

# Who Owns America's Forests?

Forest Ownership Patterns and  
Family Forest Highlights from the  
National Woodland Owner Survey



United States  
Department of Agriculture



Forest  
Service

Northern Research Station  
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## Why Do Forests Matter?

Forests provide and protect most of the Nation's fresh water. Forests supply habitats for wildlife and fish, give us and our kids a place to get in touch with nature, and help us address the challenges of climate change. Forested lands offer vital economic products and abundant opportunities for outdoor recreation, education, and solitude.

And forests that are privately owned offer special rewards for their owners—from providing private, scenic spaces and places to hunt and fish or just enjoy nature, to being an important asset that can be passed on to future generations.

## Who Owns America's Forests?

Fifty-six percent of the 751 million acres of forest land in the United States is privately owned. Of this private forest land, 62 percent is owned by families and individuals in what we call “family forests.” The remaining private forest land is owned by corporations, conservation organizations, clubs, Native American tribes, and others.

Forty-four percent of forest land is publicly owned. The Federal government administers 76 percent of the public forest land. State forestry, park, and wildlife agencies account for most of the 21 percent of public forest land that is state-

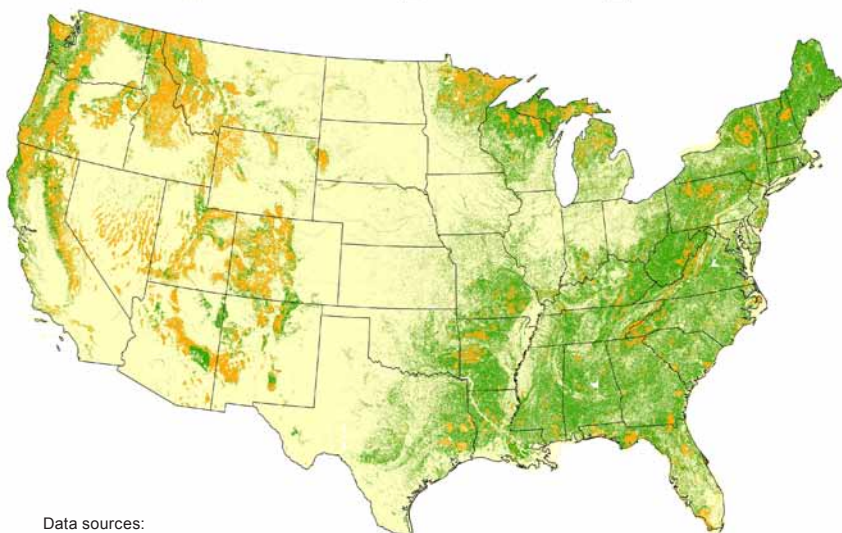
owned. The remaining 3 percent of the public forest land is owned by local governments, such as counties and towns.

America's 10 million family forest owners are diverse, dynamic, and numerous. They are pivotal for the protection and sustainable management of our forests across the landscape, yet they face ever-increasing pressures and challenges. Better understanding of their needs and concerns can help foster better forest policies, more effective services and programs, and increased public awareness of the importance of family forests.



### Forest Ownership in the Coterminous United States, 2006

■ Private forest land   
 ■ Public forest land   
 ■ Nonforest



Data sources:  
 Forest area - USGS National Land Cover  
 Database 2001  
 Ownership - CBI Protected Areas Database,  
 Version 4.0  
 State and countries - ESRI Data & Maps 2006

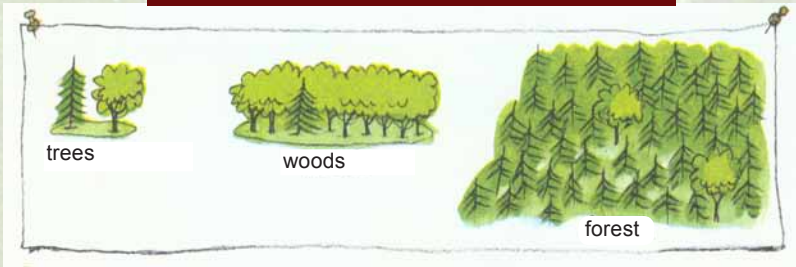
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 Forest Inventory and Analysis, Family Forest  
 Research Center  
 Brett J. Butler (17-Oct-07)

More than half the forest land in the United States (423 million acres)—mostly located in the East—is owned and managed by some 11 million private forest owners. Of those private forest owners, 92 percent (10 million owners) are classified as “family forest” owners.

#### Acres and Ownership of America’s Family Forests

Size of Forest Holdings	Number of Acres	Number of Ownerships
<i>Acres</i>	<i>Thousands</i>	<i>Thousands</i>
1-9	19,158	6,221
10-49	58,585	2,832
50-99	41,562	644
100-999	97,667	508
1,000+	35,003	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>251,974</b>	<b>10,223</b>

## Are You a Family Forest Owner?



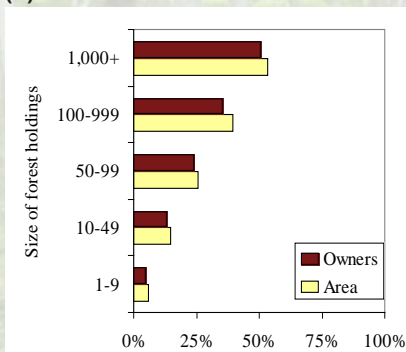
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Whether you have “just trees” that shelter native plants and animals, a bit of “woods” behind your house where the kids play and you cut firewood, or a “tree farm” that earns your family income ... if you have an acre or more of land with trees on at least 10 percent of it, you have a forest. If you own that forest as an individual, a couple, a family partnership, or some other grouping of unincorporated individuals, you are a family forest owner.

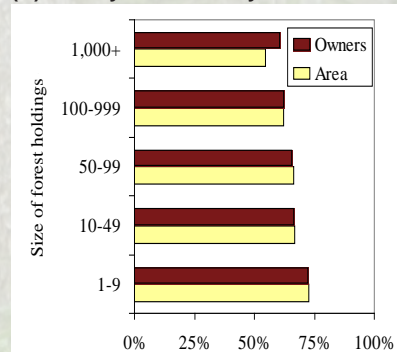
## Every Acre Counts

Most of the family forest acreage is in holdings of 100 or more acres, but a lot of family forest owners (some 61 percent) own fewer than 10 acres of forest land. The size of the forest can make a difference in owner attitudes, behaviors, and intentions.

(A) Timber Production



(B) Beauty and Scenery



Percentage of family forest land and family forest owners who rated (A) timber production, and (B) enjoyment of beauty and scenery as very important or important reasons for owning their forest land. Some management objectives “such as timber production” varied widely depending on the size of the forest, but many values, such as scenic beauty, were shared by owners of forests of all sizes.

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## Family Forest Owners' Top Tens

### Reasons for Owning Family Forests

- 1 Beauty and scenery
- 2 Family heritage
- 3 Privacy
- 4 Nature protection
- 5 Connected to home or cabin
- 6 Investment
- 7 Hunting or fishing
- 8 Part of farm or ranch
- 9 Hiking, snowmobiling, and other recreation
- 10 Timber production

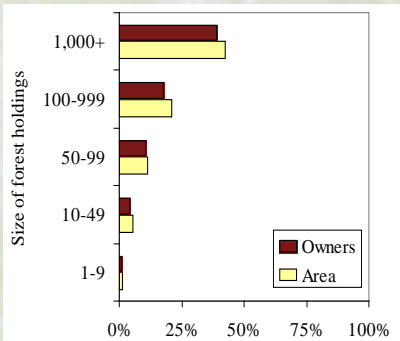
### Issues or Concerns

- 1 Insects or tree diseases
- 2 Keeping land intact for future generations
- 3 Wildfire
- 4 Trespassing
- 5 High property taxes
- 6 Vandalism or illegal dumping
- 7 Wind or ice storms
- 8 Air or water pollution
- 9 Undesirable plants and weeds
- 10 Development of nearby lands

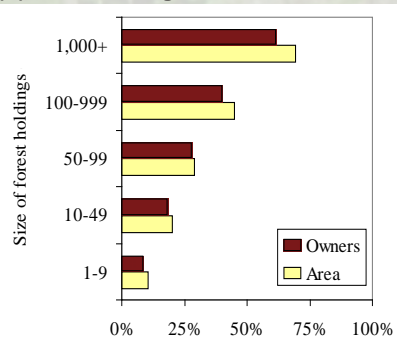
## Can Family Forest Owners Achieve Their Goals?

Whatever the reasons for owning family forests, adequate planning and consideration of various management practices can help support the desired activities over time. Yet we found that only 1 in 5 acres of family forest land is owned by someone who has a written forest management plan, and only 2 in 5 acres are owned by people who have received forest management advice.

(A) Forest management plan



(B) Forest management advice

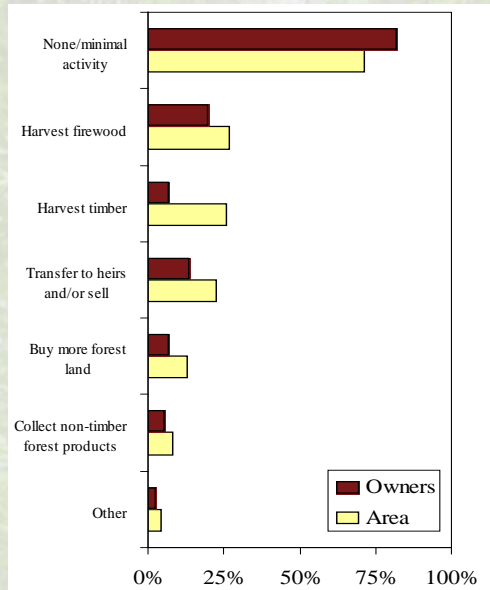


Percentage of family forest land and family forest owners who have (A) a written forest management plan, and (B) received forest management advice, by size of forest holdings.

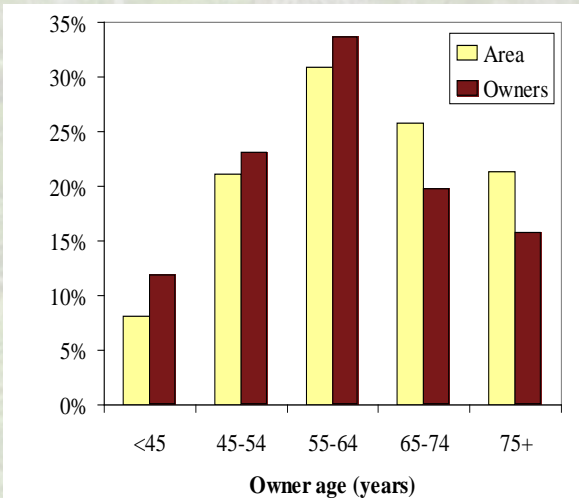
## What Does the Future Hold?

Most family forest owners plan minimal activity on their forest land in the next 5 years. However, 1 in 5 acres is owned by people who plan to sell or transfer some or all of their forest land in the next 5 years.

Changes in land ownership and management are likely to occur as land is passed from one generation to the next. A third of family forest owners are 65 years or older.



Percentage of family forest land and family forest owners by plans for the next 5 years. Future plans vary but most owners plan little to no activity.



Percentage of family forest land and family forest owners by owner age. One in 5 acres of family forest land is owned by someone who is at least 75 years of age.

## Conclusions

America's forests reflect the remarkable diversity and complexity of both their landscapes and their owners. Most of the forests are private, and most of those are family forests.

Many attitudes, behaviors, and concerns are shared by family forest owners, who commonly take great satisfaction in the beauty and privacy that their forests provide and the family heritage that they represent. Yet every family forest owner has a unique set of circumstances and faces individual challenges.

If the size of forest holdings continues to decrease in the future, as current trends suggest, there will be changes in how

the land is viewed and how it is managed. On one hand, more people owning and living on forest land can mean increased personal awareness and appreciation for forests. On the other hand, smaller forests may offer fewer opportunities for certain activities, such as traditional forestry, collection of nontimber forest products, and recreation. Smaller forests may also become more vulnerable to weeds, wildfires, development, and other challenges.

Clearly, forest owners can benefit from suitable services and resources that help ensure their forests and their goals can be sustained into the future.

For more results from this survey, visit the Forest Service's National Woodland Owner Survey website at [www.fia.fs.fed.us/nwos](http://www.fia.fs.fed.us/nwos) or contact:

**U.S. Forest Service**  
**National Woodland Owner Survey**  
**160 Holdsworth Way, Amherst, MA 01003**  
**Phone: 413-545-1387**  
**[nwos@fs.fed.us](mailto:nwos@fs.fed.us)**

To learn more about the services and resources available to forest owners in your state, contact your local forestry agency or association.





**This report highlights general ownership patterns and key information about family forest owners from the National Woodland Owner Survey, which is conducted by the U.S. Forest Service, to help us better understand:**

- **Who owns the forests of the United States**
- **Why they own land**
- **How they use it now**
- **How they intend to use it**

**We focus on family forest owners because they account for the 92 percent of all private forest owners.**

*Unless noted otherwise, figures generally are for the conterminous (lower 48) United States.*

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