

Sustaining Family Forests

A Social Marketing and Communications Approach

Proposal

We propose to undertake a social research initiative to gain comprehensive knowledge about family forest owners in the United States—credible, useful and compelling information for those who wish to create a climate in which forest owners can easily find the information and services they desire to help them conserve and manage their land. This knowledge will greatly enhance the effectiveness of communications strategies and services aimed at improving conservation and sustainable forestry practices on the nearly 50% of U. S. forests¹ owned by families and individuals. The conservation and sustainable forestry challenge on family forests is multi-sector and national. No organization or agency has the resources, knowledge or credentials to meet this challenge alone. This 50% of America’s forests is perhaps the last frontier to extending sustainability concepts to all of the nation’s forests.

Decisions made by the large numbers of small private landowners collectively enhance or degrade the landscape. How they manage their forests and whether or not they convert them to other uses is of significant public interest. However, current evidence and opinion is that most individual landowners are not reached with credible, useful, and compelling information and services. Basically, we don’t know enough about them to attend to their needs. We have sample census information about their forests and demographics, but no comprehensive information about their personal attributes, how they value and relate to their forests, how they make decisions, what sources and kinds of information they value, or the contemporary services they need.

With this project, we plan to study family forest owners with the objective of creating information that is flexible, accessible, and reliable. This information database will be made publicly available with the expectation that it can be used by many diverse organizations to accurately understand the needs and motivations of family forest owners. Government agencies, industry, consulting foresters, landowner associations, land trusts, conservation and biodiversity NGOs, sustainable forestry certifiers, universities, loggers and foresters would use this information as a guide for enhanced outreach. It would aid this broad spectrum of organizations to be more strategic in meeting outreach and service goals with limited resources.

A steering team is leading an *ad hoc* initiative to develop and execute this project, which stems from a stakeholder panel that met at the Johnson Foundation’s Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin on October 6-8, 2003. That panel, representing broad forestry and forest conservation interests, concluded there is woefully inadequate knowledge about family forest owners in the US and that a social marketing approach would be a useful means to gather necessary information about these diverse landowners, their management practices, their information and service needs, and the prospects for reaching them.

¹ The scope of this project is restricted to the continental “lower 48” states.

The estimated cost of conducting the entire market research initiative and formatting the results for use by various interest groups is still being determined and will not be known until the first phase is completed. Initial thinking is that the total cost may be in the \$1.0-1.5 million range.

Phase 1: Design and pilot a social marketing approach, with a general scoping and evaluation of appropriate methods and tools, which would possibly include surveys, focus groups, and workshops. Estimated cost: \$150,000.

Phase 2: Refine the survey design, and implement the project nation-wide. Cost to be determined based on results of Phase 1.

Phase 3: Disseminate results and design system for information access. Cost to be determined based on results of Phase 2.

Project Development and Management

The project is directed by an *ad hoc* group of diverse, interested stakeholders. The Yale Program on Private Forests and the American Forest Foundation administer it collaboratively. The initiative is being led by an 12-person steering group, with the support of a broadly diverse advisory committee, of which those shown in **bold face** serve as an informal Management Committee to facilitate decision making.

Role and Tasks of the Core Steering Group with Support from the Advisory Group

- Provide overall direction and management for the project.
- Define, with input from the consulting and advisory groups, the specific kinds of information that should be obtained by the market research effort. This includes appropriate demographic information about the target forest owner group as well as other information about them that can be effectively correlated with motives, values, communications channels, motivating messages related to forestry, and appropriate forestry services to attend their needs.
- Develop an overall “critical path” timetable for effective management of the project.
- Create final plan and budget for the project.
- Interview and select one or more market research firms with appropriate techniques to gain the needed information at a competitive cost
- Secure funding from diverse sources including industry, public agencies, and foundations
- Execute the market research phase of the project
- Convene an appropriate panel from the consulting and advisory groups to review the information gained from the project and determine the most suitable means of dissemination, including access and format amenable to the most broad-based group of users possible.

Background for the Project

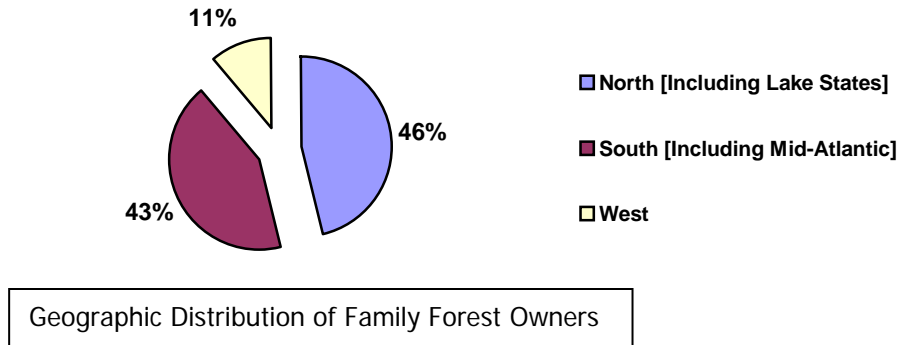
America’s Family Forest Owners

Profound changes are occurring in the individual ownership of forestland in the United States.

According to preliminary results from the 2002 US Forest Service National Woodland Owner Survey, there are 10 million private owners of 276 million acres of forestland. Parcels of less than 10 acres tend to be extended home sites with few forestry operations, and owners of parcels larger than 1,000 acres tend to use professional management services of some sort. Therefore, Our target audience is about 4 million private family forest owners who have parcels between 10 and 1,000 acres that aggregate 220 million acres—about 50% of America’s total forests, (excluding Alaska and Hawaii).

< 10 Acres	10 to 1,000 Acres	> 1,000 acres
6.7 million owners 20 million acres	4 million owners 220 million acres	17,000 owners 36 million acres

They are distributed across the country as shown in the following chart.



These owners are changing demographically. There are more of them every year as forestland becomes subdivided into smaller and smaller parcels—an estimated 365,300 more owners of 10-1,000 acre parcels since 1994. At the same time, the political, social, and economic climate in which they operate is changing too. The public expects more from forests, and expects their owners to provide it.

We need creative, contemporary approaches to identify, communicate with, motivate, inform and support this diverse array of some 4 million forest owners so they can follow the tenets of sustainable forestry—whether they are long-term forest owners or those who conduct a single forest operation in the course of a relatively inactive tenure of ownership. We have census information about some of their demographics, but we have no comprehensive base of reliable

information that can be used to accurately understand their personal attributes, how they relate to the forests they own, how they make decisions, the sources of information they value or the contemporary services they need.

We consciously use the term “family forests” to focus on individuals within the broader subset of ownerships that comprise the non-industrial private forest (NIPF) complex. These individuals own and manage personal assets and we focus on them as people rather than a non-personal category customarily labeled “NIPF”, which also includes many large lands managed for commercial or investment purposes.

For emphasis, we note that this project is not focused on forest owners who actively engage in forest management; who belong to forestry associations; who regularly use the forestry services; who regularly receive forestry publications; or who may be certified under various programs. This group ranges in size up to 100,000 forest owners and is the core U.S. constituency of already motivated forest owners.

Public, corporate and larger family forest owners tend to be highly engaged in forestry and conservation, have excellent access to information and technology and use extensive professional resources. But that only accounts for about half of America’s total forests. The rest—those that are the target of this social marketing initiative—have eluded the efforts of agencies and private interests for decades. They are the frontier of opportunity.

Sustainable Management of Private Forests

Large forest products companies in the U.S. typically get about 25 to 35 percent of their wood from company forests or large contracted sources. Most companies have certified their forest management to the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) standard and some have certified to the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) standard. These internal sources are well below the 65 to 75 percent level of content that is currently required for market labels for certified wood products. Therefore, forest products companies have a natural interest in the management of small family forests for wood and fiber.

This interest is matched by the public’s burgeoning interest in protecting green space, improving wildlife habitat, conserving watersheds and containing urban sprawl; and a growing concern about the challenge of managing a diversity of forests for a broad range of values across the landscape. Reality on the ground, however, does not yet match expectations about sustainable management practices.

By rough estimate, no more than 20-25% of all family forest land is managed by a professional forester. The American Tree Farm system certifies 26 million acres of family forests; another 6 million acres are in industrial Landowner Assistance Programs; and the Association of Consulting Foresters estimates that their members regularly impact 13 million acres of family forests. National Woodland Owners Association claims several thousand forest owners through its 32 state and 287 county affiliate organizations. Allowing for overlap among these groups and considering land managed under federal Forest Stewardship plans, regional and local family forest associations, Forest Stewardship Council-related guilds, and landowner cooperatives it is

unlikely that professionally managed family forestland exceeds 20-25% of all family owned forestland.

Professionally-managed forests account for a disproportionately large share of the total harvest from family forests. But that share isn't large enough to meet market needs for certified products. Current research suggests that over the next 10 years, only 30 to 40 percent of family forest timber production may be guided by forestry programs and services that actively promote sustainable forestry practices, or that would qualify landowners for some form of market certification.

Current Situation

Every organization that deals with family forest owners can affirm, through research and experience, that current public and private efforts fall woefully short of what is required to engage and motivate owners to apply contemporary sustainable forestry practices.² We face this challenge at a time when resources to support private forest owners are declining. Consolidation and downsizing in the forest products industry have reduced the number of "conservation foresters" available to assist private forest owners. State forestry agencies are under budget pressures to reduce employees, and as they assume responsibility to monitor water quality BMPs they have diverted resources from traditional landowner assistance. Federal forestry extension programs reach many rural forest owners, but miss large numbers of others in urban and suburban areas. Professional loggers who harvest privately owned forests are undergoing enormous competitive pressures while adapting to changing expectations and requirements in logging practices.

Therefore, we propose to begin an entirely new marketing research process that will effectively understand the interests of these forest owners, the kinds of information that will stimulate and motivate them, the sources of information they consider to be credible, the best ways to provide information that will reach, inform and motivate them, and the kinds of services they will find useful and attractive.

² Among others, Neil Sampson and Lester DeCoster provide comprehensive information and suggest new approaches in their publication *Sustaining Working Forests in the Peopled Woods* (The Sampson Group, Inc, February 20, 2001). Constance Best and Laurie Wayburn also addressed this concern in their book, *America's Private Forests: Status and Stewardship* published by Island Press in 2001.

Project Organization, Objectives and Expected Results

A “Social Marketing” Research Project

The Steering Group will create an innovative plan to gain comprehensive knowledge about the target group of forest owners with respect to their attributes, properties, interests, motivations, capabilities and the kinds and sources of information they would consider useful and credible.

- A variety of steps will be defined to gather and analyze appropriate information about the target group of private forest owners. Along with reviews of existing research, surveys, focus groups, workshops and other activities will be considered to provide a credible basis for action plans.
- Funding needs will be defined and a strategy to obtain funds will be created.
- Management needs to execute the project will be determined.
- Outside sources will be selected to conduct market research: Once funding is obtained, the management for the project will make decisions about potential service vendors.

The first step in the project is to develop relevant questions about forest owner demographics, and about their motives and goals for owning forest land, their degree of interest in managing their forests, the kinds of information sources that reach them and that they deem to be credible, and the kinds of services that would be useful to them. The questions are being framed in the context of the “kinds of forest owner behaviors” that a variety of interests reflected in the composition of the Advisory Committee may later seek to influence in one way or another. This information will be refined with the vendor who is selected to conduct the professional market research and through solicitation of expert knowledge and advice using proven social marketing tools, such as focus groups.

During phase 1, a pilot project will be undertaken to test and validate the process and the utility of the information obtained. The pilot will be conducted on a small sample, representative of the demographic, regional, and ownership size ranges and conditions that are present on the national level. Once the methodology is validated, the research scope will be broadened geographically to ensure valid information is captured for all key forest regions in the United States.

Funding requirements for the entire project are estimated to be in the \$1-1.5 million range. These funds will be sought from a broad base, including the federal government through relevant resource agencies; from foundations that have a core interest in forests and forest biodiversity; from forest industry and its major customers; and from other interested parties.

Dissemination of Results

The results of this process will be made available to the following parties (and others with interest) for their consideration and implementation. The format of the information and tools for access will be designed so as to be easily used by a wide variety of organizations.

- American Forest & Paper Association
- American Loggers Council
- Association of Consulting Foresters of America
- Certified Forest Products Council
- Certification Systems: SFI, FSC-US, ATFS, NWOA
- Companies interested in certified forest products
- Forest Landowners Associations
- Forest Resources Associations
- Forest Stewards Guild
- Land Trust Alliance
- National Association of Professional Forestry Schools and Colleges
- National Association of State Foresters
- National Governors Association (for state and county governments)
- National Woodland Owners Association and Alliance of Landowners Associations
- Nongovernmental organizations and foundations interested in forests and forestry
- “Smart Growth” advocates
- State Forestry Associations
- State and Private Forestry and Forestry Extension, USDA
- Universities, Colleges, Research Institutions
- Society of American Foresters
- Others who express interest in the project and its results

Subsequent action by those parties, either individually or via collaboration, will depend on the specific nature of the market research findings and the opportunities it identifies to create new channels of communication, to reshape messages that motivate better forestry, and to redesign services by government agencies, conservation organizations, consulting foresters and forest industry to better attend the interests of this diverse forest landowner group.

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