

# KEEPING FORESTS

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The development of the strategy and its implementation is guided by the essential participation of partners including The Center for Heirs Property Preservation, Conservation Resources, EarthEcho International, Forest Landowners Association, The Nature Conservancy, North Carolina State University, and USDA Forest Service.

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## Who We Are

Keeping Forests is a regional partnership with a mission of addressing the conversion and loss of private working forests in the South. Our partners represent a wide diversity of stakeholders and interests ranging from conservationists and private landowners to global corporations and government agencies.

Collectively, we believe the sustainability of Southern forests will require an alignment of multi-sector interests around solutions that are not bound by organizational or geographic boundaries; but that are focused on a holistic, regional approach that considers southern forests as a complex system impacted by a variety of social, political and economic factors.

## Our Strategic Approach

The challenges Southern forests 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 around a commonly held view of the Southern forest system. In a process that evaluated Southern forests and their management from social, economic, and ecological perspectives, we identified three leverage points that we consider critical in achieving our conservation goals:

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.

For more information on the work of Keeping Forests or to join in our efforts please visit:

[www.keepingforests.org](http://www.keepingforests.org)

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## Strategy I: Champions and Leaders

As noted by the first strategic lever identified above, we believe 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 successfully shift public perception of forest stewardship and sustainability, we must also develop the messages necessary to convince a variety of constituencies of the importance of working forests to forest conservation.

The outcomes defined for this strategy include the following:

1. Identification of a set of unified messages that link working forests and conservation.
2. Consistent use of these messages by select social, economic and political leaders.
3. Increased acceptance of the importance of working forests to forest conservation by their respective constituencies and the public at large.

An important first step in this strategy is to conduct quantitative and qualitative public opinion research to determine resonant messages for target audiences.

The report that follows provides a summary, synthesis, and supporting documentation of the information derived from both a qualitative and quantitative analysis of public views and attitudes around forests and their management across the South and should be helpful to partner organizations in the development of their own messaging and outreach efforts.

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**TO:** Interested Parties

**FROM:** Lori Weigel and Kathryn Hahne, *New Bridge Strategy*

**RE:** How to Communicate Effectively Regarding Managed Forests

**DATE:** October 19, 2020

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*New Bridge Strategy conducted both qualitative (online “Qualboard” focus groups) and quantitative research (a statistically valid survey of N=1,011 registered voters) throughout the Keeping Forests region, which includes Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia; as well as forest regions in Florida, Oklahoma, and Texas. This memo seeks to provide some easy to follow “rules” on how to better communicate the ecological importance of managed forests and why conserving them is vital.*

- **DO communicate that 85 percent of forests in the Southern United States are owned by family landowners.** When most people begin a conversation about forests, they think of forests on public lands. A plurality of Southerners believe that the government owns most forest land in their state (44%) rather than individuals and family landowners (28%) or private companies (27%). This is not quite as dramatic a misperception as we have seen among voters nationally, but it does impact the initial views of forests as ones that should be “conserved” and where “cutting trees” should be avoided.
- **DO talk about “managed forests.”** This phrase resonated with online discussion group participants far more than other potential terms. “Managed” is appealing because it sounds like there is some responsible oversight and rules for how the forest is handled. As one Alabama woman noted “it implies sustainability without total destruction.” A man noted that “managed means on purpose to me. So, a managed forest is a forest that is serving a purpose and can continue to serve its purpose. I want forests to remain.” Working forests had a far more mixed response as it could convey a working ecosystem, or it could conjure up images of logging camps. Participants were asked to choose which gave them the most positive reaction, and the response was overwhelming as illustrated below:

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<i>Preferred Phrase</i>	<i>Participants</i>
<b>Managed forest</b>	27
<b>Working forest</b>	6
<b>Woodlands</b>	5
<b>Timberlands</b>	1

- **DO place the threat to loss of forests in the context of development.** Nearly all respondents – 93% – view development as a threat to forests, with 62% viewing it as a “major threat.” It is also very top-of-mind. In the online discussion group, participants often brought up seeing trees cut down or bulldozed to make way for new houses or shopping areas and lamented the loss of forests in their areas. This perception is true even in small town and rural areas of these states.

Therefore, expressing the loss to forests as the coalition has in its materials is very effective in raising concerns: *“It is projected that about 23 million acres of southern forests will be lost by 2060, primarily as a result of increased population and development if the South continues to develop at its current rate.”*

- **DO place the loss of forests in large-scale terms as that appears to raise greater concerns than breaking out the loss into daily figures.** The scale of the loss sounded significant to the online discussion group respondents already, but we also tested a couple of different ways to express this loss. Notably, the comparison to the Grand Canyon or all of Georgia’s forests seem to resonate more strongly than expressing the loss in terms of the daily impact. The Grand Canyon is seen as vast (although some say they don’t really know how big it is), and Georgia is obviously close to home as well for many.

<i>One that Would Evoke Most Concern</i>	<i>Participants</i>
<b>That is equal to losing 19 Grand Canyons worth of forestland over the next 40 years</b>	16
<b>That is equal to losing all of the existing forests in Georgia over the next 40 years</b>	11
<b>That is equal to losing over 1,190 football fields of forestland a day for the next 40 years</b>	6
<b>That is equal to losing nearly two and a half square miles of forestland every day for the next 40 years</b>	6

In the survey there was no statistical difference in responses in comparing the Grand Canyon to the loss of all forests in Georgia.

- **DO highlight the responsible management of forests by family landowners.** From the online focus groups, we found that most participants assumed that individual and family landowners

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only prioritized the economic benefits of harvesting trees on their property. Participants tended to not believe that landowners engaged in stewardship of their land responsibly.

Therefore, in the survey, we asked respondents what information about how family landowners manage their land gave them the most favorable impression of these forests. The most resonant information focused on landowners ensuring the long-term health of their forests and engaging in best management practices that protect water quality.

*Foresters and state forestry associations work closely with individuals and families who own forests to help them adhere to a set of best management practices that help prevent erosion on their land and ensure harvesting of trees does not hurt water quality in streams or rivers on their land. This also ensures the sustainability of their forests. (53% chose as one of the two most favorable)*

*Families and individuals who own forestland may only harvest selected trees or ones in specific areas. They may harvest the trees in regular twenty-year cycles, or only after decades to cover unexpected/significant costs. They do not clear cut all their land and they replant trees that are harvested to maintain the long-term health of the forest. (49%)*

*Many families hold forestland that has been in their family for generations. They value the land not just as a way to help earn a living, but as an important part of their heritage to pass on to future generations. (40%)*

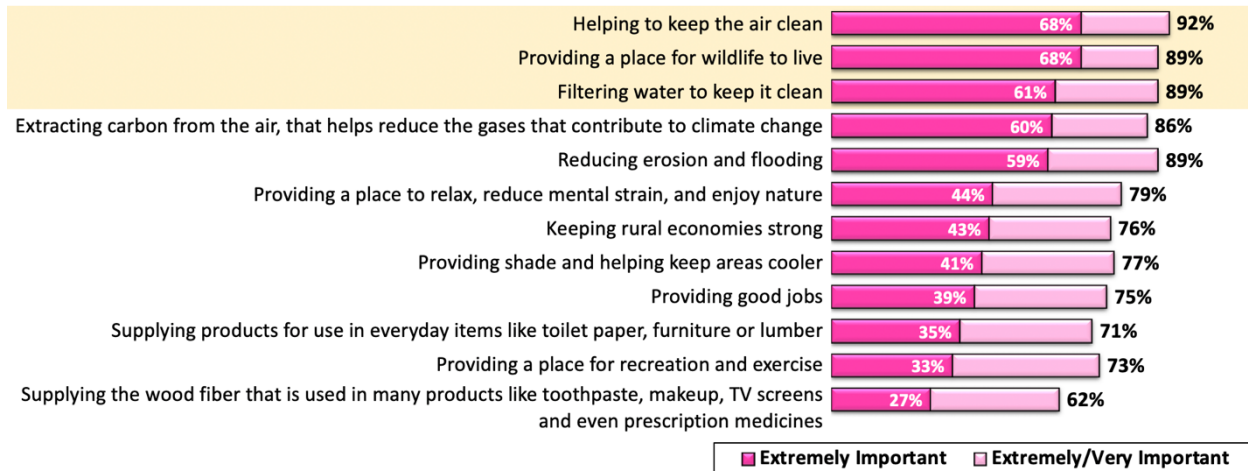
Talking about why families might harvest trees on their lands (to help offset the cost of landownership or for other expenses) only focused respondents on the economic aspects of forests, and away from the more valued benefits.

- **DO talk about the benefits of forests in keeping air and water clean and providing a home for wildlife.** Helping to keep the air clean and providing a place for wildlife to live tend to be deemed the most important benefits forests provide to people, followed closely by filtering water to keep it clean, extracting carbon from the air, and reducing erosion and flooding.

In contrast, the economic benefits of forests are still considered to be very important, but

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decidedly less so than the more nature and health focused aspects, as the chart depicts:



The top reasons in the survey for why we need to support family landowners in managing their forests align with the top benefits of forests – clean air and water, home for wildlife, and legacy for the future, as one can see in the following graph.

- **DO “read the room” before focusing on climate change benefits of forests.** We tested the carbon/climate benefits of forests in both the benefits forests provide and in messaging. In all cases, this was decidedly more partisan reaction to the carbon/climate change statements than to most other messages.
- **DO NOT talk about “cutting down trees.” Instead focus on harvesting and replanting.** Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Southern voters agreed that “cutting down trees in forests should almost always be avoided.” This sentiment was particularly strong among younger people, those living farther from forests and cities, Democrats and self-described environmentalists. That said, a majority of virtually every sub-group we examined agreed with the idea of avoiding cutting trees in forests. In the online discussion groups, it was clear that many did not immediately assume that this land would be replanted with young trees and that the cycle would perpetuate itself. Instead they say “cutting down trees” as more of a permanent loss of the benefits they value from forests.

In fact, an image of two men walking through younger growing trees was one of the images that gave online discussion group respondents the most positive impression of managed forests.

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It is important to note that the phrase tested in the online discussion group that was deemed least appealing also evokes the word “cut.” We also saw the idea of “using” forests either confusing or distasteful to many participants.

<i>Quick Phrases</i>	<i>Average Rating</i> <i>(0=Unfavorable, 100=Favorable)</i>	<i>Most Appealing</i> <i>(select 1)</i>	<i>Least Appealing</i> <i>(select 1)</i>
<b>Q.</b> Forests Are Every Fiber Of Our Being	80.97	12	2
<b>S.</b> Support Our Planet’s Hardest Workers	76.13	10	3
<b>P.</b> Our Forests Demand A Hand	71.32	7	0
<b>O.</b> Thank Your Southern Forests	69.38	1	3
<b>R.</b> Our Economy Grows With The Forest	68.67	5	6
<b>N.</b> Wood Works For You	58.49	1	5
<b>U.</b> Inaction Won’t Cut It	54.74	2	12
<b>T.</b> To Save A Forest, Use It	47.68	1	8

- DO NOT focus entirely on the products that come from responsible harvesting with the general public and steer clear of images that show mass production.** Messages that talk about jobs or the products that come from managed forests tend to be in a decidedly lower tier of importance to Southern voters. We also saw a number of respondents in the online discussion group talk about how they were trying to reduce their use of common products that originate from forests, such as copy/writing paper or paper towels. This may be one reason that showing large rolls of white paper, or an assembly line of toilet paper rolls were far less compelling to respondents. We generally saw a recognition that wood products are an important part of daily life, but again, some are seen as wasteful. Instead it is preferable to talk about jobs created both in products and in outdoor recreation.

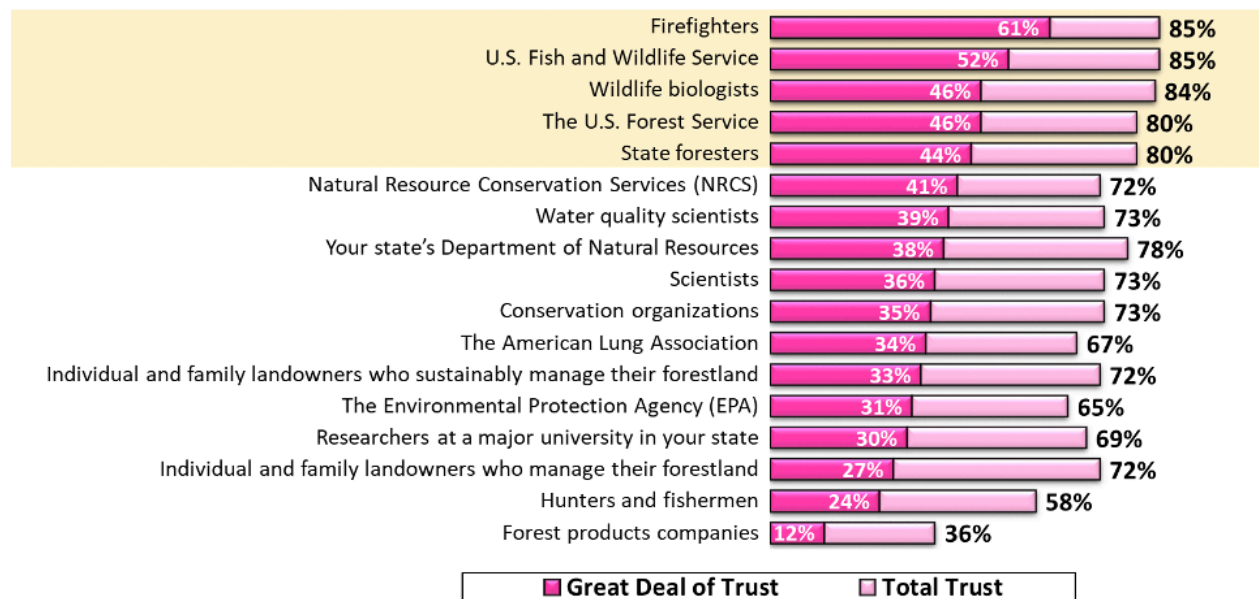
Finally, one of the least favorable images was one of large machinery loading up cut trees in a



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forest. Generally, respondents value these products, but they do not appear to want to see the “how the sausage gets made,” so to speak.

- **DO NOT focus on the cultural value or heritage of forests.** Participants in the online focus groups were rather confused about what was meant by the “cultural value” of forests.
- **DO rely on firefighters, wildlife experts/agencies, and state and federal foresters to communicate about the benefits of supporting family landowners.** Survey respondents rated a randomized list of potential messengers and indicated whether they would trust or be suspicious of what each messenger would say regarding managed forests. The following chart clearly shows that the vast majority are trusted at least somewhat, but there is far greater intensity (trust a great deal) for fire fighters, wildlife experts and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, as well as state foresters and the U.S. Forest Service. It is worth noting that NRCS was the least known group we tested.



- **DO use “plain English” language instead of industry-speak.** It is important to be ever mindful in public communications to speak in language that is common parlance, and not slide into the vernacular of forestry. Even relatively simple terms like “biodiversity” are sometimes confusing to respondents.

*Methodology: These communication recommendations are based on qualitative and quantitative research on behalf of Keeping Forests. In August 2020, we conducted an online “Qualboard” (focus group) among 39 residents of the Southern Forests target states who self-identified as volunteers, donors or members of*



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*environmentally focused organizations or who are active in their community and consider themselves to be an environmentalist. The discussion lasted three days from August 25-27, 2020.*

*In September/October 2020 we conducted an online survey among N=1,011 registered voters throughout the Keeping Forests Region. Approximately N=75 interviews were conducted throughout each of the following states: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. In Florida, Oklahoma, and Texas, interviews were conducted in specific counties that are either in or near forested areas. Due to the small population in the forested counties in Oklahoma, 19 interviews were completed in that area. Interviews were conducted September 23 – October 2, 2020. The credibility interval (analogous to margin of error) is +3.51% for the overall sample. The credibility interval will vary for sub-groups.*