

Meeting Emerging Ecological, Economic and Social Challenges in the Great Lakes region: Popular Summaries

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Meeting Emerging Ecological, Economic and Social Challenges in the Great Lakes region:

Popular Summaries

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Compiled by

Lisa J. Buse
Ajith H. Perera

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Ontario Forest Research Institute
Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources
1235 Queen St. E., Sault Ste. Marie, ON
P6A 2E5 Canada
Tel. (705) 946-2981 Fax (705) 946-2030



Ministry of Natural
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Forest Experiment Station

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Family Forestland Owners of the Lake States: Timber Harvest Activities and Implications for Sustainable Forest Management

Earl C. Leatherberry

USDA Forest Service, North Central Research Station, 1992 Folwell Avenue, St. Paul, MN; 651-649-5138;
eleatherberry@fs.fed.us

Introduction/Objectives

There are an estimated 21.1 million hectares of forestland in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota—the Lake States. These lands provide benefits such as timber products, wildlife habitat, recreation opportunity, and watershed protection. Land managers, particularly managers of public forestlands, often have strategies to ensure that the values provided are not diminished over time. In the Lake States, 41% of the forestland is publicly owned. The other 59% of the forestland area is privately owned and held by three broad owner groups—industrial, timber investment management organizations (TIMOs), and family forestland owners. Industrial and TIMOs own forestland primarily for timber production. Family forestland owners who control almost 90% of all privately owned timberland in the Lake States have an array of reasons for owning land. Family forestland owners are people who have a familial relationship, or who have a relationship based on common interests or goals. Family forestland owner holdings range in size from 4 to 2,025 ha (10 to 5,000 acres). Forestland holdings of less than 4 ha are generally associated with a home site and forestland holdings of more than 2,000 ha are generally corporate or industrial forests. Family forestland owners play a huge role in providing timber and other benefits from forests because they control much of the forest landbase.

Over the years, the character of family forestland owners have changed because of increasing population, improved infrastructure, and preferences for living and recreating in wooded environs. Demands and expectations placed on forestlands also have dramatically

changed. Today, family forestland owners face a myriad of constraints and opportunities in holding forestland and producing timber. New research is required to understand how the dynamics of ownership affects timber resource sustainability.

The third National Woodland Owners Survey (NWOS) was commenced in 2001 to increase the understanding of woodland owners. Under the legislative guidance of the Forest and Rangelands Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974, the USDA Forest Service has been charged with monitoring the forest resources of the United States. Landowners are the key link between society and the land and are a fundamental component in assessing forest resources sustainability. The USDA Forest Service implemented the NWOS to increase the understanding of private woodland owners with an emphasis on family forestland owners. Two key functions of the NWOS are to facilitate the planning and implementation of forest policies and to support forest sustainability assessments in the United States.

The specific objectives of the NWOS are:

- to characterize the land holdings, the ownership and management objectives, and the demographics of the private woodland ownerships
- to assess the flow of market and non-market goods from private woodlands
- to measure the characteristics of participants in federal and state forestry incentive, education, and technical assistance programs

- to quantify the use of forest management practices including sources of information
- to assess landowner perceptions of the health of their woodlands, and
- to ascertain the constraints that are hindering private woodland ownerships from meeting their objectives

To accomplish the objectives of the NWOS, questionnaires are mailed to individuals and private groups that own the woodlands where the USDA Forest Service Forest Inventory and Analysis program has established forest monitoring plots. Twenty percent of these ownerships will be contacted each year with complete samples being completed in calendar years ending in 2 or 7 to coincide with national census, inventory, and assessment programs. The target accuracies of the data are plus or minus 10% at the state level.

Approach

In the spring of 2002 as part of the nationwide NWOS, questionnaires were sent via mail to 1,006 forestland owners in the Lake States. One-hundred forty questionnaires were undeliverable and 3 respondents indicated they had no forestland. Those owners were removed from the sample. Five-hundred eighty five questionnaires were returned for an overall response rate of 68%. Individual state response rates were Michigan—66%; Wisconsin—67%; and Minnesota—73%.

Results and Discussion

There are an estimated 488,000 family forestland owners in the Lake States owning an estimated 10 million ha of forestland. Since 1994, the number of family forestland owner in the Lake States has increased by 9%. Over one-quarter of the land owned by family forestland owners is held by people 70 years of age or older. Nearly half of the forestland owned by family forestland owners have been owned for at least 25 years. The majority (71%) of family forestland owners hold between 4 and 20 ha (10 and 49 acres). Only 7% of these own forestland

primarily for timber production. Most own forestland for values relating to quality of life, such as a place for a home, recreation, or as a place to leave to heirs. Nonetheless, timber is harvested from land owned by family owners. Forestland owners that have harvested timber own 72% of the family forestland base. Half of those owners have harvested within the past 5 years. Timber harvesters tend to have larger holdings than nonharvesters; i.e., harvesters own an average of 25 ha compared to 14 ha owned by nonharvesters. Firewood and sawtimber were the most commonly harvested products. In addition, owners of larger holdings were more likely to harvest other products, primarily pulpwood.

Harvesters gave a wide variety of reasons why they harvested timber from their land. The primary reasons were to improve quality of remaining trees, part of a management plan, and to remove storm-damaged trees. Relatively few owners harvested because they needed the money.

Only 8% of the owners have a written management plan. However, those owners with a written management plan own 18% of the family forestland area. Although few owners have written management plans, they tend to seek advice about forestry related issues. Twenty-three percent of owners, holding 35% of the family forestland base, have sought advice about their forestlands. The most common sources of information were private consultants, state forestry agencies, and loggers. At the time of their most recent harvest, about 40% of owners used professional assistance. The most useful sources cited for learning about managing forestland were talking with foresters, and reading publications and newsletters.

Family forestland owners performed a wide variety of activities to improve their forestland. Trees were planted on about one-third of the land owned. Other activities conducted on more than 20% of the land owned included wildlife habitat improvement projects and non-timber product improvements. No improvements were

made on about one-third of the land. Landowners primary concerns are taxes, trespassing, and being able to leave a family legacy.

Conclusion

Family forestland owners are a diverse group motivated by multiple objectives. Most people do not own forestland primarily for timber production, and they do not actively practice forest management. However, many harvest timber from their land. Timber harvesters tend to be owners who have larger tracts of forestland. In recent years the number of family forestland owners have increased. Much of the increase is among owners holding between 4 and 20 ha. Many of these owners acquired forestland for reasons relating to quality of life. An

important concern for the forest resources sustainability is the extent to which owners of smaller holdings are willing to practice forestry management. Presently only 8% of family forestland owners have written management plans. A key challenge to sustainable forest management among family forestland owners is to offer technical assistance, including cost-sharing, to increase sustainable management initiatives. Programs with the greatest potential for success should target those owners whose objectives are most consistent with sustainable management. In terms of sustainable timber management, incentives should be directed to the larger tract owners because they are more likely to harvest timber and make improvements to their land.