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Forests in the United States - How are We Doing?

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A recent publication from the Society of American Foresters, *The State of America's Forests*, indicates that in spite of the many challenges our forests face, they remain plentiful and productive (based on data provided by the USDA Forest Service). The following is a summary of the historical and demographic information presented in the report. For a copy of the full report, visit: <http://www.safnet.org/aboutforestry/StateOfAmericasForests.pdf>.

Forests and forest managers in the United States face a myriad of challenges, including insects & diseases, invasive weeds, unmanaged recreation, fragmentation, land conversion and international competition for wood products. In Virginia alone, over 26,000 acres of forestland are being converted annually to other uses (mainly urbanization). However, the United States, with 8% of the world's primary forests, is the 4th most forest-rich country in the world, behind only the Russian Federation, Brazil and Canada.

Any area greater than 1 acre in size which has at least 10% tree cover is classified as forestland. If the forest is capable of growing at least 20 ft³ of commercial wood a year, it is classified as timberland. Before European settlement, the US had approximately 1 billion acres of forestland; today we have approximately 775 million acres. The good news is this number has remained fairly constant over the past 100 years (Figure 1). In terms of timber, softwood and hardwood inventories have increased 43% since 1953. In fact, harvesting levels are much lower than growth rates (growth is 36% higher than removals). We are growing much more wood than we are cutting.

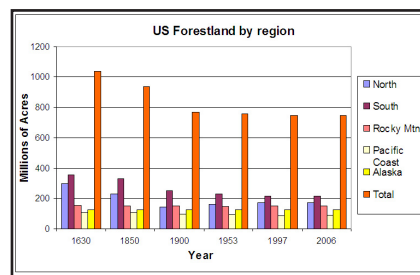


Figure 1. Acres of forestland in the United States, since 1600. Adapted from: *The State of America's Forests*, SAF.

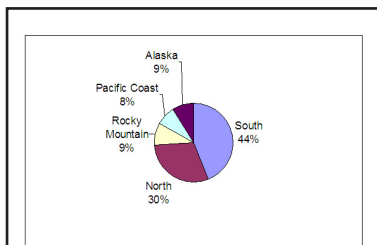


Figure 2. Percentage of privately owned forestland by region. Adapted from: *The State of America's Forests*, SAF.

As a country, 57% of our forestland is privately owned (by individuals, families, private corporations, industry, investment funds, or private institutions, organizations and societies). The other 43% is publicly owned (by national, state, and regional governments, government owned institutions and corporations, or public entities). Two-thirds of the privately owned forestland is in the northern (including northeast and north central) and southern (including the southeast and south central) United States (Figure 2).

Twenty percent of the forestland in the US is currently protected by conservation efforts (compared with a worldwide average of 11%). As of 2005, 11%, or 701,679 acres, in the southeast was permanently protected under conservation easements. The increase in federal and state tax incentives for 2006-2007 has resulted in this number continuing to increase over the past two years.

However, our forests face significant threats. As of 2006, 8% (or 58 million acres) of forestland faced significant risk of mortality from insects and disease. In the Midwest, 14% of the plant species identified were non-native. Between 1999 and 2006, wildfires affected an average of 5.8 million acres a year. And, increased development pressure could affect up to 44 million acres of forestland in the next 30 years. So keeping our forests plentiful and productive is going to become increasingly challenging. In addition to the tangible benefits we receive from our forests (wood products), we also receive many intangible benefits, now called ecosystem services. These include things such as clean air and water, wildlife habitat, and carbon sequestration. One concept which may help landowners increase their income from their forestland, allowing them to maintain ownership and to practice good management, and face the challenges of keeping our forests plentiful and productive, is to charge for the ecosystem services their land provides. The markets for ecosystem services are just developing, but interest is growing. Stay tuned for the Winter, 2008 edition of the *Forest Landowner Update* which will feature articles on different ecosystem services.