

Keeping Forests as Forests

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

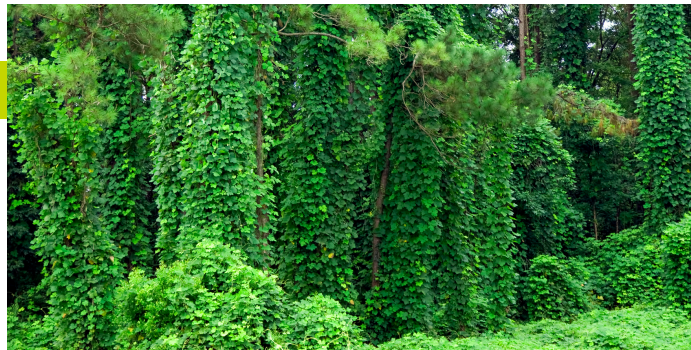
Forests in the Southeast

Forests cover 450 million acres of land in the Southeast. 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. Southeastern forests are unique in their values and provides habitat for wildlife, recreational opportunities, timber products, clean water and air, and more.

The Importance of Forest Conservation

Forest conversion is one of the biggest threats to forestland in the United States, particularly in areas of rapid urbanization. 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 Southeast. 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. With this amount of land, the decisions made by family forest landowners have a significant impact on the broader ecosystem. Retaining forests as forests is imperative to ensuring that ecosystems can continue to function for the sake of the plant, animal, and human communities that depend on them. Among many other benefits, privately owned forests provide more than half the water supply for 16 million people in the eastern U.S.



Conservation vs. Preservation

Conservation utilizes active management of the natural environment to support human communities while sustaining ecological integrity. Preservation-based management focuses on a hands-off approach to natural resources management. Many of the forests in the Southeast have experienced frequent large-scale disturbances in the last two centuries, both natural and human caused. Due to the scale at which disturbances such as industrial logging, fire suppression, and the introduction of non-native invasive species have occurred, there are many places where conservation-based forest management is necessary for maintaining forest health.



Conservation in Action: Steps to Avoid Forest Conversion

As a forest landowner, you and your circumstances determine the decisions you make for your forest. By keeping your land forested, you can enjoy the many aspects of your property while providing tremendous benefits to your community. Conservation actions can range from backyard projects to landscape-scale management. Regardless of where you are in your conservation journey, taking the first step is just as important as the tenth, hundredth, or even thousandth step.

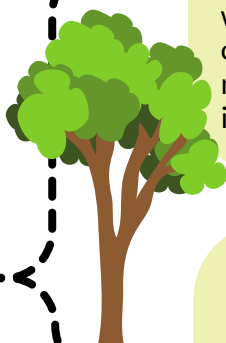


Enjoy your land. Go for walks, learn the species of trees that are growing, set up wildlife cameras...however you would like to do it, getting out and enjoying your land is all part of the conservation picture.

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.

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 you to create a plan that aligns with your goals and what is feasible on the landscape. Properly managed forests with clear goals can generate extra money while improving the health of the forest.



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 you make management decisions and protect important forest resources.



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.

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.

Work with neighbors. Nature often doesn't follow property boundaries. Tackling conservation projects such as invasive species management with other landowners around you can make a bigger impact and share the workload. Landowner associations provide opportunities to come together to learn, advocate, and network on local and regional scales.

