



# Partnerships for Conserving Open Spaces

*By Walter E. Cartwright, Assistant Forest Management Division Director, Alabama Forestry Commission*

**A** recent USDA Forest Service Report (FS-861) indicates that we are losing 6,000 acres of open space (forests) in the United States each day, or about 4 acres per minute! More people are selling their land for development, and homeowners want more acreage and fewer neighbors, which further fragments our forests. One local ad in Montgomery for a new development claims that buyers will have abundant woods, water, and wildlife with lots starting at \$64,000 for one acre, to who-knows-how-much for 2.5 acres. What they do not say is that in a few years, you will have a whole subdivision of new neighbors and all that “open space” will be a distant memory. All they will see is more houses, more noise, more traffic, and construction for years.

Another way to lose open space is by way of fragmentation, which occurs through land divisions to heirs and sales to pay inheritance taxes, thus making the average ownership even smaller. In Alabama, we have over 440,000 non-industrial landowners, who own an average of 55 acres or less. We expect to see even more land division and develop-

ment as the major forest industries have divested their land holdings in the state. Those lands are being managed by Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) and Timber Investment & Management Groups (TIMOs) for a profit to shareholders. Hopefully, they will apply good stewardship principles in their management plans for several million acres of productive forests in Alabama.

In 2003, USDA Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth identified the loss of open space as one of four great threats to our nation’s forests and grasslands. That loss affects the sustainability of both public and private forests which provide a multitude of benefits, including wood products, fiber, wildlife,

recreation, clean air, clean water, and other “ecosystem services” that are being discussed and traded worldwide today. To find solutions from all shareholders, the Forest Service is developing an Open Space Conservation Strategy and Implementation Plan which will help develop the agency’s role in conserving open space nationally. Notice was published in the federal register, and public comments were accepted through December 13, 2006. For more information, email [openspace@fs.fed.us](mailto:openspace@fs.fed.us).

## INTERESTING STATISTICS

- Increase in bird watching participation in U.S. from 1982 to 2001: 236%
- Amount spent by birdwatchers to further their interest in 2001: \$32 billion
- Miles of road in the U.S.: 4 million
- Number of vertebrates run over by cars each day: 1 million
- Number of invasive plant species in the U.S.: 2,000
- Cost to the public of invasive species per year: \$120 billion
- Percent of endangered species at further risk from invasive species: 46%
- Number of off-highway vehicle users in 1972: 5 million
- Number of off-highway vehicle users in 2000: 36 million
- Largest single source of water in the U.S.: National Forests

*-- from the USDA Forest Service’s “Cooperating Across Boundaries - Partnerships to Conserve Open Space in Rural America”*

Recognizing that it is not the only entity that actively conserves open space, the Forest Service cannot regulate development or land use, but *can* provide expertise, resources, and programs to assist landowner and other partners in conserving more open spaces. The Conservation Fund was asked to set up three regional Roundtable Dialogue Listening Sessions in Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Denver, Colorado; and Washington, DC to bring together a diverse group of partners and record feedback on how the Forest Service can most effectively contribute to a national effort for conserving open spaces.

In my Economic Development role in the Management Division of the Alabama Forestry Commission, I attended the session in Chapel Hill. Other groups represented included The Conservation Fund, National Wild Turkey Foundation, USDA Forest Service, Cierra Publishing Company, Georgia Forestry Commission, Southern Environmental Law Center, Mississippi Forestry Commission, Land Loss Prevention Project, Handmade In America, Virginia Department of Forestry, North Carolina Forestry Association, North Carolina League of Municipalities, North Carolina Division of Forestry, Meridian Institute, Sandhills Area Land Trust, Conservation Trust for North Carolina, and two local community development groups.

Discussions at the session were very open with all participants providing good comments, recognizing that all are concerned about the same issues and are willing to work together as partners to conserve rapidly declining open space. Deliberations focused on three key areas of concern:

- Private forest lands and surrounding landscapes
- National forests, grasslands, and surrounding landscapes
- Urban forests and surrounding landscapes

Topics included tools currently being employed (Stewardship, Legacy, Cooperative Forest Health, Southern Pine Beetle Prevention & Restoration, Forest Land Enhancement Program, and Rural Economic Action Programs), most effective tools now or past (economic action and forestry incentives programs),

and new tools or techniques that could be employed or developed to conserve open spaces.

Recommendations from the listening session in Chapel Hill included:

- Funding for old programs that worked to create new forest land (Forestry Incentive Program and Stewardship Incentive Program)
- Timber crop insurance (federal insurance) for natural threats to forests (weather, insects, disease)
- Funding to continue programs already in place through state forestry agencies, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Farm Service Agency
- Research and development of technologies to convert woody biomass to energy
- Alternative incomes from forests (recreation, carbon credits, and other “ecosystem services”) to offset landowners’ management expenses
- Redirect funding for ALL federal forestry-related programs through USDA Forest Service to state forestry agencies
- Landowners need to be more involved in their local communities’ development process
- More active management on national forests, using income to fund stewardship programs on adjoining private forests
- More aggressive tax incentive programs for private landowners
- Environmental Protection Agency subsidy to private landowners to maintain healthy forests for land conservation, air quality, water quality, habitat for wildlife, and threatened & endangered species
- Manage “pockets” of urban forests and expand urban forests programs
- Utilize the state forests to educate the public with handouts, publications, and promotional items
- “Get Involved” with task forces, committees, boards, and associations that deal with environmental issues that impact forest resources, because “If you are not part of the process, you may be processed!” ☛

**For current  
information on the  
Southern Pine Beetle  
situation in Alabama,  
visit our web page at:  
[www.forestry.state.al.us](http://www.forestry.state.al.us)**

## The Evolution of Forest Certification and “Sustainable Forestry”

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group certification to landowners that are already under management provided by a group manager.

Number four, landowners need to look at each of these programs carefully. The Alabama Forestry Association will post to its [www.alaforestry.org](http://www.alaforestry.org) website, under the members section, an in-depth continuing education program specific to the details of each of these certification systems. The Association website will also provide links to other sites that provide insight to forest certification.

Number five, consider the familiar green and white sign of good forestry. Tree Farm has been around since 1942 and has gone through significant changes. Over 1,600 Alabama landowners are already involved, managing over six million private acres of “certified forests.” Some recent changes include meeting the standards for international certification and providing guidance for administering group certification through the American Forest Foundation. ☛

### **Find Out More:**

[www.alaforestry.org](http://www.alaforestry.org)  
[www.af&pa.org](http://www.af&pa.org)  
[www.treefarmssystem.org](http://www.treefarmssystem.org)

### **Literature Cited**

Forest Certification Auditing: A Guide for Practitioners. *Society of American Foresters*, 2005c.

Task Force on Forest Management Certification Programs, 1999 Report. *Society of American Foresters*.