
THE PINCHOT LETTER

News from the Pinchot Institute for Conservation

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The New Generation of Private Forest Landowners: Brace for Change

The United States is about to witness the largest intergenerational transfer of family forest ownership in the nation's history. Given the extent of private forests in the United States, and their significance for conserving public values such as water quality and wildlife habitat, it will be important to develop a clearer understanding of the changing needs and interests of the next generation of owners. The Pinchot Institute and the USDA Forest Service recently completed a study of the next generation of private forest landowners in the United States. Results suggest that existing landowner assistance programs might need to be adapted to ensure good forest stewardship, and minimize further losses of forest area through fragmentation and conversion to nonforest land uses.

THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS OF FOREST LAND OWNERS

Over the past decades, dozens of studies have been conducted by universities, natural resource agencies, and the forest industry to better understand the interests and inclinations of the current generation of private forest landowners regarding the management of family forests. The stakes are high. Private forest lands, not including those owned by integrated forest products companies,



account for nearly 50 percent of all the forest land in the United States, and nearly 60 percent of all productive timberland (Smith et al 2004). These private forests play a critically important role in protecting water quality, conserving habitat for rare plant and animal species; offering opportunities for hunting, fishing and other forms of outdoor recreation; producing wood and other renewable forest products; and mitigating climate change by sequestering millions of tons of carbon dioxide and other "greenhouse gases" (Best and Wayburn 2001). In many ways, private forests play an essential role in protecting important public conservation values. Thus it is in the national public interest that we better understand the needs and motivations of private forest owners, to better craft programs and policies to assist forest landowners in managing their forests sustainably, and maximize the chances that those forests will continue to provide important public conservation values in perpetuity.

Certain consistent findings across many of these studies suggest that the perspectives of current private forest landowners are reasonably well understood, even though the total population is large—10.3 million—and diverse. Typically, the most commonly cited reasons why these individuals and families own forest land are for aesthetic enjoyment, conserving environmental values, privacy, and having a valuable asset to pass along to heirs (Butler and Leatherberry 2004). Relatively few owners indicate that timber production is an important reason for having forest land. These basic findings were most recently corroborated in the 2003 National Woodland Owners Survey (NWOS), conducted by the U.S. Forest Service.

(continued on page 2)

INSIDE

- ✿ The New Generation of Private Forest Landownerspage 1
- ✿ Working Toward Common Goals in European and American Forestrypage 5
- ✿ Cooperative Conservation in Coastal Alaskapage 11

Leadership in Forest Conservation Thought, Policy and Action

The 2005 NWOS conducted by the U.S. Forest Service found that the proportion of forest owners under 45 years of age dropped sharply between 1993 and 2003. More than 60 percent of today's forest owners are older than 55, and more than half of these are older than 65. During the next two decades, a substantial portion of the nation's private forest lands will be transferred to the next generation. Ten percent of the family forestland is owned by people who plan to transfer it within the next *five* years.

Will the goals of this next genera-

tion regarding the management of family forest lands be similar to those of the current generation? How will the demographics of the next generation of forest owners be different, and how might this affect their values, motivations and needs as they make decisions on the future of their forests? The answers to these questions have profound implications for what can be expected of this vast area of forest in the United States, and how the public values that have traditionally been provided by these private forests will be affected.

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON, ASK THE KIDS

To begin addressing some of these important questions, the Pinchot Institute, in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service and state forestry agencies, conducted a survey of the next generation of private forest landowners—not the owners of today, but those most likely to be the owners in the future. Most important to the study was the cooperation of individuals who own and manage private forest lands today, who granted

ABOUT THE PINCHOT INSTITUTE

Recognized as a leader in forest conservation thought, policy and action, the Pinchot Institute for Conservation was dedicated in 1963 by President John F. Kennedy at Grey Towers National Historic Landmark (Milford, PA)—home of conservation leader Gifford Pinchot. The Institute is an independent nonprofit organization that works collaboratively with all Americans nationwide—from federal and state policymakers to citizens in rural communities—to strengthen forest conservation by advancing sustainable forest management, developing conservation leaders, and providing science-based solutions to emerging natural resource issues. Further information about the Pinchot Institute's programs and activities can be found at www.pinchot.org.

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permission to interview their offspring, and to raise sometimes sensitive questions that in many instances had not yet been discussed within the families themselves. There were several instances in which forest landowners who had heard about the study contacted the Pinchot Institute to request that their children be interviewed. In most cases, the current owners were concerned about the future of their forests, but a surprisingly large proportion of parents did not know whether their children were interested in assuming management of the family forests, and had never discussed this with them.

The study was conducted in early 2005 through a series of 300 telephone interviews with the children of current private forest landowners, in six regions encompassing 25 states across the country. Interviews typically lasted between 30-45 minutes, and approximately 30% of the interviews were conducted with siblings of the same family. Current forest landowners were identified through state forestry agencies, university extension services, county assessor offices, and representatives of state and county forest landowner associations. The offspring to whom the Pinchot Institute was granted permission to interview represented families owning a total of approximately 300,000 acres in a range of tract sizes (15 percent owned 10-49 acres; 17 percent owned 50-99 acres; 44 percent owned 100-499 acres).

THE NEXT GENERATION: DIFFERENT NEEDS AND INTERESTS

The general picture that emerges of the next-generation owners of the nation's private forests is that most have had little involvement to date in the management of the family forest; and many of these individuals have little interest in becoming more involved. A large proportion of these next-generation owners work in pro-

fessional fields with average or higher household incomes. Most do not live near their families' forests, and do not plan to live on the family forest in the future.

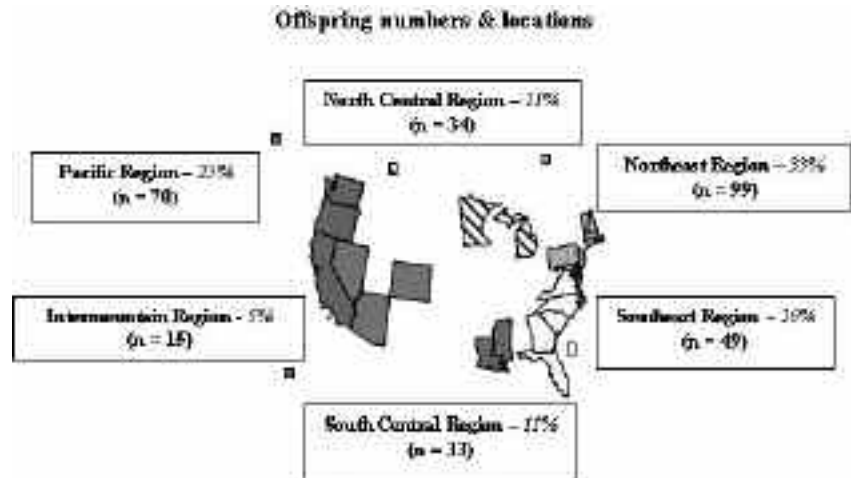
Nevertheless, most offspring of today's private forest landowners expect that their parents will want to keep the forest land in the family; and that as heirs, they will find themselves being forest landowners themselves within the next 10-20 years. Most offspring want to inherit the land, but less than half want to be involved in the current management of the land. This will lead to an intergenerational disconnect and may mean that the next generation of forest landowners will not be able to manage the land according to the legacy their parents envisioned.

Many of these individuals expect that the family forest will one day become a source of income for them, but the importance of this seems to vary significantly by gender, age and geographic region. Next-generation forest landowners who are women tend to focus more on the importance of maintaining the land as a family legacy more than men, who tend to focus more on income and personal use. The next generation of forest landowners seems to be generally aware of land use changes, particularly residential development, that are tak-

ing place in the vicinity of the family forest, and see the undeveloped nature of the family forest as one of its most important characteristics. In general, their stated intent is to retain the land as forest, but needs for ready cash for unanticipated emergencies, paying taxes, or covering medical expenses are factors that could prompt them to convert, subdivide, or sell family forest land.

Next-generation forest landowners, in general, see the major challenges in forest land ownership being taxes, maintenance costs, and the time commitment required to manage the property. Many are only marginally knowledgeable about the family forest itself and how it is being managed by their parents; and many express no desire to become more knowledgeable at this point. Some of this may be in deference to their parents, and the sensitivities surrounding discussions of inheritance. But it also seems to reflect the general low level of interest in becoming involved in management decisions, and taking ownership of a forest not located near their own community.

This picture of the next generation of private forest landowners, suggests the need for a comprehensive examination and evaluation of existing federal, state and private programs for technical and financial assis-



tance to private forest landowners. Many of the existing programs for technical assistance, financial incentives and cost-sharing were developed to help landowners absorb some of the up-front costs of improving forest growth and productivity through silvicultural practices. Returns from forest management often come many years after the initial investment in forest improvements. Many public and corporate assistance programs are aimed at enabling landowners to undertake these activities despite the long lag time between expenses and income.

A population of private forest landowners that is increasingly remote from the forest land itself, whose livelihoods are less connected with the land, and who lack prior involvement with the management of the family forest is unlikely to have the experience or knowledge to feel competent in making management decisions. Ultimately, they may be less interested in owning the land at all, and thus be more likely to consider options that will result in further fragmentation or conversion of forest land.

THE NEED TO RE-EXAMINE EXISTING LAND OWNER ASSISTANCE POLICIES

The next two decades of Americans will witness the largest intergenerational transfer of family forest land ownership in the nation's history. The needs and interests of the next generation of private forest landowners clearly will be different from those of their parents, but in what ways? Will the individuals who stand to inherit lands that are an important part of their family legacy—and which also collectively constitute a major share of the nation's productive forest land—be prepared to assume these responsibilities? What will be the implications for water, wildlife and the array of other public conservation benefits that these private lands have traditionally provided? What will be the

implications for timber production? Are there alternative approaches to the existing suite of programs and policies for private forest landowner assistance that will more effectively address the circumstances of the next generation of owners, and thus help ensure the continued conservation and stewardship of these lands?

Most of these questions will have to be answered through future research efforts, but this should not stand in the way of incorporating these kinds of considerations into intergenerational "succession plans" for family forests. To the extent that such planning is done today, its focus is often limited to estate planning aimed at minimizing the tax consequences of intergenerational transfers of assets. A more comprehensive approach might include considerations of continuity in forest management plans and objectives, particularly where goals include creating conditions or values that take decades to develop.

In remarks at the National Press Club in Washington on October 3, Georgia tree farmer (and Rolling Stones keyboardist) Chuck Leavell acknowledged the changes taking place on private forest lands, especially in the South where he is now seeing "fewer windmills and more satellite dishes." In terms of the policies and programs aimed at assisting private forest landowners—and simply keeping the forest in forest, Leavell noted that "what worked in the past may not work in the future." The future of private forest lands is too important—to private landowners and to the national public interest—for us to be unprepared. The results of this first look at differences in the next generation of private forest landowners suggest that this is an area that warrants broader and more intensive research, and a comprehensive examination of existing policies and programs relating to private forest lands.

Additional information on this study can be found at www.pinchot.org, or by contacting Al Sample (alsample@pinchot.org), Catherine Mater (mater@mater.com), or Brett Butler (bbutler@fs.fed.us). This project was undertaken by the Pinchot Institute as a cooperative venture in cooperation with the USDA Forest Service State and Private Forestry Northeastern Area and the USDA Forest Service Northern Research Station.

Please turn to page 14 for an interview with Catherine Mater about this study.

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