January 3, 2012

American Forest Foundation
American Nursery & Landscape Association
Cornell University, Department of Natural Resources
The Davey Institute
Greenspace-the Cambria Land Trust
International Maple Syrup Institute
Massachusetts Association of Campground Owners
National Association of Exotic Pest Plant Councils
The Nature Conservancy
North American Maple Syrup Council, Inc.
Oregon Invasive Species Council
Society of American Florists
Society of Municipal Arborists
University of Maryland, Department of Plant Science and Landscape Architecture
Virginia Native Plant Society

January 3, 2012

The Honorable Daniel Akaka
United States Senate
141 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
United States Senate
331 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senators Akaka and Feinstein:

We are writing to endorse S. 1673, the Safeguarding American Agriculture Act of 2011.

S. 1673 would establish the Office of Agriculture Inspection within the Department of Homeland Security, which would be headed by the Assistant Commissioner for Agriculture Inspection. The bill would further establish a career path for agricultural inspectors within the Department, and institute supportive recruiting and training programs. Finally, the bill would require a report to the Congress regarding progress in implementing the action plans developed by the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)/DHS Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Joint Task Force on Improved Agriculture Inspection. These actions are intended to strengthen the mission of CBP Agriculture
Specialists in safeguarding our nation’s natural and agricultural resources from invasive non-native pests and disease.

Our organizations are working together to reduce the introduction and spread of non-native pests and diseases that threaten trees native to our country. We note that as recently as 2009, USDA APHIS documented the establishment of 58 new or re-introduced plant pests – a rate of more than one new pest per week. Many of these pests cause enormous damage: according a recent study by Juliann Aukema and others, one subset of these introduced pests, those that kill trees, cost local governments and homeowners more than $3 billion each year. Clearly, improvements are needed in programs that are intended to prevent additional introductions.

Many of these plant pests enter with general cargo, especially in wooden crates and pallets, or as egg masses attached to ship superstructures. Preventing introductions via these pathways falls under the jurisdiction of CBP Agriculture Specialists. It is therefore vitally important that the CBP-APHIS relationship work smoothly, that the agriculture mission receive appropriate priority, and that CBP employ highly skilled and motivated Agriculture Specialists.

We look forward to working with you to bring about adoption of S. 1673 and to explore other steps that the Congress could take to reduce the rate at which damaging pests and plant pathogens are being introduced to the United States. If you have any questions about our comments or wish to speak to us directly, please contact Faith Campbell at 703-841-4881 or fcampbell@tnc.org.

Yours,

Yilmaz Balci, Professor, University of Maryland, Department of Plant Science and Landscape Architecture
Charles T. Bargeron, Chair, National Association of Exotic Pest Plant Councils
Robert L. Bendick, Director, Government Relations, The Nature Conservancy
Marcia Galvin, Executive Director, Massachusetts Association of Campground Owners
Richard Hawley, Executive Director, Greenspace-the Cambria Land Trust
Rian Hooff, Chair, Oregon Invasive Species Council
Jerri J. LaHaie, Executive Director, Society of Municipal Arborists
Mary Ann Lawler, Conservation Chair, Virginia Native Plant Society
Tom Martin, President and CEO, American Forest Foundation
Richard Norman, President, International Maple Syrup Institute
Anand Persad, Regional Technical Advisor, The Davey Institute
Cécile Brassard Pichette, President, North American Maple Syrup Council, Inc.
Craig J. Regelbrugge, Vice President, Government Relations, American Nursery & Landscape Association
Lin Schmale, Senior Director, Government Relations, Society of American Florists
Mark C. Whitmore, Forest Entomologist and Extension Associate, Cornell University, Department of Natural Resources
David Wood, Professor Emeritus, UC Berkeley