

KEEPING  FORESTS

A System Level Approach To Southern Forest Conservation

Introduction

Healthy forests are one of the South's most ecologically and economically valuable assets. Over 105 million people call this region home and depend on the benefits provided by the roughly 245 million acres of remaining forestland.

Currently, the 13 southern states contain some of the most productive forests in the world. They provide more than 18 percent of the world's pulpwood for paper and paper-related products and seven percent of its industrial roundwood. Private working forests in the South contribute approximately \$52 billion to the GDP, directly and indirectly.¹ Southern forestry-related industries support other sectors of the economy resulting in

more than \$251 billion in total industry output and more than one million jobs in the region.²

Additionally, the southeastern United States is recognized as a global biodiversity hotspot. The North American Coastal Plain is one of only 36 and identified as the Earth's most biologically diverse yet threatened terrestrial areas. Habitat loss is advancing rapidly. Species are at risk that exist nowhere else in the world. The forest ecosystem provides an array of underappreciated "ecosystem services" including clean water, carbon storage, wildlife habitat, and a wide range of recreational opportunities. And these services benefit more than local human communities. By one estimate, biodiversity hotspots account for 35 percent of global ecosystem service needs.



\$17.7 billion

in forest products exports from the U.S. southern region



2/3 of nation's fish species

are supported by southern forest watersheds, many found nowhere else in the world



2.3 million jobs

created by the outdoor recreation economy in the South

The Future of Southern Forests

The **Southern Forests Future Project** was a multi-year effort designed to forecast the potential impacts of various environmental and economic factors on Southern forests through the year 2060. The study concluded that to meet the needs of future population growth; 43 million acres of land will be developed for urban uses over the next 45 years, with potentially 23 million acres of that total coming from land currently in forests.³

The study also noted that the interaction of timber markets, climate change, invasive species, and population growth will define the health and extent of our southern forests. Although it is difficult to predict specifically how the various pathways will impact forests in the future; several things are clear. Without intervention, significant losses of southern forests are inevitable and, maybe more importantly, **traditional approaches to conservation will not be adequate to meet the challenge.**

Nothing short of a paradigm shift will be needed to conserve working forest systems. If we are to sustain their long-term viability, we must elevate the critical role that functional forests play in our everyday lives. To do this requires strategies that are implemented at regional scales and leverage social, economic, and political approaches. New policy approaches and sources of funding will be essential. Innovative approaches that engage multi-sector partners will need to be developed. Collaboration will be crucial to success.

Conservation at this scale takes time and considerable effort. Yet it is necessary to make the investment if we are to turn the tides for southern forests. A partnership of cross-sector interests has formed under the umbrella of **Keeping Forests** to secure a stable future for this region's public and private woodlands.

¹ Forest2Market (2019, May). New Reports Details the Economic Impact of Forest Products Industry. Retrieved from <https://www.forest2market.com/blog/new-report-details-the-economic-impact-of-us-forest-products-industry>

² The Economics of Forestry (2014). The Economic Importance of Forestry in the South, 2014 Fact Sheet. Retrieved from https://www.forestryimpacts.net/reports/southern-region/Forest_Econ_Fact_Sheet_2014.pdf

³ The full Southern Forests Future Project report can be found here: <https://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/pubs/42526>

Keeping Forests

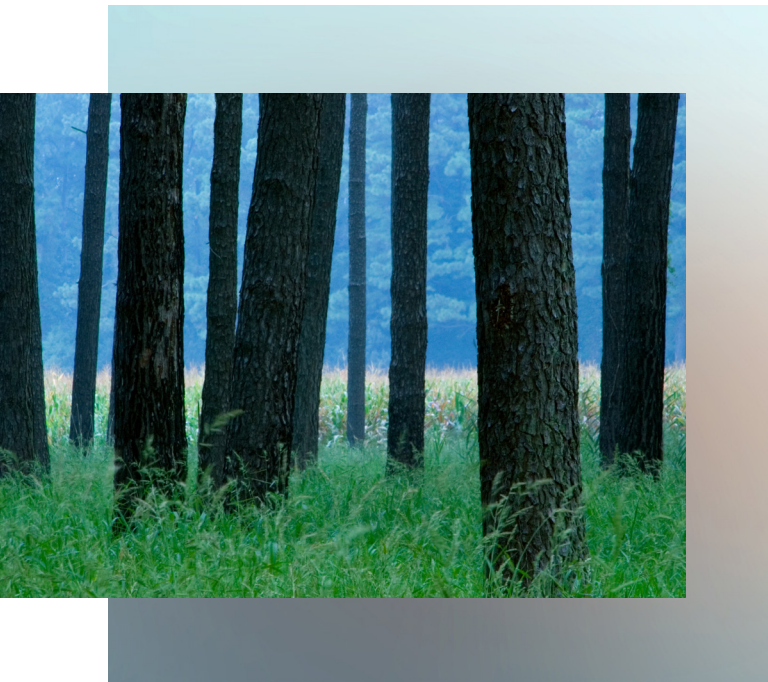
Our Challenge

If the South continues to develop at its current rate, our forests will pay the price. It's projected that by 2060 an estimated 23 million acres of southern forests will be lost, primarily as a result of increased population and urbanization. That's a portion of land equal to 19 Grand Canyons powering our economy, providing our way of life and sustaining our ecosystem. As forests are converted to other land uses and intergenerational transfer of private forests to a more urban generation accelerates, conservation can only be successful through the collaboration of a diverse and non-traditional set of stakeholders.



Who We Are

Keeping Forests is a regional partnership with the common mission to address these challenges. One voice alone cannot speak for southern forests, and a single entity cannot ensure its conservation. Our partners represent a range of interests. From environmental experts and private landowners to global corporations and government agencies, each of our partners illuminate the critical ecological, economic, and social importance of the region's forests.



Vision & Goal

The Keeping Forests partnership envisions a world where southern forests are valued as critical infrastructure that supports the health, prosperity, security, and well-being of the American people.

To achieve this vision, Keeping Forests is not focused on the piecemeal protection of forest, but on a holistic approach that considers the whole ecosystem. Healthy, functional forests are what provide the inherent benefits that support current and future innovations. To succeed at this scale requires that our partners work together to find new and innovative ways to sustain the approximately 245 million acres of remaining southern forests.

We believe to achieve that vision requires multi-sector interests collaborating on solutions that are not bound by organizational or geographic boundaries. Our work is focused on a holistic, regional approach that considers southern forests as a complex system. The health of this system depends on connected, functional forests.

Our goal is therefore lofty. Through our collective efforts we will ensure that in 2060 there will still be 245 million acres of forest land in the South. To achieve this will require we build a critical mass of public support and create new markets that incentivize private and family landowners to keep their forests as forests.

Theory Of Change

Forest conservation has traditionally been approached in a piecemeal way within the United States. Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and public agencies identified tracts of land as important conservation targets. Subsequently, they raised funds for fee acquisitions or easements that ensured land protection. This approach is based on a tract by tract approach, with individual organizations often operating independently to acquire land. Collaboration is not required except in the case of very large purchases where partners might come together to pool resources. Historically, this approach has served the conservation community well.

The challenges of climate change, unrelenting development, and an ever-shrinking supply of clean potable water demands we think about conservation differently. There is emerging evidence that intact forests support an exceptional confluence of globally significant environmental values. When we approach forest conservation tract by tract, we lose the integrity of the ecosystem and their ability to provide the full range of values.



Water

More than 50% of our country's drinking water originates in forests, which filter the most critical element of life and prevent soil erosion.



Human Health

Woodlands provide a place to improve our bodies and minds, and studies link time spent among the trees with improved mental health and physical wellbeing.



Biodiversity/ Habitat

As the cradle of wildlife, forests provide a fertile, replenished home for a wide variety of species.



Recreation

Forests fulfill our primal need for play, offering space for hiking and hunting, photography, camping and so much more.



Fiber

In ways large and small, our lives touch the forest every day, thanks to materials and products derived from wood fiber.



Resilient Rural Economies

Working forests keep our rural economy strong, and private landowners earn their livelihood from timber sales, eco-tourism and more.



Culture, Heritage, Sense of Place

Our stories, traditions and history are rooted in the Southern forest.

Our theory of change takes a radically different approach to forest conservation.

Eighty-six percent of southern forests are in the hands of private landowners, two-thirds of which are owned by families or individuals. What these landowners choose to do with their land will determine the future of the whole ecosystem, including its ability to provide the benefits on which we all depend. But the importance of working forests is not well-understood by the general public, and often there are insufficient economic incentives to resist conversion to other landuses.

Instead of the transactional approach of buying land, we believe the best chance to sustain southern forests at a meaningful scale is to create the conditions that enable our current land stewards to keep forests as forests.

Additionally, a critical part of our theory of change involves changing the way we work together. The success of our efforts is dependent on true collaboration. This is not an effort to pool resources for projects or activities. This is a partnership designed to redefine the challenges of forest conservation in new and compelling ways that ultimately leads to collective action.

⁴ Watson, J.E.M., Evans, T., Venter, O. et al. The exceptional value of intact forest ecosystems. Nat Ecol Evol 2, 599–610 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-018-0490-x>

Guiding Principles

The Keeping Forests partnership is guided by the following principles and assumptions:

- If private landowners cannot make a profit from the management of their forests, those lands will be converted to some other non-forested land use.
- We must respect the views and values of all partners with a stake in southern forests.
- Success can only be achieved with an “all hands” approach founded on intersecting interests.
- The implementation of successful conservation strategy must be based on respect for private landowners and in helping them achieve their objectives.



Our Strategic Approach

The challenges we face transcend the abilities of any individual organization. We can only achieve our goals by working across institutional boundaries.

To that end, representatives from more than 20 agencies and organizations have aligned the partnership around a commonly held view of the southern forest system. In a process that considered that system from social, economic, and ecological perspectives, we identified three leverage points that we consider critical to achieve our goal for southern forests:

1. The identification and cultivation of a new generation of forest champions and leaders.
2. The support and development of sustainable markets for traditional forest products; and
3. The creation of new markets for life-supporting forest related ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration and the maintenance of clean drinking water.

Partners formed working groups around each of these leverage points. The working groups have developed and are now testing strategic actions associated with each. Progress – and the learning around it – is continually evaluated. The leverage points and strategic activities are modified as needed.

The working groups are supported by part-time staff, but led by participating partners. Over time, our learning will help us to refine, modify, and grow our current approaches. Alternatively, we expect that some strategies may be replaced by newly emerging ideas. Each of our current areas of focus and associate strategies are discussed on the pages that follow.



The Identification And Cultivation Of Forest Champions And Leaders

A critical component of our long-term success will involve the identification and cultivation of forest oriented leadership in the economic, social and political arenas. To be successful these emerging leaders must have both the interest and knowledge to carry our message regarding the importance of working forests to conservation in the South. The paradigm shifts that Keeping Forests is intended to catalyze will require a consistent and long-term commitment of credible leaders from all corners of society.

Our current focus involves engaging leadership from conservation NGOs and land grant universities in the development of messaging that will help to shape their constituencies' perception of working forests. Currently, many in the NGO community have a negative view of any forest management. To successfully shift public perception of forest stewardship and sustainability, we must develop both the messages and leadership necessary to convince their

constituencies of the importance of working forests to forest conservation. We believe conservation organizations and academia have the ability to influence the general public's views on forest management and are therefore an important place to start these critical conversations.

Our strategic approach involves providing the leadership of conservation organizations (NGOs) and academia (land grant universities) with a set of messages that illustrate the importance of working forests. Currently, leadership within these sectors do not have a set of clear, consistent messages that demonstrate the relationship between active forest management and the related long-term conservation of Southern forests. The goal of this strategy is to define those messages and provide leadership with the information and tools needed to effectively communicate the value of active forest management to the long-term sustainability of Southern Forests.

Desired Outcomes:

- Identification of a set of unified messages that link working forests and conservation
- Consistent use of these messages by select leaders of conservation NGOs and land grant universities
- Increased acceptance of the importance of working forests to forest conservation by their respective constituencies and the public at large.

Next Steps:

- Conduct quantitative and qualitative public opinion research to determine resonant messages for target audiences
- Identify appropriate leadership in academia and the environmental NGO community to test the use of these messages with their constituencies
- Develop the necessary communication tools and outreach materials
- Identify appropriate communication venues
- Implement and measure the effectiveness of messaging campaigns

Development of New Markets for Traditional Forest Products

A primary assumption underlying Keeping Forests strategic approach is that if private forestland owners cannot make a living owning and managing their property; that property will be converted to some other non-forested land use. The Partnership identified that one of the highest leverage points for future forest retention is the availability of healthy and resilient markets for traditional forest products.

The Keeping Forests partnership cannot realistically influence housing starts or other macro-economic trends that impact timber markets. However, we can advance high-leverage opportunities to support markets for southern timber resources through the promotion of new wood products and emerging building technologies.

The Traditional Forest Products strategy is focused on information exchange that connects public officials, decision

makers and regulators charged with the design and construction of public buildings; with the latest technology in wood-based building products and construction.

The vision for this workstream is that wood-based building construction can support the sustainability of Southern forests while enhancing rural economies. The latest wood product technologies, such as Cross Laminated Timber, can be used in place of conventional products such as steel and concrete in new and retrofitted public buildings. The thinking behind this strategy is that if officials are knowledgeable about new building products and related construction techniques, they can provide the needed leadership to drive change throughout the construction industry (note: there is an emerging carbon sequestration component here as well).

Desired Outcomes:

- Increase awareness of the latest wood product technologies and the benefits of building with wood within the community responsible for design and construction of public buildings
- Increase the number of public buildings planned to be constructed with wood within the next 5 years
- Increase acceptance of wood-based construction technology among public and state agencies
- Updated or newly enacted laws, regulations and building codes that prioritize the use of wood-based construction in commercial buildings
- Build and strengthen relationships between public and private sectors responsible for construction standards and policy

Next Steps:

- Develop curricula for informational workshops*
- Identify high profile partners willing to serve as demonstration sites
- Design, plan and execute virtual workshops.
- Working with partners, facilitate the design and construction of one or more new buildings

* the workshop portion of this strategy has been funded and is currently being implemented

Development of Emerging Ecosystem Service Markets

The development of new markets for forests is essential to expand incentives for private landowners to keep and manage their forests sustainably. There are high-leverage opportunities in the development of alternative markets to traditional forest products, specifically those associated with what are often referred to as “ecosystem services.”

Functional forests provide a number of other incredibly valuable services including the maintenance of clean drinking water, carbon sequestration, wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities. Unfortunately, many of these services are taken for granted and have yet to be widely monetized. The Ecosystems Services strategy is focused on supporting and enabling the creation of viable markets around these services as an added incentive to private forest landowners.

Although carbon markets have existed in one form or another for several years, markets focused on the ability of forested landscapes to conserve and clean water are less well developed

and are therefore the early focus of the Ecosystem Services strategy. Our intent is to use the best available science to both measure and assign (tax parcel) water related ecosystem services accruing from private forestlands and their management; and translate that information into a web based – open sourced application that enables government, utilities, NGO’s and private landowners to understand the modeled water related values of private forests. This in turn can be used to support the creation of functional markets around forests and water.

Additionally, this workstream is focused on the identification of potential demonstration watersheds where the modeling described above can be tested and refined. As a part of that process, we are working with local leadership to better understand and overcome some of the economic and policy related obstacles to market development.

Desired Outcomes:

- Identify and quantify parcel level water values with tables/maps
- Develop a tool that allows for science to be translated and practically applied in a way that facilitates policy and decision-making
- Create a vehicle for industry and buyers of water (i.e. municipalities and other water users) to engage and participate in ecosystem service projects
- Enable the creation of a functional water marketplace
- Educate and empower local leadership
- Understand the motivations and constraints impacting the sellers of ecosystem services (i.e. forest landowners) to engage in payment-for-ecosystem-services projects

Next Steps:

- Develop funding proposal to fund modeling research
 - Completed – a \$300,00 Landscape Scale Restoration grant has been written and funded by the U.S. Forest Service
- Create peer to peer educational forums focused on market financing for high potential demonstration watersheds.
- Perform an in-depth analysis of financial and legal incentives/disincentives impacting decision making among private landowners in forested watersheds.