

## **Sustaining Diversity: Limited-resource Forest Landowners in the Southern United States**

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Throughout the southern United States, small farmers with limited resources are steadily losing ground. This land loss trend has been particularly notable for minority farmers, who are traditionally underserved by both market and government institutions. Many of these farmers own small areas of woodland, which we contend is an underutilized resource. By combining productive and sustainable woodland management with farming systems, these farmers could increase their incomes. Thus, improved woodland management could help sustain both socioeconomic diversity and biological diversity in the rural landscape. In an on-going research project in the coastal plain of North Carolina and Virginia, we are identifying opportunities for and constraints on participation by limited-resource landowners in timber and alternative forest products sectors.

The first challenge in this project was to develop an operational definition and means to identify “limited resource” landowners. This is a multidimensional concept. First, landowners with small acreages are more likely to have difficulties contracting forest management services and selling forest products at reasonable prices, because of the large fixed costs associated with forestry services and timber harvests. Second, landowners in certain socio-demographic categories are less likely to be in the social networks that receive information and participate in government outreach meetings and technical assistance programs; in other words, they are “traditionally undeserved.” These categories include minority (African American and Native American), heir property owners who have recently inherited land, and elderly women with land that was previously managed primarily by their late husbands. Third, landowners who have limited financial and human resources face hurdles to productive use of their forest land; for example, landowners with low incomes and low levels of education are less likely to participate in cost-share programs. While there are various public records of landowners (such as farmers registered with the Farm Service Agency), confidentiality rules prevent use of these to identify limited resource landowners. Further, government agencies are by definition poor sources of information on traditionally underserved landowners. Our project has therefore identified limited resource landowners by selecting those with no more than 100 acres listed in property tax records for townships (districts) with high percent minority, low average income, and low levels of educational achievement, based on recent census data.

Hypothesized constraints on landowner participation in forest management and forest product markets correspond to the three dimensions listed above: (a) lack of markets, (b) lack of communication and trust, and (c) lack of resources. We have found evidence for all three of these constraints operating simultaneously for many limited resource landowners. However, we have also found that a small proportion of these landowners do in fact earn substantial income from timber, pine straw, game leases, and other forest goods and services. Case studies indicate that the probability of earning income from the forest depends on characteristics of the landowner and of local agency personnel, local market conditions, and quality of the forest resource. We will test the relative size and significance of these determinants with data from an on-going survey of a stratified random sample of limited resource landowners in eastern North Carolina and Virginia.