

Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates

*Opinion Research &
Public Policy Analysis*

TO: The Nature Conservancy

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RE: Key Findings from National Voter Survey on Forest Pests and Pathogens

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From December 3 to 13, 2005, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates (FMM&A) conducted a national survey of 817 registered voters. The goals of the survey were to assess voters' understanding of the threats posed by forests pests and pathogens; to determine their level of existing concern about those threats; to gauge their support for policy proposals to help address the problem; and to evaluate their reactions to messages and language that might be used in educating the public about the issue. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is +/-3.5 percent.

Among the key findings of the survey were the following:

- Not surprisingly, voters have relatively low levels of awareness about the issue. Only one voter in four (26%) has heard "a fair amount" about "problems with non-native insects and diseases infesting or killing large numbers of trees." However, a slim majority of voters (53%) have heard at least "a little" about the issue.
- At the same time, there is greater regional awareness of the impact of specific pests. In states that have been affected, awareness of the Asian longhorned beetle is 54%, the emerald ash borer is 43%, and sudden oak death is 35%; in each case, the proportion who say they have heard "a great deal" about each pest is significantly larger than the proportion who have heard "a great deal" about forest pests and pathogens nationally.

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- About two in five voters (41%) describe themselves as “extremely” or “very concerned” about the fact that “insects and diseases are killing large numbers of trees across the United States.”
- Concern about the issue is more pronounced in the Northeast, among residents of big cities, and among those who describe themselves as Democrats.
- More than seven out of ten voters (71%) support a proposal to increase funding for efforts by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Plant Inspection Service to eradicate and stop the spread of three specific non-native insects and diseases that are killing millions of trees across the United States from \$33 million to \$100 million annually.
- When offered a list of words and phrases to describe insects and diseases that harm trees, voters have the most negative reactions to “invasive insects,” “tree-killing insects,” and “pathogens.”
- Voters indicate that trees are an important part of the character and quality of life in their neighborhood or town (95% agree), perceive trees and forests as very important for maintaining air and water quality (91% agree), and acknowledge that the death of large amounts of trees can cause significant economic damage and job losses (85% agree).
- Given a series of facts about forest pests and pathogens, voters react with most concern to a statement noting that by killing trees, insects and diseases are destroying forests that are critical to ensuring clean air and clean drinking water for the public.
- Voters are willing to take a variety of actions to help stop forest pests and pathogens, including buying plants and trees from nurseries that are certified as free from diseases and insects that kill trees (63% “very willing”), cleaning their boots carefully after hiking in a forest (56%), and buying firewood only from their local area (52%).
- After hearing the information and messages included in the poll, voters’ level of concern about insects and diseases that kill trees increased substantially – from 41% of voters at least “very concerned” to 64%. This finding suggests that public education and outreach efforts can have a significant impact on voters’ concern about these issues.