

Report Takes pulse of State's Forest

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Alabama's forest underwent its first-ever full "physical" and the results are in. Overall, the state's forest resources are in good shape. However, several threats loom over the horizon that, left unattended, jeopardize the overall health and condition of the state's forest.

This is according to the Alabama Forestry Commission's summer release of the *Forests at the Crossroads: Alabama's Forest Assessment and Resource Strategy* document.

"This report gives a very clear yet sober look at where our forest resources stand today," said Alabama State Forester, Linda Casey. "While we should be proud of our forest and its legacy, we really stand at a crossroads. It's very important that we understand the challenges facing our forest and do what needs to be done to maintain its value and function for all citizens."

Alabama's Forest Assessment and Resource Strategy was the result of an 18-month mutual effort containing input from 33 organizations, 37 subject matter experts, and 865 survey respondents. In addition, relevant information and strategies were gleaned from eight federal and state natural resource plans and then incorporated into the document. The findings of this collaborative effort will provide a critical focus to help coordinate federal, state, and local efforts toward conserving and increasing Alabama's forest resources.

The original incentive for *Alabama's Forest Assessment and Resource Strategy* can be traced back to the 2008 Farm Bill. It requires each State Forester to develop and submit to the Secretary of Agriculture an assessment of his or her state's forest in order to remain eligible for US Forest Service funding. Early on, the Forestry Commission decided that with or without this Farm Bill requirement, a forest resource assessment was needed in Alabama.

"From the beginning, this task was seen as an opportunity to develop a strategic plan for the future that would ensure the sus-

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tainability of our forest for future generations,” Casey stated. “It was something we wanted to do.”

The first part of *Alabama's Forest Assessment and Resource Strategy* involved considerable input and thought from landowners, resource professionals, and other private and public partners. Their task was to look at the condition and trends of Alabama's forest and then determine threats that need to be addressed. Their work identified nine threats to Alabama's forest future. These include urban growth and development, forest fragmentation, invasive species, changing markets, insects and diseases, wildfire, catastrophic storms, air quality, and climate change.

Of the nine threats, urban growth and development was considered the most serious because of its impact on forest acreage lost. Between 2000 and 2008, Alabama's forest decreased approximately 225,000 acres. Most of this loss is attributed to urban land use change, and future urban growth is expected to put even more pressure on forest acreage in the future.

The second part of the document lists prescriptions, or strategies, that can be used to address each threat. Because of the landscape scale of each threat, many of the strategies crossed jurisdictional lines. To carry them out successfully will require multi-state and even regional initiatives.

What this Means for Alabama's Forest Landowners

In many ways, the nine threats facing Alabama's forest are felt first-hand by the many landowners who own 68 percent of the state's forestland acreage. They are the ones who are impacted when the forest economy changes, urban development influences traditional forest management, or a new invasive plant emerges. For that reason, the *Alabama's Forest Assessment and Resource Strategy* was written as a guide for natural resources organizations and their partners to work together not only to benefit the forest, but to help the people who own forestland.

“No longer can we take our forest resources for granted,” Casey commented further. “They are vital to our quality of life and affect everyone. That's why this plan is so important. It not only helps us better understand our forest and its contributions, but also provides a road map to stewardship that can sustain this vital resource.”

The complete *Forests at the Crossroads: Alabama's Forest Assessment and Resource Strategy* report is located on the Alabama Forestry Commission website at www.forestry.alabama.gov/State_Assessment.aspx

