

*Of the many possible players involved in conserving America's forestlands in the coming century, family forest owners will have a critical role. Knowing who they are and understanding their goals are the keys to keeping them involved in conservation.*

# FAMILY FOREST OWNERS RULE!

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**W**hat do Teddy Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, and John Weeks all have in common? Yes, they are all men. And yes, they all died more than 60 years ago. But the reason I ask is that they were all catalysts for forest conservation in the United States. Theodore Roosevelt and

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Gifford Pinchot helped create the U.S. Forest Service and were responsible for the additions of millions of acres to the national forests. John Muir was a founder of the Sierra Club and an early advocate for wilderness preservation. And John Weeks is credited with the 1911 legislation responsible for spurring the creation of national forests in the eastern United States.

But these men represent a bygone era. For the past century, much effort has been placed on the conservation of forests through public ownership and management. Yes, we will continue to debate the specifics of how public lands are managed, but more likely than not, the publicly owned forests will remain forests. We may see a moderate increase in the acreage of public ownership, but not like past levels. The largest issues facing forests in the United States are no longer about public lands. The public still wants the same things envisioned by the Weeks Act—water protection, timber supply, aesthetics, and recreational opportunities

(U.S. Forest Service 1913)—but the focus must now be on the lands whose fate is more uncertain. We have entered a new era, the era of private forest conservation.

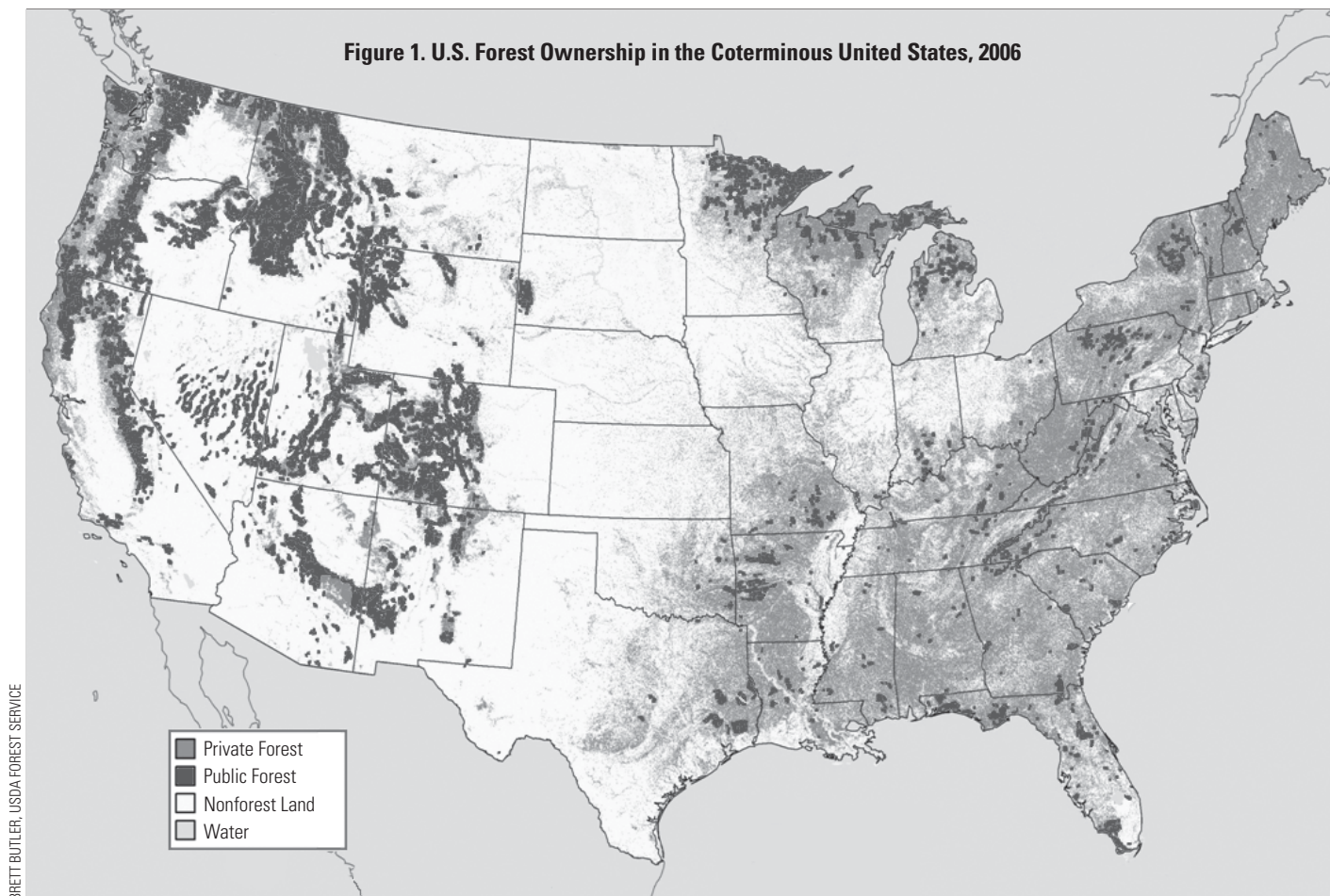
## **WHO OWNS THE FORESTS?**

Pop quiz: According to the average citizen, who owns most of the forestland in the United States? Is it (A) the U.S. government, (B) the forest industry, or (C) families and individuals? The most likely response is A, the U.S. government (Metz and Weigel 2007). Ask a friend, ask a family member, ask a random person on the street, and the answer is swift and consistent: the U.S. Forest Service owns all forests in the United States. (I work for the U.S. Forest Service. I know we manage a lot of acres, but even that response surprised me.) The second most common answer is B, the forest industry, but the millions of acres of industrial plantations are only a fraction of the total forest area.

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**BY BRETT J. BUTLER**

Figure 1. U.S. Forest Ownership in the Coterminous United States, 2006



BRETT BUTLER, USDA FOREST SERVICE

The correct answer is C: a plurality of American forestland is owned by families and individuals, collectively referred to as family forest owners. Of the 751 million acres of forestland in the United States, 56 percent is privately owned, and of this, nearly two-thirds is owned by families and individuals (Butler 2008). Why is there this misperception? In the western United States, the federal government indeed owns a majority of the forestland, and the stories in the media often concentrate on these lands. But in the East, where half of the forests in the nation exist, it is predominantly private ownership, and of this private ownership, it is family forest ownership that dominates.

If we are interested in forest conservation, we must be interested in family forest owners. And given the numbers, I say family forest owners rule!

### SIZE MATTERS

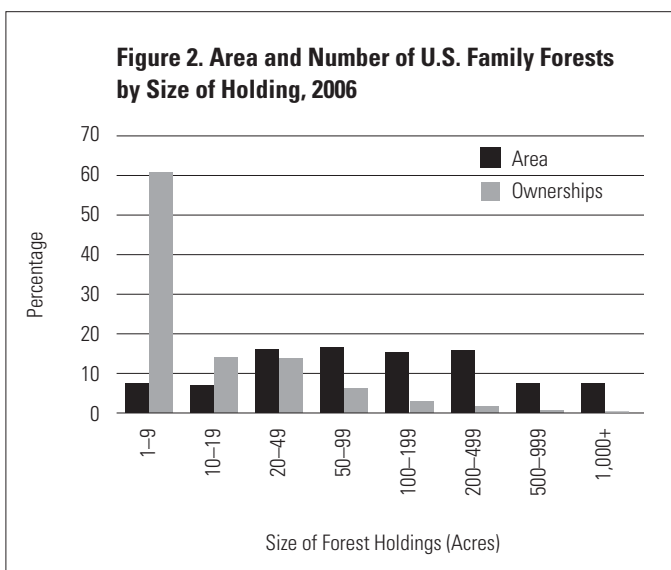
There are two ways of looking at family forest ownership statistics—number of ownerships and number of acres (see Figure 2). When we count the number of family forest ownerships, we find more than 10 million across the United States. And if we consider that many of these ownerships are composed of more than one person, such as a joint ownership by a husband and a wife, this number increases dramatically, likely more than doubling. Most of these owners have relatively small holdings; 61 percent have holdings of only one to nine acres.

If we look at numbers of acres, however, we get a very different picture. Of the 264 million acres of family forestland in the United States, just over half of the acres are owned by people with 100 or more acres.

So what is the right way to look at the statistics? It depends on the question. If we are interested in politics, we have to remember that people vote, trees do not. So looking at the number of owners is important. If we are interested in ecological or timber issues, then acres may be a better metric. In most circumstances, it would be prudent to consider both.

Not all family forest ownerships are created equal. Depending on whether the holding is one acre, 50 acres, or 1,000 acres, the owner can do different things with it. Acreage is the single greatest predictor of other family forest attributes. As the size of forest

Figure 2. Area and Number of U.S. Family Forests by Size of Holding, 2006



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holdings increases, so too do land tenure, absentee ownership, the likelihood of having a management plan, and numerous other attributes (Butler 2008). Size likely influences owners' attitudes toward their land and their sense of place (Brown and Raymond 2007), and there are economies of scale that influence the financial feasibility of forest management (Row 1978). When we seek to understand family forest owners, size matters.

### BEAUTY, LEGACY, AND PRIVACY

To fully understand people's motivations and behaviors, we have to understand their attitudes. Attitudes will never fully predict behavior—there are too many other factors involved—but they provide important insights. Despite what some of us might have learned in forestry school, timber production is not the primary reason that families own land (Butler 2008). Rather, the most important reasons they own forestland are related to the aesthetics and privacy the land provides and its importance as part of their family legacy. "Aesthetics" is shorthand for the enjoyment owners get from many facets of the land—the trees, the wildlife, everything about it. Many owners have a primary or secondary residence on their land and greatly value the privacy and solitude their forests provide. "Legacy" is their ability to pass the land on to the next generation: many owners have inherited the land from their parents or other relatives and would like to do the same for future generations.

Although everyone is unique, grouping family forest owners based on common attitudes and behaviors is useful for understanding them and designing effective programs and communication materials. The Sustaining Family Forests Initiative has identified four groups, based on people's reasons for owning

forestland: woodland retreat, working the land, supplemental income, and uninvolved owners (see Figure 3; Butler et al. 2007; www.engaginglandowners.org). "Woodland retreat owners" are primarily interested in the aesthetics, privacy, and other amenity values their forests provide, and many in this group have homes or cabins on their land. "Working the land owners" are multiple-objective owners: you name it, they like it, whether the purpose is aesthetics, recreation, or timber production. The money they can earn from the land, through either land or timber sales, is the primary reason that "supplemental income owners" have forestland. And when asked about their purposes, "uninvolved owners" give no strong opinions; maybe they inherited the land, maybe it is the back 40 of the farm, or there is some other reason they became unintentional forest owners. By tailoring programs and communications for specific groups, the forestry and conservation communities can be more efficient and more effective in their efforts to engage family forest owners.

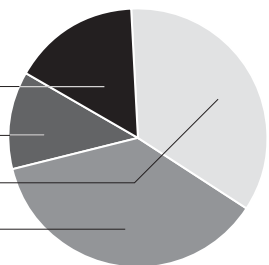
### TO MANAGE OR NOT TO MANAGE...

That is the question that many owners ask themselves. Most owners do not object to active management, and many feel it is necessary to keep the woods healthy. The problem is that many of them do not know what to do and choose to do nothing. Although timber production is not a major ownership objective (see Figure 4), 27 percent of the family forest owners (who account for 58 percent of the family forestland acreage) have commercially harvested

**Figure 3. Percentage of Area and Number of U.S. Family Forest Ownerships by Attitudinal Groups, 2006**

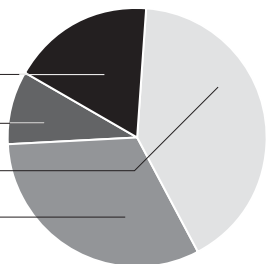
#### ACRES

Uninvolved	16%
Supplemental Income	12%
Woodland Retreat	35%
Working the Land	37%

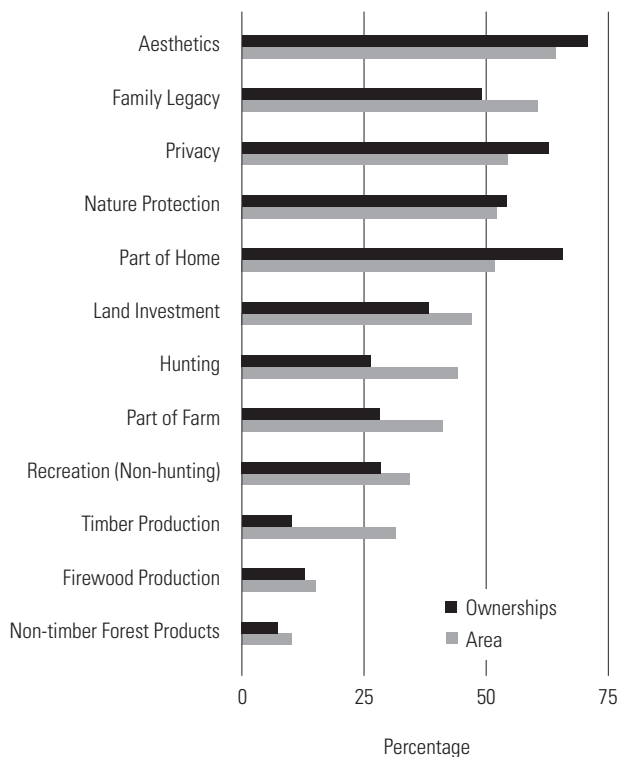


#### OWNERSHIPS

Uninvolved	18%
Supplemental Income	9%
Woodland Retreat	41%
Working the Land	32%



**Figure 4. Area and Number of U.S. Family Forest Ownerships by Reason for Owning Forestland, 2006**



Numbers include landowners who ranked each objective as very important (1) or important (2) on a seven-point Likert scale.

trees from their land (Butler 2008).

So harvesting is occurring, but is it being done sustainably, and is it best meeting the needs of the owners (and society)? Only 4 percent of owners (accounting for 17 percent of family forestland) have written management plans (Butler 2008). This does not bode well for forest planning. And only 14 percent of the owners (37 percent of the land) have received professional management advice (Butler 2008). Foresters fall far short of reaching private forestland owners.

### WHO OWNS THE WOODS (PART TWO)?

Although demographics are not much fun to talk about, they are important for understanding how to communicate with people (Butler et al. 2007; [www.engaginglandowners.org](http://www.engaginglandowners.org)). According to the National Woodland Owner Survey (Butler 2008), the demographics are fairly straightforward—family forest owners are older white men. Fifteen percent are 75 years or older, another 19 percent are between 65 and 74 years old, and an additional 32 percent are between 55 and 64 years old. Ninety-five percent of them are white. And 81 percent of them are male.

At least the sex statistic needs to be taken with a grain of salt. The survey asked the primary decision-maker to complete the survey. We know that many family forests are owned jointly by a man and a woman, and their decisions are made together at the kitchen table.

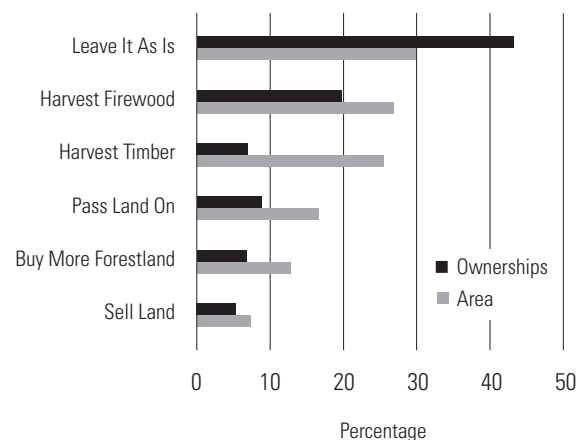
The age of family forest owners is an important thing to consider. As their age increases, so too does the likelihood of handing down, selling, or otherwise disposing of the land. With a substantial percentage of older owners, many of whom are planning to bequeath the land or sell it in the near future, consideration must be given to who the next generation of family forest owners will be (Butler 2008; Mater et al. 2005).

Although family legacy is an important objective (see Figure 3), it is also a major concern (Figure 6; Butler 2008): Will today's owners be able to pass their land on to the next generation, and will their kids want it? Property taxes, especially coupled with other life events, can force owners to sell their land when they would not do so otherwise (Butler et al. 2010). Even if they can hold on to it, their children may be uninterested in the land or live too far away to manage it.

### FOREST OR WOODLAND OR TREES?

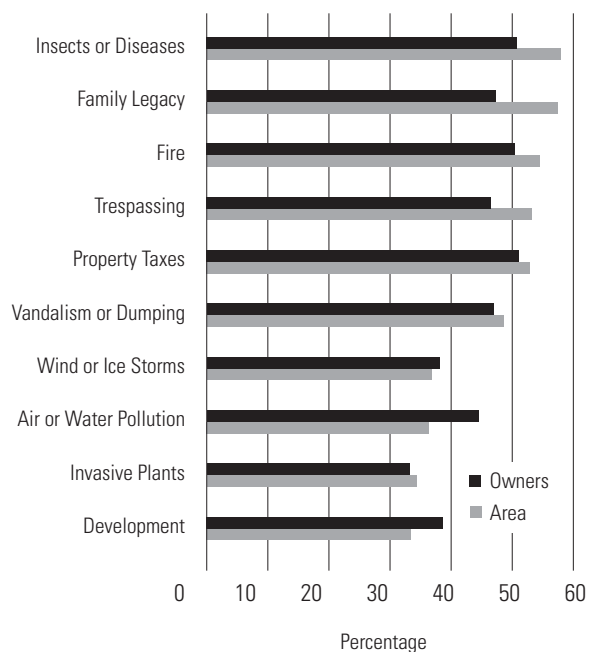
My mother, as usual, was right—words do matter. We—the forestry and conservation community—often fail to engage landowners because we are using the wrong words. At the website “Tools for Engaging Landowners Effectively,” we even have a page called “From Forestry-Speak to Landowner-Speak” that shows the differences in our terminology. For example: when we were conducting focus groups with family forest owners in five states across the United States, we began by asking people to describe their land so we that we could hear the words that they use. We started off in Massachusetts, and there they owned trees and woods. We asked about forests; they said a forest was something bigger, something out West. We went down to South Carolina, and there they said they had trees, woods, and woodland. Again, forests were something bigger and out West. We went to Wisconsin; they did not own forests, either—they had woods, woodlots, and trees. Our final focus groups were in Oregon, where we thought we would finally find the forest. But these owners had woods, woodlots, and timber—still no forests.

**Figure 5. Area and Number of U.S. Family Forest Ownerships by Landowners' Plans (Next 5 years), 2006**



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**Figure 6. Area and Number of U.S. Family Forest Ownerships by Top 10 Concerns of Landowners, 2006**



Numbers include landowners who ranked each objective as very important (1) or important (2) on a seven-point Likert scale.

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It basically came down to scale: trees → woods → forests. The term *forest*, used by the forest and conservation community, is missing many “forest” owners. Yes, some owners already engaged with the forest and conservation community—tree farmers, for example—understand our use of the word, but most owners do not self-identify with it. We can change either their words or ours. Seeing that there are 10 million of them and many fewer of us,

the choice appears clear. Personally, I use two sets of terminology, terms like forests and forest owners when I am talking with forestry and conservation professionals and terms like woods and landowners when I am talking with owners and the general public.

### IS IT TIME FOR A NEW WEEKS ACT?

The 100-year anniversary of the Weeks legislation provides an opportunity to think about where U.S. forest conservation is headed. Is it time for a new Weeks Act? That depends on the problem we are trying to solve. The biggest goal of the forestry and conservation community is to keep forests as forests. Once forests are lost, all other forest-related issues are moot. Fortunately, the total forestland area in the United States has been relatively stable for the past 100 years (Smith et al. 2009).

Although the total or net change in forestland has been small, there are substantial acreages that are being brought into and out of agriculture and being converted to developed uses, such as housing. The losses to development have historically been offset by gains from agricultural lands, but as urbanization increases (Nowak and Walton 2005) and the area of land that can revert to forest diminishes, 23 million acres of forestland may be lost over the next 50 years (Alig et al. 2003).

The Weeks Act was established to take land out of the hands of private owners and place it in public ownership. Given the current political, economic, and social environments, this approach would likely now be deemed undesirable and infeasible. Public lands may continue to slowly increase (Smith et al. 2009) through small-scale acquisitions and donations, but nothing approaching the scale of the Weeks Act.

Conservation of (private) forests must therefore rely on other tools. Conservation easements—the voluntary sale of development rights for perpetuity—keep the land in forest cover while allowing private ownership. But conservation easements are not a viable option for many owners: either there is no one willing to pay them for their development rights, or they do not want to cede total control (American Forest Foundation 2010). Currently, fewer than 2 percent of owners have conservation easements (Butler 2008). Other tools, such as education, technical assistance, property tax relief, strong markets, and others must also be used.

### CONCLUSIONS

If we are interested in the future of forests, we need to be interested in the people who own a plurality of this land—family forest owners. We need to be able to see the forest for the trees and owners of the forests. A common sentiment among most family forest owners is a deep love of the land—“they’re not making any more of it.” They want to be good stewards of the woodlands and do what is best for themselves and the land, and it is up to the forestry and conservation communities to help them. □

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Brett J. Butler is a research forester with the Forest Inventory and Analysis Unit of the U.S. Forest Service, in the Northern Research Station. He conducts the National Woodland Owner Survey through the Family Forest Research Center. He would like the following known: “While the mistakes in this article are mine alone, I owe a debt of gratitude to Mary Tyrrell, Char Miller, and James Lewis for constructive comments on earlier drafts.”

### THE NATIONAL WOODLAND OWNER SURVEY

The statistics for this article came from the U.S. Forest Service's National Woodland Owner Survey (NWOS). It is administered by the Forest Inventory & Analysis program as the social complement to its biophysical forest inventory. This survey is conducted in order to better understand:

- Who owns the forests of the United
- Why they own it
- How they have used it in the past
- How they plan to use it in the future

The 2006 data, referenced here, came from 15,440 randomly selected family forest owners from across the U.S. Using a mail-based survey, they were asked questions related to their forest holdings, the history of their ownership, reasons for owning, uses of their land, management practices, information sources, concerns, future plans, and their demographics. For more information about the NWOS, visit: [www.fia.fs.fed.us/nwos](http://www.fia.fs.fed.us/nwos).

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