

# The Changing Family Forest

A family forest can take many different shapes. The forest can be a large woodland tract of 100 acres or a small wooded area behind a house. If an individual, a couple, a family partnership, or other group of individuals owns an acre or more of land with trees on at least 10 percent of it, the owners are considered family forest owners.

America's 10 million family forest owners are pivotal for protecting and maintaining our country's forests, and yet the forest owners face increasing pressures and concerns (see box). Millions of acres of family-owned forestland will change hands in the United States within the next decade. One third of family forest owners are over the age of 65 years. And one in every five acres is owned by people who plan to sell or transfer some or all of their forestland in the next 5 years.

Many family forestlands lie on the edges of metropolitan areas. The forestlands provide important economic, ecological, and social amenities to communities throughout the nation. With changes in land ownership, how the land is managed and used is also likely to change.

The U.S. Forest Service projects that about 23.2 million acres of forestland will pass out of forest use over the next 50 years. Most of these acres will be privately owned, nonindustrial forestlands converted to residential subdivision.

The fate of family forestlands is an issue not only for the families involved, but also for communities. The fate of forestlands is an important social issue that can affect the larger landscape.

## Family Forest Owners Top Tens

### Reasons for Owning Family Forest

1. Beauty and scenery
2. Family heritage
3. Privacy
4. Nature protection
5. Connected to home or cabin
6. Investment
7. Hunting or fishing
8. Part of farm or ranch
9. Hiking, snowboarding, or other recreation
10. Timber production

### Issues or Concerns

1. Insects or tree disease
2. Keeping land intact for future generations
3. Wildfire
4. Trespassing
5. High property or inheritance taxes
6. Vandalism or illegal dumping
7. Wind or ice storms
8. Air or water pollution
9. Undesirable plants or weeds
10. Development of nearby lands

### Source

USDA Forest Service. 2008. "Who Owns America's Forests: Forest Ownership Patterns and Family Forest Highlights from the National Woodland Owner Survey." <http://www.forestfoundation.org/pdfs/Who-Owns-Brochure-V3.pdf>.

# The Changing Family Forest (cont.)

## Family Scenarios

Read the following scenarios and, for each, discuss these issues:

- What options does the family have?
- How would each of the options affect the family? The local forest? The community?
- What would you do if you were a member of this family?
- What implications would this situation have for our country's forests as a whole?

### 1. The Williams Family Tree Farm

John Williams remembers growing up on his family's forestland, which has been in the family for many generations. He used to help his father plant seedlings, as well as cut and sell grown trees. After John married, he and his wife, Estelle, continued to live there. When his parents died, they went through the process of certifying the forest as a Tree Farm. Like an agricultural farm, a tree farm relies on the sustainable production of forest products over time. To be certified, a tree farm must contain many different habitats and stages of forest regeneration, from seedlings to mature timber.

Through the sale of lumber, their tree farm provided the Williams family with enough income to raise their children—three sons and a daughter—who are all grown now. Their sons are all married and live in the nearby city, where they and their spouses make good wages and own their own homes. Their daughter, Julia, has stayed on the family land and has worked beside her parents to manage the tree farm for the past 20 years. They continue to harvest a portion of the trees each year. By selling the timber, Julia and her parents have been able to earn enough to get by, but they aren't able to save much money.

John and Estelle plan that when they die, they will leave the family tree farm equally to their four children as one parcel. They do not want to split the land because splitting it could fragment the forest and cause each resulting parcel to be too small for Julia—or anyone else—to make a living. The problem is that the sons do not intend to move back to the family land, and Julia cannot afford to buy out her brothers. If the four siblings sell the property, Julia would have to find another job, not to mention her emotional loss of the heritage and history that will no longer be in the family.

### 2. The Lee Family's Weekend Cabin

Imagine waking up on a Saturday morning to the haunting call of a loon across a moonlit lake, with the surrounding woods alive with birdcalls and animal chatter. Back in the 1940s, Mr. and Mrs. Lee bought a small cabin on a woodland lake so that they could share such delightful experiences with their son, Allen. As Allen was growing up, they spent many weekends and much of their summers at the cabin fishing and hiking.

After Allen left home, the Lees retired and moved to the lake cabin full-time. They truly loved and appreciated the beauty and solitude of their property. Allen lived in another state, but he would sometimes take his young son to spend weekends with the grandparents at the lake. They all enjoyed these relaxing times close to nature.

When Mr. and Mrs. Lee died, Allen inherited the cabin and the surrounding woods. He visits the cabin with his son a couple of times a year. But as these visits have become more and more infrequent, more work is required to maintain the property. Recently, instead of relaxing at the cabin, Allen and his son must spend whole visits patching the leaking roof and doing other chores. Now that his son is almost grown, Allen is considering selling the property.

## The Changing Family Forest (cont.)

### 3. The Woodlot on Garcia Creek Farm

Garcia Creek Farm is a small farm owned by Mr. and Mrs. Garcia, who grow alfalfa and clover hay for a local dairy farmer. Nestled on the slopes of rolling hills, their farm consists of more than 300 acres of fields, with a creek running through them and a woodlot at one end. As is common in the area, the woodlot is a small forested area that was never farmed because the terrain is too steep and rugged.

In the past, woodlots provided all the fuel and lumber a farmer would need to run the farm and homestead. Such woodlots also provided shelter and shade for cattle, sheep, and other livestock, as well as a habitat for game birds. Today, however, farms no longer use wood as a main source of fuel, and it is easier or cheaper to buy lumber elsewhere.

The Garcias occasionally cut firewood from their woodlot, and their children enjoy playing hide-and-seek in it. Otherwise, they don't really use the woodlot. A developer from the nearby city has offered to buy the woodlot to build six high-end estate homes, and the Garcias are tempted to sell it. While understanding that losing this woodlot would affect the entire ecosystem, the Garcias are also enticed to sell by the high property and inheritance taxes they would face if the land remained in their care.

### 4. The Davis Family Forest Corporation

Throughout their married life, Fred and Mary Davis owned and managed a family forest that they inherited from Mary's parents. They worked hard to keep the forest healthy and productive and were disappointed that none of their six children were interested in following in their footsteps.

When Fred and Mary started having health issues and became too feeble to continue caring for the forest, they decided to place all of the forest property into a "family corporation," with themselves and all of their adult children and grandchildren as co-owners. At first, things didn't change much under the new Davis Family Forest Corporation. The family decided to hire a caretaker to manage the land, and Fred and Mary oversaw all the work. As long as they were still alive, Fred and Mary were deeply involved in making decisions about the forestland, and the other family members deferred to their wishes.

When Fred and Mary died, the Davis Family Forest Corporation had 18 other co-owners. Many of them had either grown up on or near the land, or had visited it as children. For the most part, they strived to continue managing the forest as Fred and Mary might have. Today, 20 years after Fred's and Mary's deaths, there are 63 co-owners. With so many people involved, it is becoming more difficult to make joint decisions about the forest. It seems that all family members have their own ideas about what should be done with it.

Some of the co-owners, such as Fred's and Mary's children, want to continue managing the forest much as it has been. They value the ecosystem services that the forest provides and want to keep the forest as intact as possible. Others, such as some of the great-grandchildren who have no personal connection to the forest land, value the forest primarily as a financial asset. They want to make as much money as possible from the land and are looking at ways to maximize timber production or to sell part of the land for development.

Looking ahead, as the number of co-owners grows with each successive generation, such decisions are likely to become more difficult.

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