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U.S. Sen. Baldwin: Secures major victories for Wisconsin's timber economy in bipartisan spending agreement

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin, a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, announced major victories for Wisconsin's forest and timber economy in the bipartisan spending agreement that passed Congress and was signed into law last month. Senator Baldwin fought for funding to boost Wisconsin's timber economy, help improve forest management and to help rural counties pay for schools, roads and emergency response services.

"Our forests and the timber industry in northern and central Wisconsin are facing a number of challenges that need to be addressed and I'm proud to work across party lines to secure significant reforms to strengthen Wisconsin's timber economy," said Senator Baldwin. "By passing the Good Neighbor Authority Improvement Act, fixing fire borrowing and securing funding for schools and services in our rural counties, we can make sure critically needed funding stays in Wisconsin and helps move key forest restoration and timber projects forward to strengthen our northwoods economy."

Fire Borrowing Fix

In recent years, U.S. Forest Service funds have been regularly diverted from Wisconsin forests to fight wildfires in the west, in a process known as "fire borrowing." The bipartisan spending package includes a ten year fix for fire

borrowing which will prevent funding from being taken from local Wisconsin forest projects to fight fires in western states, and will ensure those funds stay dedicated to projects in Wisconsin. Senator Baldwin has long supported a fix for fire borrowing and the broken fire management system and pushed to include this measure in the final bipartisan bill.

Good Neighbor Authority Act

The final agreement also included bipartisan legislation authored by Senator Baldwin and cosponsored by Senator Johnson – the Good Neighbor Authority Improvement Act – that amends the 2014 Farm Bill to allow the Forest Service's Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) to cover forest management efforts that require road repair, which will help improve forest access and complete stalled Forest Service projects. The Good Neighbor Authority Improvement Act proactively addresses the need to conduct road repairs in order to complete Forest Service projects in the next few years. This modification also supports ecosystem goals by improving forest health, restoring wildlife and fish habitat and improving water quality.

"The importance of the omnibus spending bill to Wisconsin's forest products industry cannot be overstated," said Max Ericson, President of the Great Lakes Timber Professionals Association. "With forestry being the number one employer in northern Wisconsin counties and Wisconsin being the number one paper producing state in the union, it is extremely important to manage federal lands wisely. We are very thankful for Senator Baldwin's leadership and support of this bi-partisan legislation. The omnibus package will enable schools and local units of government with federal lands to receive Secure Rural School Funds and PILT payments, it will enhance the use of Good Neighbor Authority and it will enable the US Forest Service to treat more acres of public lands without the loss of management funding to fire suppression."

As a strong supporter of Wisconsin's timber economy, Senator Baldwin championed the use of Good Neighbor Authority in Wisconsin. Using this tool, the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest and the Wisconsin DNR established an agreement to work together under the authority in 2015. Since then, Good Neighbor contributed to a substantial increase in timber harvest in the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, along with Stewardship Agreements and the work of the Forest Service. Timber sales on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest have risen steadily in recent years, from 77.1 million board feet (mmbf) in 2014 to 81.1 mmbf in 2015 to 114.8

mmbf in 2016. The Good Neighbor Authority Improvement Act will allow increased sales and forest restoration projects to continue.

Secure Rural Schools Program

Finally, the spending bill included full funding for the Secure Rural Schools program for the next 2 years, which will provide funds to Wisconsin's northern counties to help with local school costs, roads and emergency response services. Senator Baldwin urged Senate leadership in December of last year to include this funding authorization in the agreement to help communities across northern Wisconsin with school costs.