

Figure 2: Public and private forest ownership in the United States, 2006.

Forest Ownership Patterns are Changing

Brett J. Butler*

Introduction

The fate of the nation's forests lies primarily in the hands of the people who own and manage (or do not manage) the land. Any report that claims to analyze forest resources must consider not only the biophysical characteristics of the forests, but also the social context in which they exist. It is ultimately landowners, within the social constraints imposed by society, who make the decisions that lead to nomenclature.

fragmentation, timber harvesting, recreational opportunities, and many other outcomes.

Broad Ownership Patterns

Of the 750 million acres of forestland in the United States, 56 percent (421 million acres) is owned by private individuals, corporations, and other private groups, while 44 percent (329 million acres) is controlled by public agencies (Fig. 1). The federal government controls 76 percent of the public forestland (33 percent of all forestland). State agencies control 21 percent of the public land (nine percent of all forest land) and three percent of the public land (one percent of all land) is controlled by county and municipal governments.

Two-thirds of the private forestland (283 million acres or 38 percent of all forestland) is held by non-corporate private owners. This includes individuals, couples, estates, trusts, non-governmental organizations, clubs, associations and other unincorporated groups. The other third of the private forestland (137 million acres or 18 percent of all forestland) is owned by corporations. This category includes forest industry and forest management companies, timber investment management organizations and other companies that may or may not have forest management as a primary ownership objective.

Due to various historical factors, forest ownership patterns

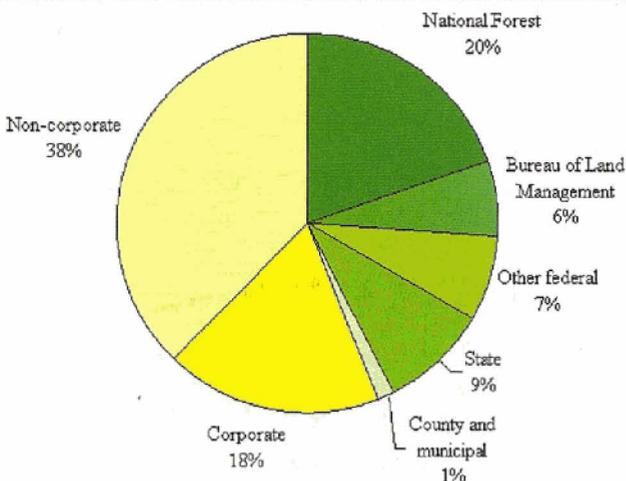


Figure 1: Forestland in the United States by ownership category, 2007. (Note: Data may not add to totals because of rounding)

* U.S. Forest Service, Forest Inventory & Analysis Family Forest Research Center Amherst, Massachusetts.

vary considerably across the country (Fig. 2). In general, public ownership dominates in the Rocky Mountain and Pacific Coast regions and private ownership dominates in the North and South regions, but there are notable exceptions, such as northern Minnesota.

Public Ownership

The U.S. Forest Service controls more forestland (149 million acres) than any other public agency in the country. The Bureau of Land Management (47 million acres) and other federal agencies (53 million acres) also control significant acreage. The significance of state and local forest ownership varies widely. More than 20 percent of the forestland in Hawaii, Minnesota, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Alaska, and Michigan is controlled by state agencies. The highest percentages of county and municipal ownership are found in Wisconsin (15 percent) and Minnesota (14 percent). In some states, such as Nevada, less than one percent of the forestland is controlled by state or local agencies.

Private Ownership

In previous reports, we categorized private owners as forest industry or non-industrial private. Due to the large-scale divestiture of forest industry lands (discussed below), we are unable to report these categories without divulging sensitive information and have switched to the current corporate/non-corporate category system.

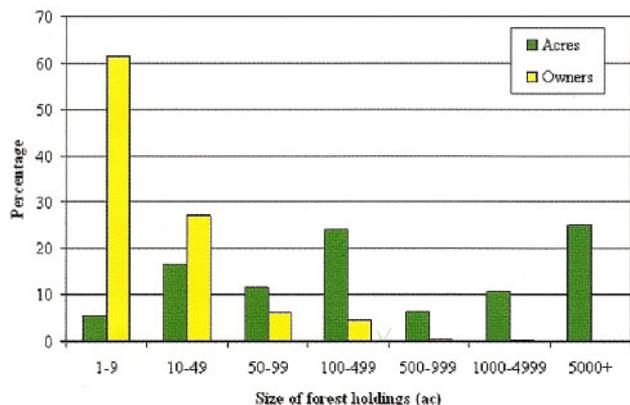


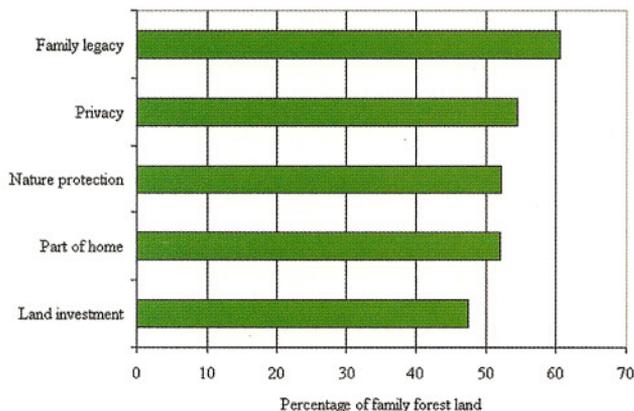
Figure 3: Size of private forest holdings in United States, 2006. (Excluding interior Alaska, Hawaii, Nevada, western Texas, and western Oklahoma due to lack of data)

The 412 million acres of private forestland in the U.S. is owned by more than 11 million forest owners. While most (62 percent) have between one and nine acres of forestland, most (66 percent) of the forestland is owned by people or organizations with 100 or more acres (Fig. 3). Owners with parcels of 5,000 or more acres, including many corporate owners, account for 25 percent of the private forest land.

A further refinement of our ownership categorization scheme allows for family forests to be examined separately. Family and individual-owned forests, hereafter referred to as family forests, include forestland owned by individuals, couples, estates, trusts, or other groups of unincorporated individuals. These people represent 93 percent of the private forest owners in the U.S. and 62 percent of the private forestland (260 million acres or 35 percent of all forestland).

Data from the U.S. Forest Service's National Woodland Owner Survey shows that the dominant reasons for family forest owners to own land are related to aesthetics, family legacy, and privacy (Fig. 4). There is a lot of activity occurring on these lands, but indicators of sustainable forest management

are weak. For example, 69 percent of the family forestland is owned by people who reported harvesting or removing trees from their land, but only 17 percent of the family forestland is owned by people who reported having a written forest management plan. The NWOS also shows that nearly one in four acres (23 percent) is owned by people who plan to sell or transfer land in the near future. This trend is further supported by the fact that 20 percent of the family forestland is owned by people who are 75 years or older. Their land will change hands relatively soon either by choice or mortality. The transfer of any of these lands will provide opportunities for changes in the ownership objectives, management practices and—potentially—land use.



Trends: Past and Future

Forest ownership is far from static. Agencies and owners react to ever-changing internal and external factors and the owners themselves are often changing. Changes in forest policies, divestiture of forest industry lands and the sale of family forest lands will potentially have significant impacts on the nation's forest resources.

Over the past decade, there have been significant changes in forest ownership in the U.S. and it is likely we are going to see more, albeit different, changes in the next ten years. Between 1993 and 2006, the area of private forestland in the U.S. increased by seven percent and the number of private forest owners increased by 12 percent. The large-scale divestiture of landholdings by vertically-integrated forest industry companies has resulted in the shift of millions of acres of forestland from the forest industry to timber investment management organizations, real estate investment trusts, families and others.

Many of the family forestlands will soon be changing hands. It is important that effective and efficient policies, outreach, and services be provided to help current owners meet their needs and bolster their legacies, help new owners meet their objectives, and allow society to continue to receive the goods and services we have come to rely upon.

References

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