

Family Forest Owners of Alabama: Reasons & Objectives for Owning Timberland

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There are approximately 23 million acres of timberland in Alabama, which makes up 71 percent of the state's total land area. Alabama ranks second in the 48 contiguous states in private timberland coverage as approximately 94 percent of the timberland in the state is privately owned. The majority of that private timberland (88 percent) is owned by non-industrial private forest (NIPF) landowners. Of the NIPF landowners in Alabama, approximately 70 percent are family forest owners that make up approximately 60 percent (13.7 million acres) of the total timberland. Family forest landowners are defined as a forest ownership type that includes families, individuals, trusts, and estates. Family forest landowners are unique in that they have diverse backgrounds, experiences, a wide range of management objectives, and a variety of reasons for owning their land. This article will discuss how family forest landowners in Alabama feel about forest management and how they compare to family forest landowners in the Southeast and the United States as a whole.

In general, it has been found that forest landowners with fewer than 10 acres of land often use it for residential or developmental purposes, while forest landowners with greater than 500 acres are more likely to have goals and objectives driven by timber production. In Alabama, family forest landowners who own between 10 and 500 acres make up 98 percent of the total

family forest ownerships. A study conducted by the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences at Auburn University in 2009 found that family forest landowners in Alabama who own between 10 and 500 acres do so for a variety of reasons and not for economic motivation alone. Specifically, the top three most important reasons statewide for owning forestland were non-timber related, consisting of passing the land on to heirs ('legacy'), enjoying the beauty and scenery, and hunting and fishing (including protecting and/or improving wildlife habitat).

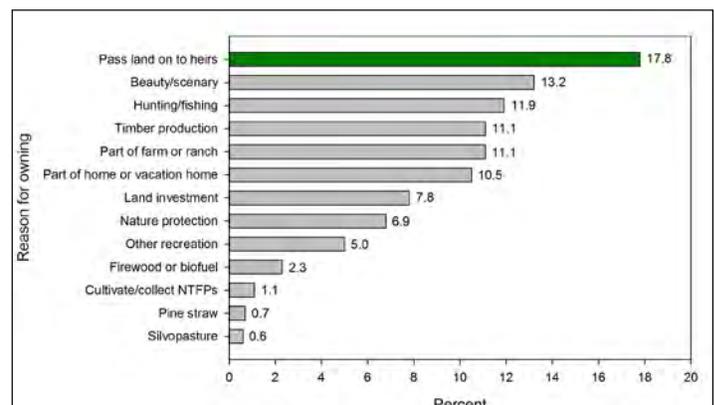


Figure 1. Statewide reasons for owning Alabama timberland as reported by Zhou (2010).

When examining why family forest landowners own land in different regions of the state there were noteworthy differences based on location. Reasons for owning timberland in the northern region of the state were similar to those found statewide, with legacy and enjoying the beauty/scenery of the land as the two most important. However, the third most important reason in the north was that the timberland is part of their farm or ranch. In the central region of the state, legacy and hunting/fishing were the top two reasons, with timber production being the third most important. The three most important reasons for owning timberland in the southern region of the state were similar but in a different order. Legacy topped the list, but timber production ranked second just ahead of hunting/fishing.



Figure 2. Regional map of Alabama

Landowners in the northern region of the state were more likely to enjoy non-timber activities, while those in the southern region focused more on timber motives. This is likely due to past land-use practices, the location of predominant farming and forestry communities, site productivity, and local timber markets. Farming and timber production have historically been the predominant industries in the southern region of the state.

Further, it was found that the amount of acreage per ownership plays a role in landowners' objectives. Family forest landowners that owned between 10 and 100 acres of timberland were found to be more likely to enjoy owning their land for non-timber or amenity-related activities such as legacy, beauty/scenery, and wildlife. In fact, the top three reasons for owning timberland as reported by these smaller scale landowners across the state were legacy, enjoying the beauty and scenery of the land, and the timberland being part of their farm or ranch.

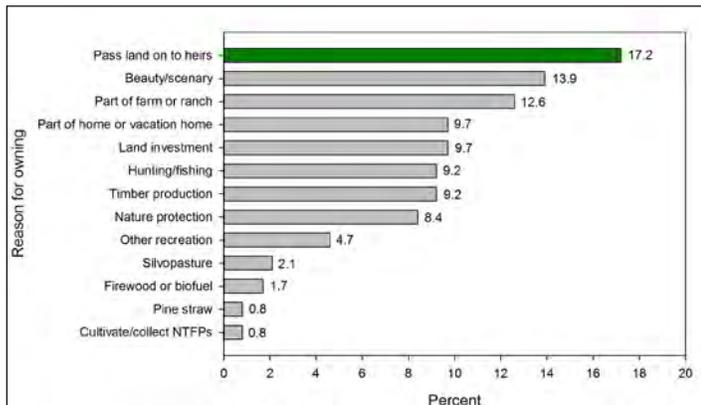


Figure 3. Reasons for owning Alabama timberland (tract size between 10 – 100 acres) as reported by Zhou (2010).

Reasons for owning timberland changed when reported by family forest landowners with 101- to 500-acre tracts. For these Alabama landowners, timber production is the most important reason, followed by hunting and fishing, and legacy. They were found to have more timber-oriented objectives along with hunting, fishing, and habitat improvement. In general, non-financial objectives are more common than financially-driven objectives overall for Alabama family forest landowners that own between 10 and 500 acres of timberland, but the specifics of these objectives depend on location within the state and tract size. However, legacy and enjoying the beauty and scenery were consistently rated as highly important.

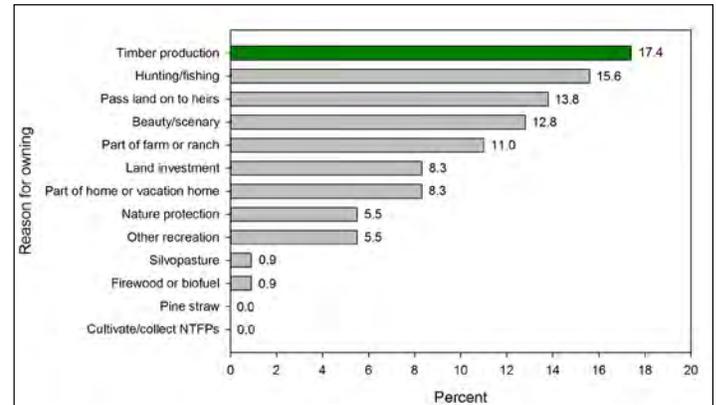
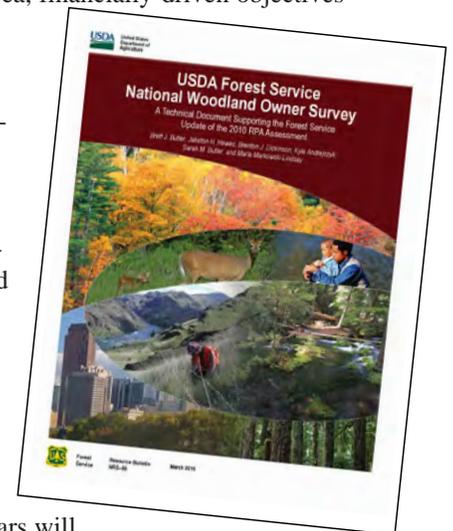


Figure 4. Reasons for owning Alabama timberland (tract size between 101 – 500 acres) as reported by Zhou (2010).

More recently the National Woodland Owners Survey (NWOS) found similar results for family forest landowners in Alabama. The NWOS is a national survey of private forest landowners in the United States conducted by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service. The main purpose of the survey is to find out who owns America's private forests, why they own them, and what their past and future objectives are for their forestland. For landowners with greater than 10 acres of timberland, non-financial objectives such as legacy, beauty, and wildlife were found rated as important or very important. In terms of area, financially-driven objectives increased with acreage owned, but overall they were rated much lower than non-financial objectives in terms of importance. The most commonly reported financially-driven objectives were related to land investment and timber production.

According to the NWOS, the greatest change in activities from the previous five years to the next five years will be a decrease in the number of ownerships across the state that harvest trees for sale. However, harvesting is expected to remain



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as one of the more common activities. Activities expected to increase include protecting and/or improving wildlife habitat, fuels reduction, and managing unwanted insects and diseases. This indicates that more activities to improve forest health will be implemented in the coming years.

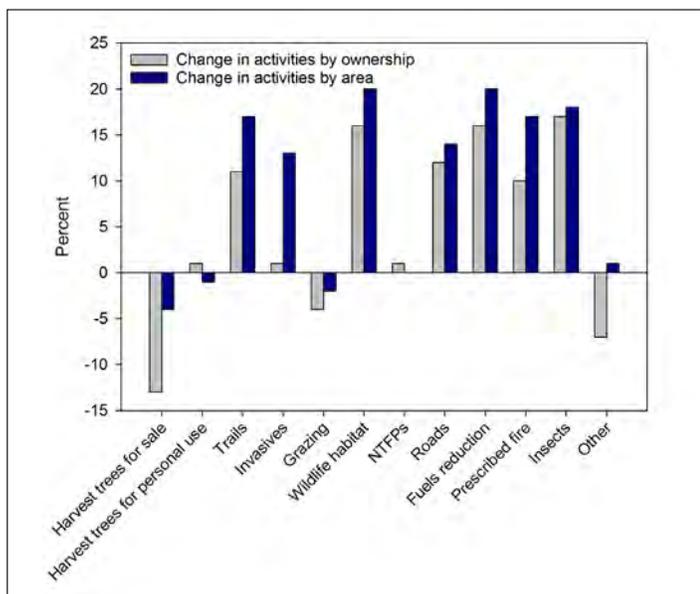


Figure 5. Percent change in activities by ownership and by area (acreage) from the five years prior to 2013 and five years following 2013, based on data from the National Woodland Owners Survey.

The NWOS reports similar results for the southeastern United States and for the entire country. Family forest owners make up approximately 58 percent of all forest owners in the Southeast and 43 percent of all forest owners in the United States. For both the Southeast and the United States, the top reasons for owning their land include legacy, beauty and scenery, and wildlife, with the top future activities expected to include protecting and/or improving wildlife habitat, harvesting trees for their own use (i.e., firewood), controlling invasive species, and fuels reduction for wildfire. The only real difference found between the Southeast and the United States as a whole was that legacy was the most important reason family forest landowners owned their land in the Southeast, while enjoying the beauty and scenery was the most important across the entire United States.

In conclusion, family forest landowners in Alabama own timberland for a variety of reasons. Acreage owned makes a difference in the landowners' attitude towards their objectives and managing their land. However, the importance of legacy, beauty, and protecting and/or improving wildlife habitat is shared by ownerships of all tract sizes. These landowners have a high interest in forest management, but a combination of lack of knowledge, ability, and fear of damage or doing wrong is preventing action. Statewide, it is reported that only 14 percent of family forest landowners (45 percent of family forest acres) have received management advice, and only 12 percent (32 percent of family forest acres) have a written management plan. Forestry and other natural resource professionals must understand the landowners' values, objectives, and concerns in order to effectively engage, educate, and motivate them about the importance of managing their land and taking the steps to do so. 🌲

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