to the national economy. Moreover, most of our economic footprint is in rural America, where our members’ facilities often serve as the economic base in communities across the country.

We highlight for you the following three public policy issues that are critically important to our sector.

**Labor**

The forest products industry’s enduring commitment to replant trees promptly after a timber harvest lies at the very heart of our sector’s sustainability pledge. As stewards of the land, forest owners and loggers understand that to ensure vibrant, thriving forests for future generations, a balance must be struck between the many uses of the forest—from providing raw material for products we use and depend on every day (including masks and other personal protective equipment) to managing the land for recreational benefits and wildlife habitat.

This balance is predicated on tree planting programs to serve working forests nationwide. Based on U.S Forest Service data, there are more trees in the U.S. today than there were in 1952, despite a record housing boom during the intervening decades. That outcome could not be achieved without forest landowner investment and commitment to forest renewal. But the key to making this system work is an ample supply of labor, which is where the system is out of balance.

Simply stated, demand for tree planters exceeds supply. Tree planting is mostly not mechanized. Seedlings are hand planted by work crews shortly following a forest thinning. The nature of this work is challenging in that it is not only physically demanding, but it is also performed on terrain that is often rugged and in inclement weather conditions. Moreover, the work is itinerant with tree planting crews traveling long distances, county to county and state to state, to follow tree planting seasons that differ by region. For these reasons, it is extremely difficult to find U.S. workers to fill tree planting positions despite aggressive domestic labor recruiting efforts. Like other sectors, the forest products industry has been forced to rely on the H-2B guest worker program to fill the void. These workers, who largely come from Latin American countries, are reliable and dedicated but are in short supply because the H-2B program is chronically oversubscribed. In 1992, a cap of 66,000 was imposed on worker admissions, and every year since that cap was set, employers who rely on H-2B have struggled to meet their labor needs.
For example, in Fiscal Year 2021 that began on October 1, the first half cap on H-2B visas (33,000) was met on November 16—a mere six weeks after the beginning of the fiscal year.

FRA has long advocated for reform of the H-2B program to address the outdated arbitrary cap and other deficiencies of the program. In strong economic times, the need for supplemental workers, as evidenced by U.S. government certification, is well over triple the number of visas provided. In recognition of that certified need and the absence of overall immigration program reform, Congress has provided the Administration with authority to increase the number of workers admitted when American workers do not fill these positions. This has provided critical relief to our members and, should that authority continue to be included in the legislation, FRA urges the Biden Administration to work with us and other sectors that rely on this labor pool in ensuring that labor needs are met, and no further economic hardship results from lack of workers for our members while the country continues its post-pandemic recovery.

Transportation

Our nation’s federal interstate highway vehicle weight limit is outdated and out of touch with today’s engineering advancements, economic needs, and safety concerns. The 80,000-pound arbitrary truck weight restriction on federal interstates has introduced unnecessary costs, safety risks, and inefficiencies to raw material suppliers and finished product shippers that depend on our roadways every day. In every state in the country, the allowable vehicle weight limit for state roads is higher than the limit imposed on federal highways. This anomaly has created several perverse outcomes, including forcing log trucks to travel longer distances on narrow state roads, crossing numerous intersections, and through small towns instead of safer, more direct routes on the federal interstate.

FRA supports bipartisan legislation to allow trucks operating at the maximum allowable gross vehicle weight on state roads to travel at that state’s legal weight on that state’s portion of the federal interstate highway system. The bill, known as the Safe Routes Act, would apply only to trucks carrying raw forest products such as logs, wood chips, and biomass. We view this legislation as a modest, sensible approach to a problem that confronts logging businesses looking to safely move harvested trees from the point of harvest to the consuming mill or storage facility. Forest harvesting is a decentralized activity that occurs in remote locations, almost always far from railroad spurs, so transporting this material by railroad is not an option. For this reason, our industry is confined to using trucks to move raw material from the woods to the mill. This one-page bill would simply allow our trucks to access the interstate for short distances when that option provides a more direct route to the destination.

As a highway reauthorization bill is fashioned and negotiated in the 117th Congress, we look forward to working with your team on advancing Safe Routes Act provisions in any final surface transportation legislative package.

Bioenergy

The forest products industry is the primary producer and major consumer of a renewable, sustainable material derived from tree residuals known as biomass. This material takes many forms including limbs and small branches generated at a harvesting site, sawdust produced as a byproduct at sawmilling operations, and lignin that is extracted during the pulp and papermaking process. Because FRA members are committed to ensuring that no part of a harvested tree is wasted, we utilize this material as bioenergy to heat and power our facilities as well as homes and businesses nationwide. For pulp and paper facilities, upwards of 80 percent of a mill’s heat and power needs are self-fulfilled using forest-based biomass energy. In many instances, excess renewable power is generated at the mill site and sold to electric utilities to provide electricity to entire towns near mill locations. For wood products manufacturing facilities, not only do they use the sawdust
to heat and power their operations, but also convert the sawdust into both pellets that are sold and used as fuel in pellet stoves for space heating, and pellets that are consumed by larger biomass heating systems used to heat entire homes and businesses.

What makes biomass so attractive beyond the energy efficiencies its use presents to our sector is its environmental benefit.

FRA, along with governmental bodies ranging from the local to international level—including the U.N.’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—view sustainably produced forest biomass energy as carbon neutral. Forest biomass does emit carbon when it is combusted for energy, but the carbon released is that which has been sequestered over the growing life of the tree. Sustainably managed forests, where forest growth exceeds removals, ensure that the continual cycle of carbon uptake and release remains in balance.

FRA has long advocated for U.S. government policy that acknowledges the carbon-neutral nature of sustainably managed forest biomass energy. Again, we look forward to working with the Biden-Harris team and officials at the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Energy on this critical initiative.

Please do not hesitate to contact me or Tim O’Hara, FRA Vice President of Government Affairs tohara@forestresources.org

Sincerely,

Deborah Hawkinson
President, Forest Resources Association
dhawkinson@forestresources.org