Parcelization and development of private forestlands have become major concerns of public agencies and private groups in many regions across the U.S. and beyond. In the Northwoods of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan, where forests cover more than 2/3 of the land area, increased parcelization and development could have major repercussions for economic, ecological, and quality of life values.

To begin to understand these concerns, we first looked broadly at factors thought to influence parcelization across the Northwoods using recent Forest Inventory and Analysis data. With stand area as an indicator of parcel size, we found several factors that may help detect differences in the proportion of private lands within different stand areas and changes in these proportions over time:

- The recreational character of counties;
- Forest-related attributes of stand size, forest type, stand history, and disturbance;
- Proximity of water bodies and roads.

Changes in parcel size were closely related to how near forestlands were to water bodies and roads. Regarding forest type, our findings showed that some of the greatest changes were happening on the smallest properties, 0-10 acres.

In a follow-up study, we held forums in five locations across northern Wisconsin to better understand how forest stakeholders perceived private forestland parcelization and development in their region. Findings highlighted four areas of concern:

Patterns of change: Participants generally saw the biggest changes near the outskirts of towns and cities, and around traditional amenity areas. But they were often surprised to see new patterns of seasonal home development occurring on forestlands away from water and permanent homes, well beyond common commuting distances.

Drivers of change: Participants in nearly every region felt that recent highway improvements had reduced commuting distances and thus put formerly unconsidered areas on the market for development.

Consequences of change: Few participants saw benefits to parcelization and development, and most cited negative impacts on recreation and aesthetics, forest health and productivity, community quality of life, and local infrastructure.
Response strategies: Participants cited a wide variety of response strategies related to planning and regulation, taxes and incentives, acquisition and funding, and education and ethics. Most felt that a combined strategy will be necessary to deal with problems over the short and long terms.

These findings can help make planners and policymakers aware of the scope of issues relating to forest parcelization and development, and suggest potential avenues for addressing them. They also suggest rich avenues for future study to help identify variables and issues in “hotspot” assessments, and suggest other analyses to pinpoint the patterns, causes, and consequences of landscape change.

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