

GEORGIA FORESTRY
COMMISSION



Executive Summary

Georgia's Sustainable Forests: A Resource for All Generations

Prepared by the Georgia Forestry Commission
for the Georgia General Assembly January 2014





Executive Summary

Georgia's forests are being sustainably managed to meet the numerous needs of our state today. To ensure our forests will continue to meet the needs of present generations and the projected demands for future generations, many challenges must be met. Success will depend on proactive decisions by our state leaders and the entire forestry and conservation communities addressing a myriad of forestry-related issues. A more comprehensive listing and discussion of these issues can be found in Georgia's Forest Action plan.



Georgia boasts more than 24 million acres of forestland. Georgia's forest inventory volumes are at an all-time high. We have 49% more cubic feet of wood growing in Georgia than we did 40 years ago. However, the state's population is increasing at a record rate. Urbanization continues to be a threat to forest sustainability and recent increases in population and changing land-use patterns have made ongoing forest management more difficult in some areas of the state. These and other trends threaten forest sustainability and the numerous economic, environmental, and social benefits that our thriving forests

provide. This report describes both forestland (all forests including those not available for commercial harvest – 24.7 million acres) and timberland (all forests that are available for commercial harvest – 24.3 million acres).

Georgia's forest area has remained stable over the past 50 years at about 24 million acres. Approximately 91% of this acreage is privately owned, and Georgia has more privately-owned acres of timberland than any other state. Forest growth exceeds removals by 41% (annually) and is available to supply global and local markets. However, ownership patterns have been changing and average parcel sizes are shrinking. This is due to a number of factors, including the effects of urbanization and the tremendous divestiture of forest industry-owned lands. Several issues, such as federal, state and local tax structures and the strength of forest product markets, affect the economic viability of owning and managing forestland.

Eighty-three of Georgia's 159 counties have at least one primary wood-using mill. Strong markets for forest products are crucial to the future of traditional pulp and paper, lumber, and pole supplies. In 2012, economic impact from forestry was \$28.9 billion and maintained over 135,000 jobs. The development of a forest resource-based bioenergy industry is poised to contribute significantly to Georgia's economy and reduce our dependence on non-renewable fossil fuels.

Georgia's forests provide valuable ecological services that help supply our state with clean water, clean air, wildlife habitat, and recreation opportunities



that benefit all Georgians. A University of Georgia study valued these ecological services at \$37 billion, with clean water noted as one of the most important services that benefit society. Because two out of every three raindrops in Georgia land on forestlands, the sustainable management of our forests is one of the most significant factors affecting the state's water quality and quantity. The General Assembly's adoption of the Statewide Water Management Plan recognizes Forestry Best Management Practices as a model program that other land-use practitioners should emulate. A GFC internal analysis of watersheds used for drinking water indicates that 60.5% of these areas are forested, so these forests cleanse the water that is utilized by the majority of Georgians. Wildlife-associated recreation, which is in great part supported by healthy forest ecosystems, annually generates \$5.5 billion and supports 40,000 jobs.

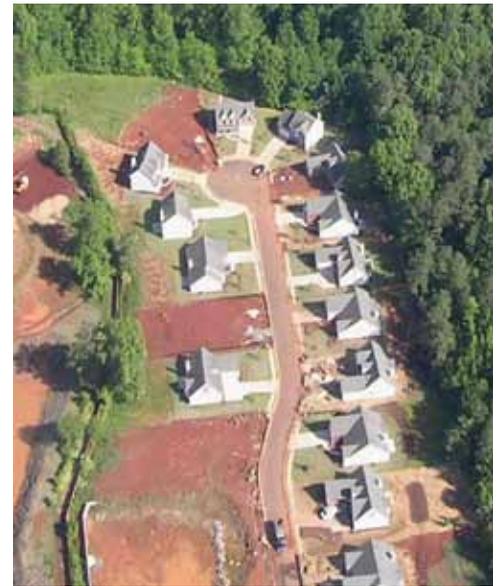
Forestry professionals ensure public safety by providing fire prevention services in the form of prescribed fire as well as wildfire suppression. The health and sustainability of Georgia's forests are dependent on attention to both. Urbanization places more lives and property at risk from wildfire as growth expands into rural environments and greatly complicates the management of wildfires and prescribed fires.



Urban sprawl and fragmentation impact natural habitat and ecological services forests provide. The loss of forestland to urbanization continues to be the greatest single factor for conversion to other (non-forest) uses, even though we are slowly emerging from one of the greatest recessions in our country's history. *A system of public and private conservation strategies is needed to support forest and wildlife sustainability. Sustaining healthy forests, including the professional use of prescribed fire, is critical to maintaining the full suite of ecosystem services, traditional forest outputs and the habitats required by native species. Expansion of the Georgia Land Conservation Program supports this goal, as do the State Wildlife Action Plan and the Forest Action Plan.*

Forestland valuations for tax purposes are inconsistent across Georgia, despite the General Assembly's overwhelming support and passage of the Forestland Protection Act (FLPA) and its subsequent approval by voters in the form of Constitutional Amendment One in 2008. FLPA was a vital first step toward creating fairness and consistency in timberland taxation in Georgia, allowing corporate timberland owners, for the first time, to participate in a conservation use property tax program. Since 1992, private non-industrial landowners have been permitted to enroll up to 2,000 acres in a Conservation Valuation Assessment (CUVA) program. These programs are critical to incentivize forest investment and retain our current forests.

While CUVA and FLPA property tax programs have been effective in allowing much timberland to avoid conversion and remain as timberland, many in the forestry community would embrace a property tax system that is far less complicated, far less restrictive, and far less encumbered by special conditions. Revisions to the current timberland property tax system should strive to bring Georgia's property tax rates more in line with those in surrounding states to help ensure Georgia's forest resources for future generations. Even when land is enrolled in CUVA or FLPA, University



of Georgia studies have shown the ad valorem taxes paid from these lands exceed the amount of local costs and services needed to sustain them.

Government policies and rules (at the federal, state, and local levels) can add burdens and requirements to working forests and may impact profitability, as well as create deterrents to investment. Policy makers should carefully consider the full implications of any proposed changes.

The cooperative efforts of a diverse group of natural resource professionals developing this report have confirmed the need to periodically update the Forest Action Plan (completed in 2010), and work in conjunction with the State Wildlife Action Plan. By doing so, the GFC and its partner agencies and organizations can better identify priorities and outreach efforts that will ensure the state's forest resources are being managed for optimal results.

With the wise use of knowledge and resources, Georgia can keep its forests sustainable for present and future generations, providing tangible benefits to landowners, local economies, and forest industry, while continuing to provide vital ecosystem services from which all Georgians benefit.

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GaTrees.org

Protecting and conserving
Georgia's forests.

Ensuring that Georgia maintains
healthy, sustainable forests
providing clean air, clean water,
and abundant forest products for
generations to come.

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