Background

The changing climate and resulting shifts in average temperatures, precipitation, growing seasons, and frequency of extreme weather events directly affect the social and economic wellbeing and stability of rural communities. Extreme droughts and floods have become more frequent, as have uncharacteristically severe wildfires and resulting smoke impacts, all of which pose severe risks to human health and safety, as well as local and regional economies. Furthermore, changes to climate and carbon policies can deeply and inequitably impact rural communities if they are not involved in crafting those policies in ways that work for each place.

Rural communities are directly impacted by extreme weather events and changing natural conditions, including increases in severe wildfires, reduced snowpack, and water supplies, and changing precipitation patterns. At the same time, the rural lands around them play a significant role in providing natural climate solutions such as carbon sequestration and storage. These realities demand that emissions reduction and climate adaptation strategies place a central focus on the people and landscapes of rural America.

Not only does climate change affect the economies of rural communities, so does climate policy. Rather than implement one-size-fits-all, top-down policy prescriptions, policymakers should partner with rural communities to find solutions that work at local scales, support small businesses and landowners, and can be adapted to diverse economic, environmental, and social conditions.

In the face of these climate-related challenges, rural America has a critical role to play in helping build resilience and implement sustainable solutions. Not only do rural residents have deep experience with and knowledge of local landscapes, they also own and work the private lands that are crucial to achieving sustainability and resiliency goals. These activities represent important steps toward carbon neutrality and opportunities to grow and diversify the economies of rural communities. Climate-focused solutions such as building up healthy soils and creating forests less vulnerable to severe wildfire also protect and improve the natural resources that support rural livelihoods and quality of life.

Land management plays a vital role in emissions reductions and climate adaptation, and rural areas are central to this work. Private land stewardship by rural landowners and restoration and management of public lands are critical for supporting natural climate solutions. Furthermore, rural communities often feel the most direct gains and burdens of land management-related decision-making, including those related to carbon mitigation, climate adaptation, and ecosystem resilience. Climate policies should be crafted to support the economic and social well-being of rural communities and as well as the broader principles of sustainable private and public land management. This work will require making new investments and developing new strategies that work for local conditions and do not leave the most vulnerable community members behind.

Proposed Recommendations for the CAC Forestry Subcommittee
1. **Staff a land stewardship department to liaise with rural Lane County landowners and communities to achieve Lane County climate action goals.**
   a. Work with land management agencies and tribes to promote climate resilient policies.
   b. Work with rural residents and communities to find solutions to current and future impacts of climate change.
   c. Develop community energy plans focused around alternative and renewable energy solutions, including micro energy projects.
   d. Develop cross boundary community forest resilience plans.
   e. Connect communities to resources and implement climate mitigation efforts.

2. **Adopt and manage firewise programming across rural Lane county homeowners.**
   a. Update the Lane County Community Wildfire Protection Plan to appropriately address rural areas in the county.
   b. Fund rural community fire hardening and prepare landowners to manage, withstand, and recover from wildfire.
   c. Work with agencies to increase crossboundary prescribed fire and cultural burning practices.

3. **Support private land owners to sustainably manage their lands, mitigate climate impacts and keep working lands intact.**
   a. Land use is a key element of carbon management. Preventing working rural lands from conversion to non-agricultural or non-forestry uses will help preserve and improve carbon storage.
   b. Policies should advance solutions that incentivize responsible, climate-informed private land stewardship to help sequester carbon, adapt to the changing climate, conserve freshwater resources, and support shifts away from fossil fuels.

4. **Carbon storage strategies should complement sustainable management and multiple use on public lands.**
   a. In fire-adapted ecosystems, policies should seek to develop durable carbon pools that are resistant and resilient to wildfire and improve ecosystem function, even if this results in a loss of carbon in uncharacteristically dense forests.
   b. Solutions should address the legacy of past forest management while creating forest conditions that can survive in a warming climate.

5. **Develop a stewardship economy workforce to meet the challenge of a changing climate and enhance rural economies.**
   a. The workforce needed to adapt and respond to the impacts of a changing climate through land management is likely to be largely rural. Policies should recognize the work required to build up a base of skilled workers in these areas and invest in supporting local workforce training.

6. **Markets-based strategies should be balanced with appropriate regulation and government funding.**
   a. Market-based approaches to climate and carbon policy, such as cap-and-trade or carbon offsets, can be an important part of the solution, but should be structured
to include rural community benefit. Proceeds from carbon markets should benefit the rural communities which are home to the land base required for these markets.

b. Wood products can play a role in carbon sequestration, but such approaches should be careful to consider both short- and long-term impacts and the potential for carbon leakage.

c. Market-based approaches should be supplemented with direct government spending and responsibly crafted regulations to drive necessary emissions reductions and increase climate resiliency.

d. Increase local and regional markets for locally grown agricultural and forest products.