

Who owns America's forests and woodlands?

The answer may surprise you

Most forests and woodlands across America are privately owned. There are 819 million acres of forests and woodlands across the United States — an area twice the size of Texas. The combined decisions of the millions of private landowners will determine the fate of these lands, including the quality of wildlife habitat and hunting opportunities.

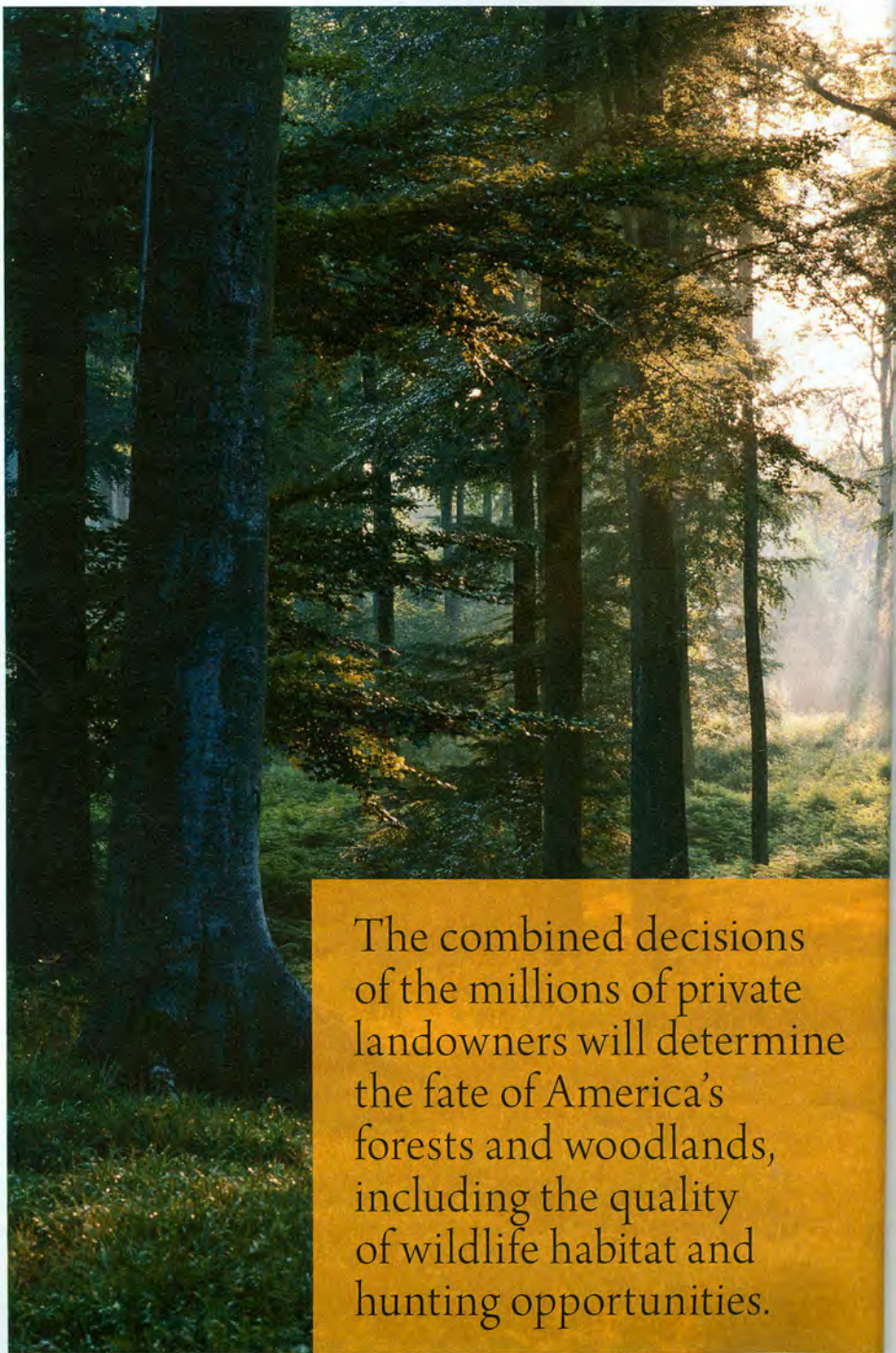
AMERICA'S FOREST AND WOODLAND OWNERS

There are misperceptions about who owns the forests and woodlands. In fact, private owners control a majority of our nation's forests and woodlands. The single largest group of owners is families and individuals, collectively referred to as family owners. Eleven million of them, including all owners with at least 1 acre of forest or woodland, collectively own 290 million acres, or 35.5 percent, of the nation's forests and woodlands. Corporate owners, ranging from multi-national forestry corporations with millions of acres to local factories with a few acres, own an additional 19 percent. The "other" private owners, including conservation organizations, clubs and associations, own 1.7 percent. In total, private owners control 56.2 percent of U.S. forests and woodlands.

The federal government controls 31.1 percent, mostly through the USDA Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Department of Defense. State governments, largely parks, forestry and wildlife agencies, control 9 percent. Local governments control 1.7 percent. In total, public ownership controls 41.8 percent of U.S. forests and woodlands.

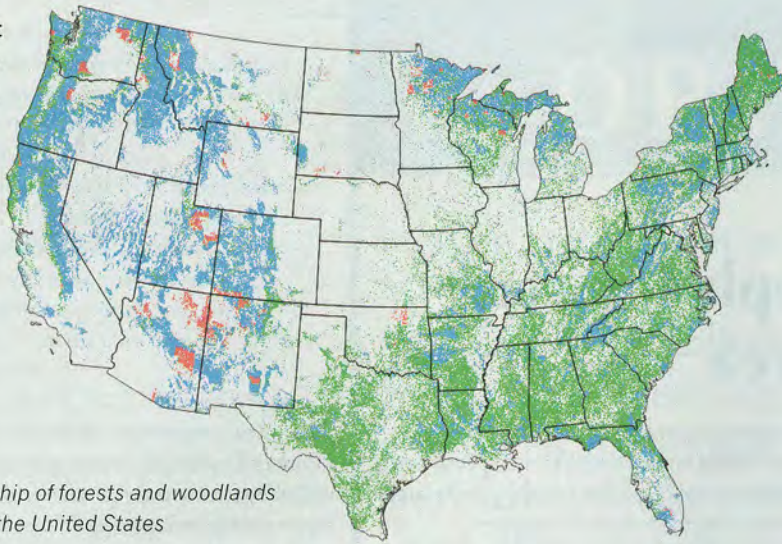
Native American tribes own an additional 2 percent. Some of these lands are in individual allotments, and tribal entities manage others.

Ownership patterns vary substantially across the United States. Private owners, especially families, dominate the eastern U.S. Public owners dominate the western U.S., but there also are millions of acres of private forests and woodlands.

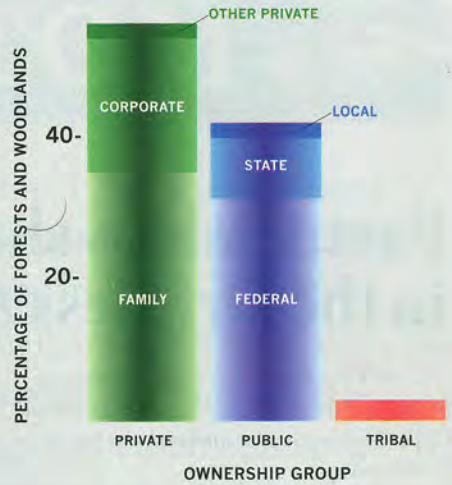


The combined decisions of the millions of private landowners will determine the fate of America's forests and woodlands, including the quality of wildlife habitat and hunting opportunities.

● PRIVATE
● PUBLIC
● TRIBAL



Ownership of forests and woodlands across the United States



WHO ARE THE FAMILY FOREST OWNERS?

Let's take a more detailed look at the families who own 35.5 percent of the forests and woodlands. In particular, we'll focus on the 4 million families who own 10 or more acres.

Beauty, wildlife, legacy, nature and privacy: These are the primary reasons family owners have land. And these are what we need to have in mind if we want to see the trees through their eyes. Financial gain from their land, through timber harvesting or other activities, is not the primary reason for the majority of them. That causes a major disconnect between owners and the traditional programs designed to increase wildlife improvement and other conservation activities.

Many family forest owners are actively working on their land. Over half of them have harvested trees for personal use or sale, and many have improved roads or trails, removed invasive species and improved wildlife habitat. Interestingly, while 21 percent of family owners have improved wildlife habitat in the past five years, another 45 percent say they plan to do so in the next five years.

We also know that recreation is a major activity occurring on these lands. Along with hiking/walking, hunting is the most common activity. Four out of five of the family forest owners either have hunted on their land themselves or have had a family member or friend hunt on it.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Only 20 percent of family forest owners have received forest management advice, only 13 percent have a written forest management plan and fewer than 10 percent have

participated in cost-share programs. It is clear traditional programs and approaches are missing the mark.

Most family forest owners have a strong stewardship ethic and try to do right by the land. They know more than most how valuable land is: "They're not making any more of it," many say. Asked if they want to keep their woods undeveloped, 86 percent said yes. There is a great opportunity to engage with more people.

A PATH FORWARD

Although family forest owners may not be "engaged" by standard forestry metrics, many are, or are interested in, actively managing their land. In particular, based on the evidence previously cited, there is a great opportunity to engage more family forest owners to enhance wildlife habitat.

If the wildlife and conservation community want to engage more family forest owners, we need to clearly define the objectives of our efforts and ensure they

align with those of the owners. Knowing wildlife is an important objective, resource consultants can tailor recommendations to activities that will increase the amount and quality of wildlife habitat, in addition to the multitude of other benefits that come from sound management. The current challenge of the conservation community is creating targeted, compelling messages and effectively implementing these approaches.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

All of this information is from the Forest Service's National Woodland Owner Survey. On a recurring basis, this program contacts a random sample of owners from across the nation to collect information on general characteristics, attitudes and behaviors. For additional information about this program and America's private forest and woodland owners, please visit www.fia.fs.fed.us/nwos. — Brett J. Butler, U.S. Forest Service, bbutler01@fs.fed.us

The Driftless Forest Network

There are those in the forest conservation community who have realized that the traditional ways of doing business are not working and are trying new tactics. The Driftless Forest Network is a broad coalition of more than 20 organizations, including the NWTF, focusing on the woodlands that encompass southwestern Wisconsin and portions of Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois. Their mission is to test new ideas that motivate landowners toward action, such as increasing oak regeneration.

Developed by the group, My Wisconsin Woods (mywisconsinwoods.org) is an online tool that helps connect landowners to resources. By tailoring messages and programs with wildlife focuses, the group has been able to attract more owners.