

Economic Contributions from Conserved Forests: Four Case Studies of the USDA Forest Service Forest Legacy Program

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Abstract

Privately-owned forests provide important environmental, economic, and cultural benefits to the general public. Resulting impacts from land-ownership changes and conversion of working forests to other land uses threaten these benefits. The USDA Forest Service Forest Legacy Program (FLP) permanently protects threatened private forests that are of environmental, cultural, and economic importance to the greater public while keeping land ownership and forest management at the private or local level. FLP provides grants to state agencies to purchase conservation easements on private forestlands or, less frequently, acquisition by public agencies. We employed IMPLAN's input-output model of the 2016 economy to estimate how land protected by FLP in four regions of the United States contributes to the economy. FLP land adds tens of millions of dollars of value annually and supports thousands of jobs in the four study areas and, due to the permanent protection of these lands, they will continue to do so in perpetuity. Nonfederal partners contributed 34%–60% of total project costs, highlighting the importance of land conservation to multiple stakeholders and the ability to leverage federal resources. The permanent nature of FLP protection provides long-term security for the economic and cultural benefits these lands provide.

Study Implications: The Forest Legacy Program (FLP) is administered by the USDA Forest Service to protect historic forest uses and intact working forest landscapes. This study quantified economic activities on FLP land in four areas to assess how these activities contribute to the economy of the multistate region in which the projects are located. The substantial economic contribution in natural resource industries suggests that permanent protection of forests provides economic and cultural benefits in perpetuity. This information illustrates the contributions of FLP to local economies and can be used to assess the value of the program and the potential for future funding.

Keywords: regional economics, IMPLAN, private forests, conservation, permanent protection

Nearly 60% of the forests in the United States (excluding interior Alaska) are privately owned (Butler et al. 2020). These forests provide important environmental, economic, and cultural benefits to the landowners themselves and also to nearby communities and the general public (Stein et al. 2009). Concerns have been raised in recent decades about conversion of working forests to other nonforested land uses (e.g., low-density residential development) and the threats these conversions pose to the public benefits that private forests provide (Best 2002, Daniels and Lapping 2005, Alig 2007, Stein et al. 2009). Threats to forests and barriers to forest protection vary among and within regions (Smail and Lewis 2010, White et al. 2010), necessitating a flexible, locally-driven approach to protect the values that private forests provide to the public.

The USDA Forest Service Forest Legacy Program (FLP), established in 1990 (16 USC 2101 et seq.), permanently protects threatened forests that provide important environmental, economic, and cultural benefits to the greater public while keeping land ownership and management in private hands

or at the local level (USDA 2017). FLP provides competitive grants to state agencies to purchase conservation easements on private lands or, less commonly, purchase lands outright to protect these valuable forests. The program requires a nonfederal match of at least 25% of the total cost of the land protection project. All FLP properties are required to have a forest management plan that provides public benefits such as timber production and recreation access.

Land protected under FLP contributes to the economy through forest management and other activities. To date, no publication has estimated the extent to which financial transactions associated with forest management activities and recreation on private land permanently protected through FLP flows through the economy and contributes to employment in multiple regions of the United States. This study provides these estimates for all land conserved by FLP in four environmentally, culturally, and economically distinct regions (Figure 1) and summarizes specific project attributes to help assess the social and cultural effect that FLP land has on the study areas.

