



Aerial photo of the Paint Rock River Valley © The Nature Conservancy

# Working Woodlands: A Forest Conservation Model from The Nature Conservancy

*Contributed by The Nature Conservancy in Alabama*

**W**ith uncertainty in traditional timber markets and a trend toward lower sawtimber prices, some landowners are looking for ways to continue good forest management while ensuring long-term protection of their forest. The Nature Conservancy's 'Working Woodlands' program has taken these challenges head on.

What is *Working Woodlands*? Working Woodlands is a forest conservation program initiated in the Appalachian Mountains that seeks to implement science-based, verifiable forest management activities while taking advantage of a growing voluntary carbon market to protect private forests. But before getting too deep into Working Woodlands, let's explore what exactly is forest carbon?

## Forest Carbon

Forest carbon is carbon that has been removed from the atmosphere through photosynthesis – the method by which trees absorb carbon dioxide and sunlight to produce energy. Trees pull carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and store it for long periods of time as wood. This process can counteract increased amounts of carbon dioxide occurring in Earth's atmosphere.

So how can a natural process – that is going to occur with or without human intervention – be marketed? Well, carbon markets have developed around what are called 'offsets,' or the removal of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere to compensate for carbon dioxide emissions occurring elsewhere. Currently, there is no regulatory framework requiring U.S. forest carbon conservation or mitigation. Most carbon offset projects have been implemented voluntarily by project developers, and carbon buyers have purchased offsets on a voluntary basis, seeking in

many cases to enhance their sustainability record.

Now, how does the carbon market advance forest conservation? While there are many types of carbon sequestration projects, Improved Forest Management (IFM) projects are one way to capture and hold carbon for a long period while compensating landowners for making the long-term commitment of 'keeping their forest a forest.' IFM projects focus on 'improvement' from a carbon standpoint. They are *improved* in that they capture more carbon than the typical forest in the area, thus addressing the *additionality* requirement. The good thing is that IFM projects are compatible with good forest management. Periodic timber harvesting can continue, wildlife management programs can continue, and private landowners can ensure permanent protection of their land. Improved forest management is the typical approach utilized in the Working Woodlands program.

## Carbon in Alabama

Clean water and air, sustainable fiber and lumber, excellent wildlife habitat, endless recreational opportunities, and aesthetic appeal are all forest values Alabamians have treasured for generations. Capturing and holding carbon is yet another role of Alabama's forests, and one that can provide meaningful economic benefit to private landowners.

There are many factors influencing the ability of a landscape to sequester carbon, such as existing forest cover and past land use, and each project is unique. While the Working Woodlands program has focused on hardwood forests in the Appalachians, we can estimate relative sequestration capacity by forest types in Alabama with some level of certainty. The open pine forests of the Lower Coastal Plain that were

once dominated by vast, fire-maintained longleaf pine forests are now increasingly managed as well-stocked working forests. If we consider the 'additionality' concept of carbon accounting, it would be difficult to do more than common practice in this setting. However, there may be significant opportunities in other forest types across Alabama, for example, the upland hardwood forests of the Ridge and Valley at the tail end of the Appalachians (northeast Alabama), or our extensive bottomland hardwood forests within the Mobile River Basin.

Considering the values we are accustomed to receiving from the forests and a changing landscape of traditional management regimes, are there other ways we can continue good forest management in Alabama while ensuring long-term protection of our forests? Would a Working Woodlands program work in Alabama? We think carbon projects can be part of the answer and encourage landowners to research and stay well-informed in a changing market.

## The Nature Conservancy

The Nature Conservancy is a 501c3 non-profit conservation organization working in all 50 states and around the globe. Our conservation goals focus on protecting biodiversity, native habitats, and resources for the benefit of people. In Alabama, The Nature Conservancy helps conserve and manage the most biodiverse state east of the Mississippi River. ♻️

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