



United States Department of Agriculture

Who Owns America's Trees, Woods, and Forests?

**Results from the U.S. Forest Service 2011-2013
National Woodland Owner Survey**



Forest Service

Northern
Research Station

NRS-INF-31-15

Publication Date
March 2015

Why Do Trees, Woods, and Forests Matter?

Trees, woods, and forests provide and protect most of the nation's fresh water. They supply wildlife and fish habitats and give us a place to get in touch with nature. They offer opportunities for outdoor recreation, education, and solitude, as well as economic products.

Trees, woods, and forests offer special rewards for private owners—from providing private, scenic spaces and places to hunt, fish, or enjoy nature, to being an asset that can be passed on to future generations.

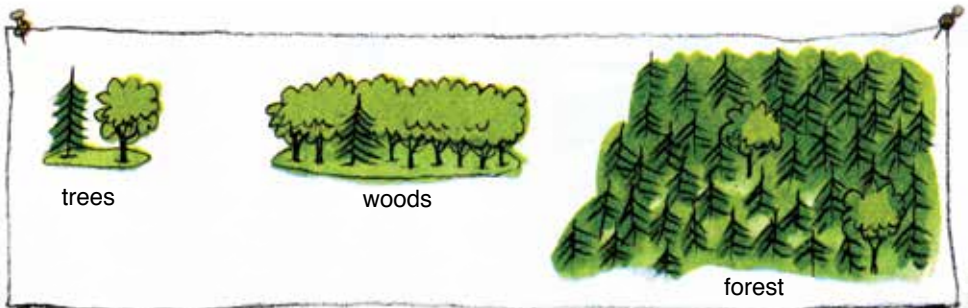
You may enjoy your backyard trees where you hang your hammock and relax, the blossoms of spring on the sidewalk as you walk into work, or the natural backdrop trees provide to family photographs.

Trees, woods, and forests connect us all with the natural world and are a part of our lives in cities, rural America, and anywhere in between.



Big or Small, all Properties are Important

Whether you have “trees” that shelter native plants and animals, a bit of “woods” behind your house where the kids play and you cut firewood, or a “forest” that earns your family income, your trees and the land they grow on matter to your life. Your needs and concerns about your woods and property are important, and you have your own unique ideas about the benefits, opportunities and challenges they provide.

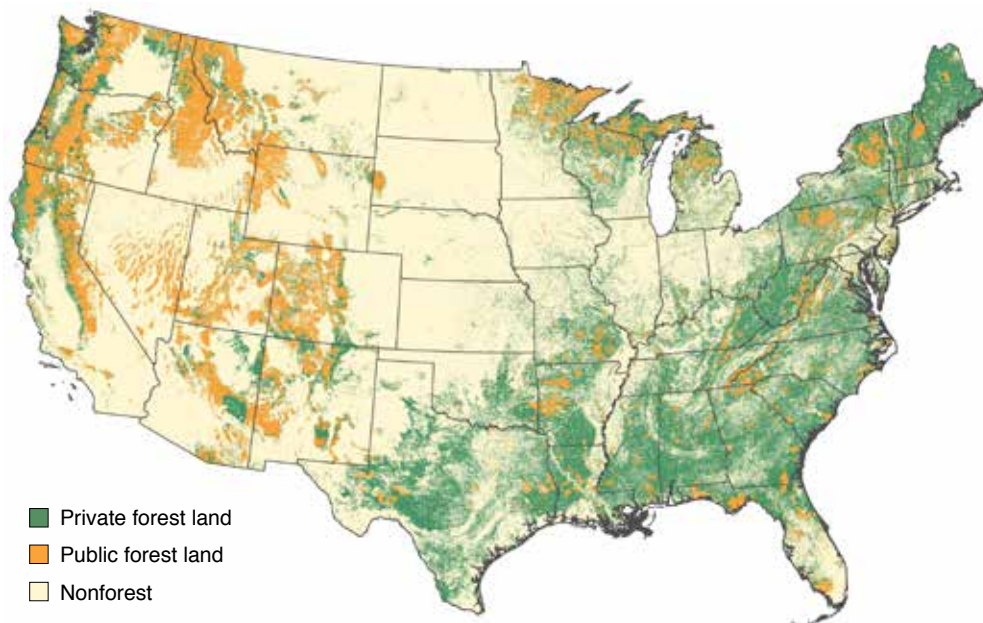


People may refer to trees, woods, or forest depending on the size of the acreage.

Where in the U.S.?

If you are a private owner of woods or forest, you are part of a group who, collectively, own **more than half** the woods and forests in the United States. Regardless of the size of your property, together all private ownerships make an impact on health of the environment.

- ▶ Private owners of woods or forest are “Family and Individual” owners, “Corporate” owners, and “Other Private” owners who own 1 or more acres of woods or forest land.
- ▶ Public woods or public forest owners are Federal, State, and local government agencies (such as the U.S. Forest Service and State forest departments).



Ownership of woods and forest in the conterminous United States, 2013.

More than half the woods and forest in the United States (441 million acres)—mostly located in the east—is owned and managed by some 11 million private ownerships. Of those, 95 percent are classified as “Family and Individual” ownerships, 4 percent are classified as “Corporate” ownerships, and 1 percent is classified as “Other Private” ownerships.

Private Owners of Trees, Woods, and Forest

Land with trees, woods, and forests not only provides aesthetic beauty and privacy, but also clean water, wildlife habitat, timber or cordwood, and recreational opportunities. Depending on how much land you own and what your interests are, some of these benefits may be more important to you than others.

Do you own less than 1 acre of trees?

You may be located in an urban or suburban area, surrounded by buildings, neighborhoods, and other cultural amenities. Or, you may have more trees around you than you own, and you may be benefiting from being a part of a larger forest. Not much is known about private forest owners owning less than 1 acre, but in the future we hope to learn more.

Do you own between 1 and 9 acres of woods or forest?

If you are an owner in this category, you may reap many of the benefits woods and forests have to offer. You may use your land for recreational purposes or choose to cut firewood for the winter. These owners own 5 percent of all private woods and forests in the United States with average holdings of 3 acres, and have owned the land for roughly 23 years.

Top Five Reasons for Owning Woods or Forests

- 1 Part of home
- 2 Beauty and scenery
- 3 Privacy
- 4 Wildlife habitat
- 5 Nature protection

Top Five Issues or Concerns

- 1 High property taxes
- 2 Vandalism or illegal dumping
- 3 Keeping land intact for future generations
- 4 Trespassing
- 5 Insects or diseases



Do you own 10 or more acres of woods or forest?

In addition to all of the benefits described for other owners, your woods and forests may provide you with wood products and wider access to Federal or State forestry programs. Collectively, these owners own 95 percent of all private woods and forests in the United States with average holdings of 98 acres, owning it roughly 24 years.

Top Five Reasons for Owning Woods or Forest

- 1 Beauty and scenery
- 2 Part of home
- 3 Wildlife habitat
- 4 Pass on to children/heirs
- 5 Privacy

Top Five Issues or Concerns

- 1 High property taxes
- 2 Trespassing
- 3 Keeping land intact for future generations
- 4 Vandalism or illegal dumping
- 5 Insects or diseases



Different Types of Ownerships....Different Goals

If you own 10 or more acres, your opinions, behaviors, and intentions for your land may differ depending on if you are a Family and Individual, Corporate, or Other Private ownership of woods or forest.

Let's take a look at some characteristics of each of these 10+ acre landowner groups.

Family and Individual Ownerships – 10 or more acres

Family and Individual ownerships of woods or forest—4 million ownerships holding 61 percent of all private forests—include families, individuals, trusts, estates, family partnerships, and other unincorporated groups.

On average, these ownerships own 66 acres of woods or forest, and have had it for an average of 24 years.

Over 65 percent of these ownerships hunt and over 50 percent hike or walk on some part of their land.

Nearly 40 percent of these ownerships cut or removed trees for their own use on some of their land, and 42 percent of the ownerships intend to improve wildlife habitat on some of their land in the next 5 years.



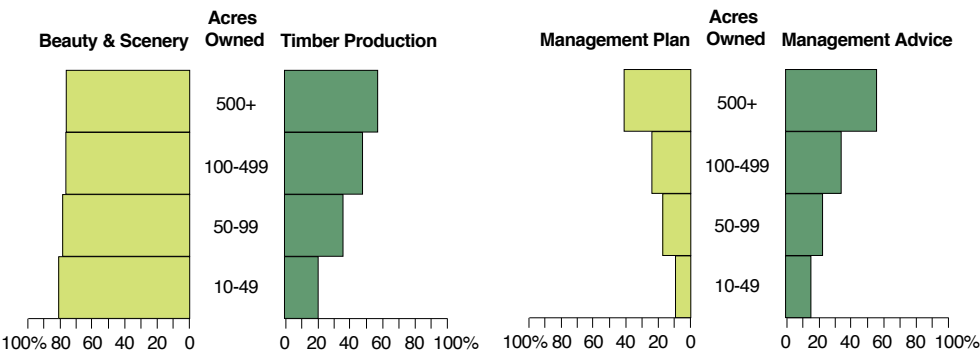
Every acre counts

The size of the woods or forest can make a difference in owners' attitudes and objectives. Some management objectives such as timber production vary widely depending on the acreage owned, but many values, such as scenic beauty, are shared by ownerships of all sizes.

These ownerships also found home and wildlife to be important reasons for owning their land.

Regardless of the reasons for owning woods and forests, planning and management can help support the desired activities over time.

Yet only 1 in 4 acres of these ownerships are owned by someone who has a written forest management plan, and only 1 in 3 acres are owned by people who have received forest management advice.



Percentage of Family and Individual ownerships (10+ ac) who rated beauty and scenery, and timber production as very important or important reasons for owning their woods or forest, by size of woods and forest holdings.

Percentage of Family and Individual ownerships (10+ ac) having a written forest management plan and where ownerships received forest management advice, by size of woods and forest holdings.

What Does the Future Hold for Family and Individual Woods and Forests?

One in 6 acres is owned by people who plan to sell or transfer some or all of their woods or forest in the next 5 years.

Changes in land ownership and management are likely to occur as land is passed from one generation to the next.

Forty-three percent of Family and Individual ownerships of woods or forest are 65 years or older.

Corporate Forest Ownerships – 10 or more acres

Corporate forest ownerships are businesses that own forest land, primarily for timber, but in some cases for other reasons as well. These approximately 160,000 ownerships hold 28 percent of all private forests. On average, they own 775 acres of forest.

Acres are not evenly split across these Corporate ownerships:

► 5,000+ acre ownerships

1 percent of the ownerships
73 percent of the acreage

► 50-4,999 acre ownerships

53 percent of the ownerships
26 percent of the acreage

► 10-49 acre ownerships

46 percent of the ownerships
1 percent of the acreage



Corporate forest ownership in the conterminous United States, 2013

Where are Corporate Forests?

Fifty-seven percent of the corporate forest acreage is in the south. The north has 23 percent of the acreage and the west has 20 percent.



Corporate Forest Ownership Objectives

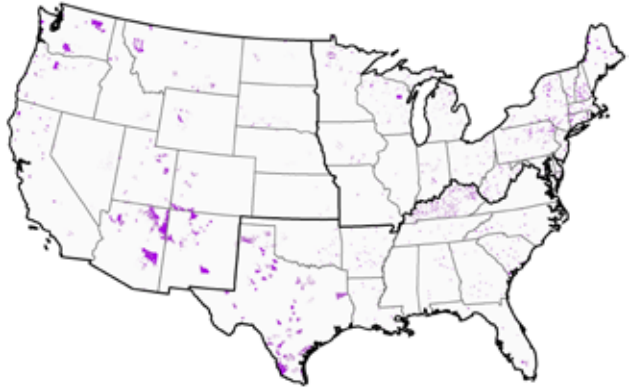
Two-thirds of corporate ownerships own land for investment purposes, 67 percent as part of a farm/ranch. While 32 percent have timber products objectives (representing 86 percent of corporate acreage), only 23 percent have a management plan (representing 76 percent of the acreage).

Other Private Forest Ownerships – 10 or more acres

Other Private forest ownerships include Native American tribes, nongovernmental conservation and natural resource organizations, and other (nonfamily) unincorporated partnerships. These approximately 42,000 forest ownerships hold 6 percent of all private forests. On average, they own 669 acres of forest.

Acres are not evenly split across these Other Private ownerships:

- ▶ **5,000+ acre ownerships**
2 percent of the ownerships
56 percent of the acreage
- ▶ **50 to 4,999 acre ownerships**
44 percent of the ownerships
42 percent of the acreage
- ▶ **10 to 49 acre ownerships**
54 percent of the ownerships
2 percent of the acreage



Other Private forest ownership in the conterminous United States, 2013

Where are Other Private Forests?

The west region accounts for 58 percent of the other private forest acreage, the south 22 percent and the north 20 percent.

Other Private Forest Ownership Objectives

About 90 percent of these ownerships own it for wildlife habitat protection, and 88 percent own it for beauty and scenery.





For more information on these topics,
please visit the Web page
[www.familyforestresearchcenter.org/
landowner-resources.html](http://www.familyforestresearchcenter.org/landowner-resources.html)

Your Information Needs: Help is Available

Every survey respondent had the opportunity to tell us their top information needs regarding their woods and forests. Respondents said they wanted information on:

- 1 More favorable tax policies
- 2 Advice on woodland and forest management
- 3 How to transfer land to the next generation

Tax Policy Information

If you need information on programs that can help lower your tax burden, contact your local state forestry agency to ask about how:

- ▶ Current use programs may help defer or reduce property taxes
- ▶ To deal with timber and other activities on income taxes
- ▶ Conservation-based tax incentives that limit development rights can reduce taxes

Woodland and Forest Management Advice

Whether you are concerned about insects and diseases, timber sales, tree regeneration, or timber markets, we suggest you contact your:

- ▶ Local extension forester from your State/land grant university
- ▶ State forestry agency

Estate Planning Information

Estate planning resources vary by state. Consult:

- ▶ An extension forester from your state university or a state forester
- ▶ American Bar Association real property, trust, and estate law section



Conclusions

America's woods and forests reflect the remarkable diversity and complexity of both their landscapes and their owners. Most of the woods and forests are privately owned. Families and Individuals are the main owner category, owning more acres than corporate or other private owners. Many attitudes, behaviors, and concerns are shared by all private owners, who commonly take great satisfaction in the beauty and privacy that their woods and forests provide, the wildlife habitat they protect, and the family heritage that they represent.

Yet every private owner of woods and forests has a unique set of circumstances and faces individual challenges, perhaps associated with their reasons for owning their land. Families and Individuals most often cited reasons of beauty, home, and wildlife. Corporations most often cited reasons for owning their land that were investment and farm/ranch related. Representatives from Other Private ownerships most often cited wildlife and wildlife related reasons for owning their land. Clearly, owners of woods and forests can benefit from suitable services and resources that help ensure their forests and their goals can be sustained into the future.

Unless noted otherwise, figures generally are for the conterminous (lower 48) United States.

The figure on the bottom of page 2 is: "Trees," "Woods," and "Forest" from BEST PICTURE DICTIONARY EVER! by Richard Scarry, copyright ©1966 and copyright renewed 1994 by Richard Scarry. Used by permission of Golden Books, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

The photos on the front and back cover; those on pages 2, 4, 5, 6, and 8; and the one on the bottom of page 10 are from Thinkstock.com.

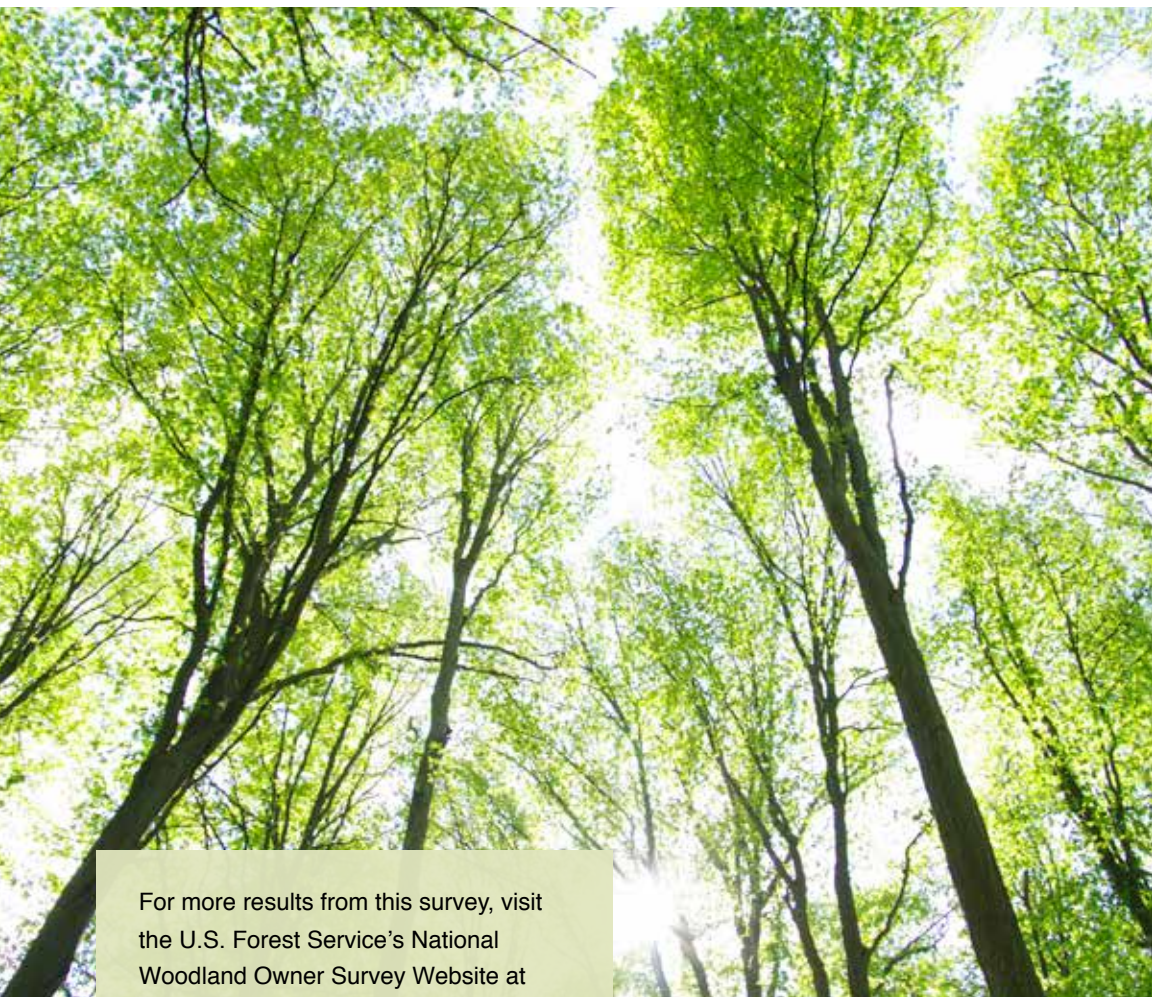
The photo on page 9 is courtesy of U.S. Forest Service.

The photo on the top of page 10 is by Jennifer Fish, Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, used with permission.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotope, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410, or call (202) 720-5964 (voice or TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

This report highlights general ownership patterns and key information about private owners of trees, woods, and forests from the 2011-2013 National Woodland Owner Survey, which is conducted by the U.S. Forest Service, to help us better understand:

- ▶ **Who owns the woods and forests of the United States**
- ▶ **Why they own it**
- ▶ **How they use it now**
- ▶ **How they intend to use it**



For more results from this survey, visit the U.S. Forest Service's National Woodland Owner Survey Website at [**www.fia.fs.fed.us/nwos**](http://www.fia.fs.fed.us/nwos).