



# KEEPING FORESTS AS FORESTS

Tips for landowners on how to avoid forest conversion in the Southeast

## FORESTS IN THE SOUTHEAST

Forests cover 450 million acres of land in the Southeast (Oswalt 2019, Keeping Forests 2020). These forests belong to 14 distinct ecoregions ranging from bottomland hardwood swamps of the Louisiana Delta to the high elevation forests of the Blue Ridge Mountains (TNC 2009). Each is unique in their values and services they provide: ecosystem services, timber, recreational opportunities, clean water, and more. However, one of the biggest threats to all forestland in the Southeast is **land conversion**.



## WHAT IS LAND CONVERSION?

The Forest Stewardship Council's National Risk Assessment identified conversion of natural forests to non-forest use among its key indicators of unacceptable sources for certified wood. Additionally, the Assessment completed for the United States identifies ongoing conversion risk to be significant in areas of rapid urbanization (FSC 2019). In the US, between 24 and 38 million acres of forests are forecasted to be converted to other uses between 1997 and 2060. More than half of these losses are likely to occur in the South (Wear 2011).

Two factors that often lead to land conversion are **fragmentation** and **parcelization**. Fragmentation is when a single ownership consists of many separate parcels, and parcelization occurs when land is divided into multiple, smaller parcels. Of the 450 million forested acres in the Southeast, roughly 89 percent are owned by family forest landowners (Butler 2020). However, only one third of these family forest landowners own more than 10 acres of contiguous forestland (Butler 2020). Even further, of this only 10 percent has a written forest management plan (Butler 2020) – a crucial step to keeping forest as forest.

## SOURCES

- Butler. 2020. America's family forest owners. Society of American Foresters. (ISBN: 978-0-939970-69-8)
- Forest Stewardship Council. 2019. FSC US controlled wood national risk assessment. <https://us.fsc.org/en-us/certification/controlled-wood/fsc-us-controlled-wood-national-risk-assessment-us-nra>
- Keeping Forests. 2020. A system level approach to Southern forest conservation <https://bit.ly/3FXdcz5>
- Oswalt et al. 2019. Forest Resources of the United States, 2017 <https://doi.org/10.2737/WO-GTR-97>
- The Nature Conservancy. 2009. Terrestrial Ecoregions. <https://geospatial.tnc.org/datasets/terrestrial-ecoregions>
- Wear. 2011. Forecasts of county-level land uses under three future scenarios. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/treesearch/pubs/39404>



## STEPS TO AVOID FOREST CONVERSION

There are a few steps a landowner can take to avoid converting their forest to another land use. Several resources exist to help landowners create a plan for their woods, as well as successfully implement it.

1

**Determine an estate planning strategy.** There are sometimes resources available for this process, particularly if the land is considered “heirs’ property”.

Note: Heirs’ property is family-owned land that is jointly owned by descendants of a deceased person whose estate did not clear probate. The descendants, or heirs, have the right to use the property, but they do not have a clear title to the property since the estate issues remain unresolved.

2

**Find a forester and create a plan.** State forest service websites often have resources for finding local foresters, both public and private employees. A forester will work with the landowner to create a plan that aligns with their goals and what is feasible on the landscape. Properly managed forests with clear goals can generate extra money for the landowner while improving the health of the forest.

3

**Apply for cost-share funding.** Cost-share programs provide funding to landowners for part of the cost of conservation practices. While each program is different, they typically support practices like writing forest management plans, tree plantings, and controlling invasive species. For example, Farm Service Agency programs or Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) programs provide reimbursements to landowners for implementing conservation practices.

4

**Reach out to a local Extension Agent.** University extension offices often have programs dedicated to landowner education and outreach. Experts in land management are available to help landowners make management decisions and protect important forest resources.

5

**Consider conservation easements.** Conservation easements allow landowners to protect land that they love through a voluntary, legal agreement that permanently limits uses of the land to protect its conservation values. Reach out to a local land trust for more information.

6

**Join a landowner association.** Landowner associations provide opportunities to come together to learn, advocate, and network on local and regional scales.

**FOR MORE RESOURCES VISIT**

<https://foreststewardsguild.org/forest-stewardship-council/keeping-forest-as-forest>

Forest Stewards  
 **Guild**