

Forest Inventory

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On a good workday, two complete plot locations can be fully surveyed; but long walks to access plots, high tree tally, thick underbrush, or inclement weather can limit a day to one fully surveyed plot.

And now the question that must be answered, “Why?” To be honest, I once talked with a landowner to secure permission to measure a plot on his property, and he answered, “Sure, I don’t mind, but this is the stupidest thing I have ever heard of.” I have to disagree, although when it is over 98 degrees and you happen to be in a very recently replanted stand with no shade, you wonder if he wasn’t on to something. Seriously, though, there are a lot of good reasons why we do what we do.

To begin, this survey was authorized back in 1928 as a response to some of the poor land-use practices that had prevailed and damaged the landscape. It has been performed in the lower 48 states since 1930. What a wealth of information this survey provides! When forest industry is looking to expand and bring jobs to a region, they need to know if the species they want – in the sizes they need, at the quantities they will demand – are available within economic hauling distances. Before you make such multi-million dollar decisions, you have to be sure. That makes this data, which is not only free and available to all, but also consistent across state lines, invaluable.

Also, consider major destruction from natural disasters such as hurricanes and wildfires. Since you know what you had before the event, you can go back in and re-measure after the event, and get a very accurate damage assessment over a large area. I assisted in doing large-scale storm damage assessments in Mississippi in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. A large contingent of us re-measured all the plots in the affected counties at the same time, and took special additional measurements on all of the downed trees.

The academic world, as well, relies upon this work. There is no better tool to track the spread of tree diseases and destructive invasive species nationwide. The survey provides policy makers with the hard data needed to make management decisions that, hopefully, are in the best interests of the land and the people who are dependent upon it.

I hope this article about Forest Inventory & Analysis has been informative. When you work in the field, it is always rewarding to run into people who are aware of what you do and appreciative that you do it. Here in Alabama, we are blessed with a great crew of dedicated professionals who travel to points spread out everywhere, bringing in this accurate data in a timely fashion that is so important to such a broad spectrum of stakeholders.

Working in the office now, I answer requests for data and data analysis. If you have specific questions, anything from, “About how many water oaks are there in Shelby County?” to complex multi-county wood basket analyses, please give me a call or email. My office number is (334) 240-9370, and my email address is james.chappell@forestry.alabama.gov. ☞

Alabama Scores High in the Nation’s ‘Tree Census’

By Dan Chappell, Forest Inventory & Analysis (FIA) Coordinator, Alabama Forestry Commission

The Alabama Forestry Commission’s dedicated staff of full-time Forest Inventory & Analysis (‘FIA’) crew leaders, and their assistants who come from the agency’s county offices around the state, are to be commended for the outstanding service they are providing to the people of Alabama and the wider network of stakeholders in the fields of forest industry, research science, and beyond. Not only are our FIA crews exceeding expectations by setting new state plot production records, we are outperforming all other states in the Southeast. This is truly a group effort, one in which all participants should take a great deal of pride.

From January 1 through June 30, 2017, Alabama FIA can claim 527 plots completed. If this pace is maintained through the latter half of the year, over 1,000 plots could be measured, which will far exceed the levels that we have been able to achieve in years past. Even then, Alabama was one of the region’s premier programs. In comparison, Georgia FIA is on pace to complete just over 900 plots by year’s end, Florida 780, and Tennessee just 680. If you look at funding levels, all three should be producing at a higher level than Alabama. It goes to prove that it’s the people who really make the difference!

The data from Forest Inventory & Analysis is used in countless ways. When researching a site for a new forest products mill, FIA data is crucial in showing potential investors that the species they seek are available in the size classes they need, in the abundance they require, in the quality they demand, and within hauling distances that are economical. Existing mills also consult the data to track long-term trends that might affect their wood procurement strategies into the future. In Alabama, digital access to FIA data goes back to 1972, making it possible to follow land-use trends over a long time frame. Researchers tracking forest health threats such as red bay ambrosia beetle and emerald ash borer can analyze the spread and impact of these pests using FIA data. Likewise, the spread of invasive plants can be tracked, such as Japanese climbing fern and cogongrass. When emerald ash borer was first detected in Alabama, the FIA data was consulted to assess the potential impact to the state’s ash resource and to help shape the state’s response.

The international focus on carbon emissions and carbon sequestration is another vital area where FIA data proves its worth. Where once upon a time the survey was more strictly a timber inventory, today it could accurately be called a carbon inventory. Through our work, estimates are made for the carbon stored in living trees, standing dead trees, downed and dead trees, fine woody material on the forest floor, and even the carbon stored in the organic layer of the soil. With international trading partners placing an emphasis upon carbon neutral practices and being able to prove the sustainability of their wood sourcing, it has never been more important to provide the hard data that backs up Alabama’s claim to having a sustainable, renewable resource that, whether as unprocessed logs or as finished products, is available for export around the world. ☞