

social sciences

# Engaging African American Landowners in Sustainable Forest Management

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The Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program is a comprehensive effort to address the long-standing problem of underparticipation of African Americans in forest management. We conducted rapid appraisal baseline research for pilot projects in this program in three Southern states using a carefully selected purposive sample to enhance our understanding of minority landownership and forest management. We found that whereas land represents an important family resource across generations, heirs' property status often results in insecure property ownership, and most families receive little or no economic return from their land. Forest stands tended to be naturally regenerated pine forests that require thinning, burning, or even complete harvest and replanting if owners are to benefit economically from forestry. Forestry can help families retain land and build assets, although most of the African American landowners included in our study noted that their previous engagement with forestry has been limited to opportunistic timber sales. Landowners expressed broad interest in future engagement in forestry activities and managing for wildlife. Our interview with landowners revealed that the community-based pilot projects were building links among landowners and foresters to encourage sustainable forest management and retention of African American family land.

**Keywords:** minorities and forestry, family forest owners, heirs' property

Concerns about African American participation in forest management have been voiced for at least three decades. In the 1980s, a study in two North Carolina counties found no black forest owners who had received technical assistance from state or local forestry agencies, many owners having heirs' property<sup>1</sup> or clouded titles that limited forestry activities, and a lack of knowledge about and perception of bias in program administration (Hilliard-Clark and Chesney 1985). Unfortunately, many of these same issues persist

today. Recent research in Mississippi (Gordon et al. 2013) found that African American forest owners reported high levels of distrust of government agency staff, issues of heirs' property and land loss, and limited engagement with forestry professionals. Yet we also know that African Americans have strong attachments to the land and interest in managing forestlands (Hilliard-Clark and Chesney 1985, Schelhas et al. 2012, Gordon et al. 2013). Although it has historically been difficult to engage family forest owners in general (Hilliard-Clark and Chesney

1985, Butler and Leatherberry 2004), the persistence of this issue provides a compelling reason to increase outreach to African American forest owners and address their needs in the areas of heirs' property and sustainable forest management. In this article, we discuss an integrated research and outreach effort to improve African American land retention and forest management.

In 2012, the US Endowment for Forestry and Communities, in collaboration with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resource Conservation Service and the USDA Forest Service, funded three 30-month community-based pilot projects through the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program. This initiative was intended to foster stronger, more economically viable families, healthier communities, and improved ecosystem sustainability by resolving landownership issues and helping families become engaged in sustainable forestry. The pilot projects were initiated with partner organizations working in three multicounty regions: Roanoke Rural Electric Cooperative and partners in northeastern North Carolina; Center for Heirs' Property Preservation and partners in five coastal counties of

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South Carolina; and Limited Resource Landowner Education and Assistance Network (LRLEAN) and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC) in the Black Belt of west-central Alabama.<sup>2</sup> The pilot projects addressed land loss and underutilization of forest resources for African American families by providing information and assistance for resolving heirs' property issues and promoting increased engagement in sustainable forestry. The primary activities of the pilot projects were the following: raising awareness and educating landowners about these issues by working through existing social ties and building new ones; providing information and legal assistance for resolving heirs' property issues; and helping landowners to become engaged in sustainable forest management by building links among landowners and public and private sources of technical and financial assistance. Effective engagement of African American landowners in forest management requires understanding their circumstances, the nature of their landholdings and forests, their historical engagements with forestry and foresters, and their core land and forest values. Thus, the pilot projects included a baseline research component to learn more about heirs' property and engagement in forestry among African American forest owners.

The literature on African American forest owners indicates that, similar to the broader population of family forest owners, they have diverse objectives and occupations and tend not to be farmers (Gan et al. 2003). However, they do have smaller tracts and may not engage in forest management at all or may manage forests less intensively than other forest owners (Gan et al. 2003). In addition, they have lower levels of awareness about and participation in assistance programs, and they face more overall constraints to land management than their majority counterparts (Gan et al. 2003, Guffey et al. 2009). Even in the case of wildland fire mitigation programs, where African American landowners have higher levels of awareness than white landowners, they have lower participation rates (Johnson-Gaither et al. 2011).

Whereas farmers in general have low participation rates in conservation programs, minority farmers have lower participation rates in some programs, enroll fewer acres, and report less satisfaction with the programs (Onianwa et al. 1999, 2004, Gan et al. 2005, Dwivedi et al. 2016). Numerous

factors may influence low participation from minority farmers. For instance, minority landowners have faced discrimination and other difficulties in accessing government assistance programs, even after the enactment of civil rights legislation in the 1960s (Daniel 2013). Gan and Kebede (2005) found that African American farmers were less likely to harvest timber than their white counterparts. Recommendations from prior research include creating awareness of the benefits of forest management, overcoming obstacles to participation in financial assistance programs (e.g., distrust and inability to afford cost-sharing), and increasing technical assistance with forest management and timber sales (Gan and Kolison 1999, Gan et al. 2003, Guffey et al. 2009).

Land loss among rural African Americans in the US South has long been a concern (Zabawa et al. 1990, Zabawa 1991, Wood and Gilbert 2000, Gilbert et al. 2002). Many owners are older, and land has often been passed on without wills as heirs' property (Zabawa et al. 1990, Wood and Gilbert 2000). For various reasons (e.g., distrust of the legal system, lack of estate planning knowledge, desire to keep land as a family resource, and attempts to avoid the conflict that land division can generate), heirs' property has been common among African Americans (Zabawa et al. 1990). However, partition and tax sales related to heirs' property are a leading cause of African American land loss (Dyer and Bailey 2008, Dyer et al. 2009, Gordon et al. 2013). Gordon et al. (2013) note that the multiple owners of heirs' property make forest management practices such as thinning, harvesting,

and prescribed burning difficult because these activities require proof of ownership and a contract signed by each owner. Many African American landowners today engage in off-farm employment and rent out their farmland, but landownership remains important (Wood and Gilbert 2000, Gilbert et al. 2002). African Americans have been found to have very strong landownership values and place a high value on passing land on to the next generation, while expressing limited forest management knowledge and weak preferences for particular land uses (Schelhas et al. 2012). Notably, there has been a revival of interest in land management among African Americans in the US South, with both longtime residents and the many return migrants increasingly turning attention to their family land (Stack 1996, Falk et al. 2004, Dyer and Bailey 2008).

There have been a number of efforts to address African American forestry and landownership issues. Extension workshops and other outreach programs have focused on underserved and minority forest landowners (Hughes and Monaghan 2001, Hughes et al. 2005). Nonprofit organizations, often partnering with federal agencies, have developed innovative community-based programs that go beyond technical assistance to include networking, coalition-building, and cooperative development to more specifically focus on increasing land retention, building social capital, improving access to public and private services, and implementing land-based income-earning strategies (Hamilton et al. 2007, Diop and Fraser 2009, Christian et al. 2013). Yet sustained and comprehensive outreach and assistance

## Management and Policy Implications

Improving forest management and resolving ownership issues for African American landowners can promote sustainable landscapes, ensure future timber supplies, and help redress past inequities. Limited experience with forestry in the African American community and a history of inequality and distrust create a challenging situation. Many forests have been unmanaged and require family landowners to both implement forestry practices that are unfamiliar and to engage forestry professionals for the first time. However, African Americans value land highly for its connections to earlier generations and are nearly unanimous in wanting future generations to retain their land. Sustainable forest management can facilitate land retention, but landowners often require time and assistance to engage family members, consider options, and resolve ownership issues. Outreach programs help create awareness of the value and practice of managing forests, and workshops can help build new relationships among landowners and forestry professionals. By becoming more aware of the complex situations faced by minority forest owners, forestry professionals can adjust their work and programs to increase minority participation. Comprehensive, long-term efforts like the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program offer important lessons for forestry professionals trying to engage minority forest owners everywhere.

efforts have not yet been implemented across the southern region.

Overall, relatively limited data on African American forest owners are available. The National Woodland Owners Survey (NWOS) (Butler et al. 2015) is our primary source of comprehensive data on family forest owners in the United States. However, the combination of low-intensity sampling (the NWOS has a target sample size of 250 responses per state) and known lower African American response rates to mail surveys (Krysan et al. 1994) results in NWOS data providing limited insight into African American forest owners. Most African American forest owner studies have used referral sampling and been limited to one state (e.g., Gan and Kolison 1999, Gan et al. 2003, Dyer and Bailey 2008, Dyer et al. 2009, Gordon et al. 2013), and studies using random sampling have been limited to either farmers<sup>3</sup> or small geographic areas (Onianwa et al. 1999, 2004, Gan et al. 2005, Schelhas et al. 2012).

## Methods

Our approach was inspired by interdisciplinary rapid appraisal techniques developed in association with international agriculture and agroforestry development programs to gain a broad understanding of complex social and agricultural systems in a short period of time as a precursor to project development (Collinson 1981, Hildebrand 1981, Conway 1985, Chambers 1992, Beebe 1995, Russell and Harshbarger 2003). Accordingly, we used an interdisciplinary research team working on the ground for a period of 3 weeks in each of 3 states (North Carolina, South Carolina, and Alabama) and sampled at the household and/or family level (henceforth simply referred to as landowners). Rapid appraisals can achieve a significant understanding of land use systems in a short time period, although sampling is not adequate for generalization of quantitative data and respondent engagement falls short of ethnography (Russell and Harshbarger 2003).

The research team consisted of social scientists and foresters to facilitate simultaneous engagement with the social and forest conditions within which African American landowners operate. We chose the family landownership as the unit of analysis because heirs' property land is often owned at the family level. Relationships among individuals, households, and families in rural settings are complex and often ambiguous

and show considerable variation across cultures; therefore, anthropological research must be open and attentive to both morphology and function of land-owning and economic groups (Netting et al. 1984). Accordingly, our research revealed complex formal and informal land divisions among families, complicated multigenerational and multihousehold ownership patterns, multiple tax parcel divisions within a single ownership, and a variety of arrangements in designating management authority. Interviews were arranged with one member of each family landowning group, and that member was asked to invite other members to be present including those residing in other households and of different generations. Although we would have liked to explore the different perspectives and relationships within family land-owning groups, long-term ethnographic research is required to contact scattered family members and respectfully negotiate family differences.

A purposive sample was assembled in each of the three states, with each pilot project developing a list of 20 landowners with 10 or more acres of land. The 20 landowners in each state were evenly distributed between core participants in the pilot projects and nonparticipants. Core participants were selected from families already engaged in the pilot projects, which had begun outreach efforts about 10 months before the research was undertaken. Nonparticipating families were identified by pilot project foresters through extension agents and other community contacts, a process they were already engaged in as a part of their outreach work. We believe that our sample represented a mixture of engaged landowners, early adopters, and families with nascent interest but limited engagement in forest management. It probably did not include families that were difficult to reach or highly distrustful of outsiders. The purposive sample was intended to represent the diversity of family land ownerships present in the project sites. Thus, we requested that the project foresters endeavor to choose a sample with diversity in parcel size, forest conditions, gender, income, employment status and occupation, management objectives, and experience with forestry.

The social science team (itself diverse in terms of the race, gender, and age of its members) conducted a lengthy interview with each of the 60 landowning families. The interviews ranged from 2 to 4 hours and were conducted in the families' homes, on their land, or in nearby community centers.

Interviews were often followed by property visits and/or less formal conversation. Landowners were encouraged to have multiple family members present for the interviews in person or by phone. We believed that including absentee landowners in our sample was important, and several interviews of absentee landowners residing in other states were conducted entirely by phone. The research team was introduced by pilot project foresters at the beginning of each interview. A forester also visited each property to conduct a rapid assessment of forest conditions. Although we planned for this visit to be in conjunction with the social science team visit, this was not always practical.

The social science interviews were conducted conversationally using a semistructured interview guide. The interview guide covered the following: (1) land and forest characteristics (e.g., acreage held, land uses, and forest conditions); (2) land and forest owner characteristics (e.g., demographics); (3) present and past land and forest management practices and forest conditions; (4) early and recent experiences, values, and attitudes related to land and forests; (5) forms of ownership and heirs' property, tax status, and informal land allocations; (6) social relationships relating to forestry and membership in forestry organizations; (7) future interests and plans for family land and forests; and (8) interest working with other forest owners, for example, to market timber.

There were multiple team members present for each interview; one member generally asked questions, whereas the other took notes. Of the 60 total interviews, all but 8 were recorded with permission. About half the interviews were with groups of 2 or more family members (the largest being 8, 2 parents and 6 children). Generally 1 or 2 individuals did most of the talking in any given interview (often corresponding with land management responsibility). Although we sought opinions from additional members present and noted differences, we were careful not to foster or exacerbate discord among family members. As noted above, internal household or family research on this topic requires a long-term ethnographic presence. A written summary of each interview (with areas of family disagreement softened) and a copy of each forestry assessment were given to each interviewee as a record of the interview and for potential use in forest planning. Several interviewees sent us corrections or clarifications; we revised these documents for their records, although we used the

data originally collected for our own analysis. Nonparticipants were added to pilot project contact lists for outreach programs if interested.

Interview notes, consisting of text added to the interview guide at the point where the interviewee talked about a topic, were prepared based on field notes and recordings. We did not create exact transcripts, but we consulted the recordings, sometimes several times, to clarify meaning and capture unique wordings. We performed qualitative analysis of the interviews using NVivo, with coding developed as a hybrid of interview guide topics and new topics that emerged from the texts themselves. We extracted numerical data for the tables from the interview notes and report frequencies, but we did not perform statistical analysis because the nature of the sample does not permit generalization to the larger population.

## Results and Discussion

Our research results address four primary areas: the characteristics of landowners and their land, the meaning of and importance of land, experience with forestry, and land management interests.

### Landowner Characteristics

Nearly two-thirds of the primary interviewees were between 51 and 70 years old, and only 5 were younger than 50 (Table 1). Interviewees tended to be highly educated (nearly 60% had advanced college degrees, compared with 23% of forest owners Southwide.<sup>4</sup> Many were or had been employed in professional occupations (particularly teaching and educational administration), although 60% of the interviewees were retired (Table 1). However, incomes were generally modest, perhaps because many interviewees were retired public school employees (Table 1). All interviewees were African American, and the gender split was nearly equal (Table 1). In sum, interviewees tended to be older, more highly educated, slightly less wealthy, and more likely to be retired than the larger population of family forest owners in the US South (Butler et al. 2015).

Landholding sizes were modest but appropriate for forestry, with the majority between 21 and 100 acres (Table 2). About 40% faced heirs' property issues on some or all of their land, whereas 60% reported having a title to their land (sometimes jointly with other family members) (Table 2). More than two-thirds of the respondents had in-

**Table 1. Demographic characteristics of principal interviewee of African American families owning 10 or more acres of land.**

Landowner characteristics	No.	%
Age		
<50 yr*	5	8.3
51–70 yr	40	66.7
>70 yr	15	25
Gender		
Male	21	35
Female	23	38.3
Couple	16	26.7
Education (primary interviewee)		
High school†	2	3.3
Some college	14	23.3
Bachelor	7	11.7
Postgraduate	35	58.3
No response	2	3.3
Employment		
Part-time employed	3	5
Full-time employed	20	33.3
Retired	37	61.7
Income		
<\$25,000	8	13.3
\$25,000–\$50,000	8	13.3
\$50,000–\$100,000	13	21.7
\$100,000–\$250,000	5	8.3
>\$250,000	3	5
No response	23	38.3

\* Four additional young people (age <20 years) attended interviews with family members.

† Three parents in multigeneration interviews had less than a high school education.

**Table 2. Characteristics, ownership, and productivity of family land ownerships greater than 10 acres.**

Family land	No.	%
Acres held		
<20	8	13.3
21–50	15	25.0
51–100	16	26.7
101–500	21	35
Tenure		
Title	36	60
Heirs' property	16	26.7
Both*	8	13.3
How land was obtained		
Purchase	11	18.3
Inherit	39	65
Combination	9	15
No response	1	1.7
Productivity		
Makes money	7	11.7
Costs money	32	53.3
About even	15	25.0
No response	6	10.0

n = 60.

\* Some families had parcels of both titled land and heirs' property.

herited land, and about one-fifth had purchased all or some of their land (Table 2). Notably, only 12% reported making a profit from their land, whereas the remainder incurred net costs (generally taxes) to maintain

their land holdings (50%) or were just breaking even (25%) (Table 2).

### The Meaning and Importance of Land

The importance of family land across generations—both looking back to ancestors and looking forward to future generations—emerged as one of the clearest findings from our research. Eighty percent of the interviewees had at least some inherited land, and the depth and strength of attachment to family land was notable. Other research has reported the importance of land-ownership across generations to African American forest owners, while noting their lower levels of engagement with their forests in comparison to those of white forest owners (Schelhas et al. 2012). Consistent with other research on African American land-ownership in the US South (Stack 1996, Falk et al. 2004, Dyer and Bailey 2008), our interviewees often had historical and generational ties to the land and were often reengaging with family land after retirement or return to the US South or as a result of taking over responsibility from ailing or deceased relatives.

Interviewees told stories of childhood experiences on the land, often about working on the family farm but also enjoying the freedom of rural life in fields, forests, and streams. These early experiences played a key role in forming identity and character among many interviewees, and they led to strong attachments to family land and the memories of ancestors and experiences associated with them, as these quotes indicate.

Planting and harvesting sweet potatoes and peanuts were a family affair. Sweet potatoes were fun. Peanuts were horrible....I would say it gave us our work ethic—and it was done together as a family....There's a new appreciation for the land and the things we've gone through and done. We hear today about people not being able to do things, but we've been able to accomplish things. I'm grateful for the experience, though at the time I wasn't. It's given us a wonderful work ethic and teamwork ethic....As you get older, you appreciate it more. Our successes are tied [to that] (SC14).<sup>5</sup>

It wasn't forestry—it was a thriving farm. I do think about the forest. I remember coming down for vacations, and running freely to the back of the land where we grew watermelons. We would smash one and scoop it out, and it was pure enjoyment....We didn't have the trees like that in the city. To be able to commune with nature was a pleasure. I liked to find a spot to read in the shade, to get away from them and have my private time. The shade of the trees! We

would come down when they were taking down tobacco. I remember the shade of the trees as such a comfort for the workers. Just to see people relaxing under the trees and hear stories of the past being shared there (NC9).

Rooted in memories, land was often viewed as an intergenerational resource. People acknowledged and sought to honor the hard work their ancestors had undertaken to buy and hold on to land during times when this was difficult for African Americans in the US South. The message to “never sell the land” had often been passed down for generations and continued to be repeated to upcoming generations. Landowners were often trying to resolve land-ownership issues and bring the land under management for future generations as well as for themselves. For many families, there was an unwritten rule that if you needed to sell family land, you sold it to another family member. And many family members were prepared to buy any such land, even if it was financially difficult, to keep it in the family. Landowners reported efforts, with varying degrees of success, to involve future generations with the land and reinforce the importance of keeping family land, although urban jobs and lifestyles at times made this difficult.

I would like to see it be kept as family land. There was a lot of sacrifice and struggle to get and keep this land. It was passed on without any liens or loans—I don’t want to be part of the generation that loses it, because of the sacrifices that were given to keep it (NC6).

It was drilled into our heads, don’t you ever sell your land. Never sell the land (SC17).

We’re all in agreement that if any of us want to sell, we’ll sell it to each other. I don’t foresee us selling, but if we do, it’s family first (SC14).

We’re working on the next generation. They’ve been worked on since birth. They know the importance of the land (SC8).

The difficulties of managing land that was heirs’ property, as well as the difficulties of resolving ownership issues, were widely acknowledged. The number of owners of heirs’ property parcels was at times large; the highest reported number was “around 200,” although the number involved in decision-making was typically in the single digits because there were generally designated representatives for each family line. Resolving heirs’ property begins with constructing a family tree and contacting all family members and generally requires the assistance of

an attorney. Although several interviewees had resolved ownership issues before the pilot projects, it was more common for them to be planning or just beginning to work with pilot project attorneys. Heirs’ property makes timber sales difficult, and participation in government assistance programs by heirs’ property owners has typically not been possible. Equitable contribution to tax payments was often an issue; frequently heirs who live on the land or have been paying property taxes feel more entitled than other heirs, although the entire property is actually held in common by all heirs. This can create discord and inhibit agreement about a path forward.

No one person has the right to change anything without the permission of everyone [in the family]. If you want to sell, you can’t sell because it’s not yours to sell. You have to get permission to cut timber or do anything else on the land (AL19).

It was through those conversations, when [we learned] that the land was about to be lost because of taxes. I came back and shared that with the family. For us, it was an experience! For me, it was a very moving experience. It was like something was compelling me—we have to save this land! This is where my great-grandfather...to see those gravestones, and all that property. I was determined. We gotta save this property (SC5).

We need assistance with getting the survey. We always need legal advice. I have business experience, but know nothing about clearing title and restoring land value. I’ve worked with black families that have had their land taken—it’s not just a local thing. It happens all over the country, because they’ve had minerals and other resources on the land. There are some heirs that live near the land and an adopted cousin lives on the land (AL20).

### Experience with Forestry

The landowners we interviewed generally had very limited experience with forestry. The history of family land use was generally farming, often a style of small-scale family farming that is no longer viable. Cutting firewood for home heating and selling timber were common, with about half of interviewees having sold timber at some point. The most common strategy for managing forestlands in the past was to allow them to naturally regenerate, invest little or nothing in management, and then harvest when cash was needed or when approached by a timber buyer. Interviewees often felt that they or their parents had been not been paid a fair price for their timber in the past. Concerns about past shortfalls and the need to do better in the future were endemic, moti-

**Table 3. Experience of family land owners (≥10 acres) with forest management activities and assistance programs.**

Owner program participation	No.	%
Activities		4
Tree planting—Yes	16	26.7
Tree planting—No	44	73.3
Burning—Yes	8	13.3
Burning—No	52	86.7
Thin or harvest—Yes	31	51.7
Thin or harvest—No	29	48.3
Use of cost share		
Yes (before program)	9	15
Yes (recent)	9	15
Applied (recent)	1	1.7
No	41	68.3
Forest management plan		
Yes (before program)	7	11.7
Yes (recent)	7	11.7
In process	13	21.7
No	33	55.0

n = 60.

vating people to learn more and share experiences. Only about 25% of landowners indicated that trees had been planted on their land, with natural regeneration being much more common. Very few study participants had formally engaged in prescribed burning (13% reported doing some burning), although several recalled their parents burning but indicated that their customary burning measures were now discouraged or illegal.

Only 12% of landowners interviewed had a written forest management plan before the advent of the pilot project (Table 3). However, an additional 12% had recently obtained a management plan, and 22% were in some stage of obtaining one. Only 15% had participated in any government assistance program before beginning to work with the pilot project, although an additional 15% had recently applied and been accepted and others were planning to apply (Table 3). Experiences with forestry information before the initiation of the pilot project varied widely. Several people indicated that they had sought help from relatives employed in logging or forest products businesses, but that they often did not receive the information that they needed. Because of labor specialization in the industry, it appears that even contacts working on logging crews or at mills are rarely able to provide all of the information that landowners need. Several landowners had historically trusted sources of forestry advice and other information, either through extension agents or university personnel, but these re-

relationships tended to be with one specific trusted individual and were easily lost with transfers or retirements. For the most part, awareness of and participation in landowner organizations was very limited. Only 3 landowners reported belonging to one, and many knew little about them; as one said, “I never heard about there being ones we could join” (SC17). If organizations were mentioned, it was usually the community-based organization carrying out the pilot project.

Forestry experience was rare, and many landowners felt that they and their families had been kept away from information and programs and therefore lagged behind other landowners.

Before, there was no management—the trees were just growing. We were focused on farming. The trees were there to supply fuel for the winter. We didn’t think about forest management until a few years ago. I went out and tried to find people to help us, because I didn’t know anything about timber at all. People take advantage of people who don’t know (SC14).

If our ancestors had had this information 40 or 50 years ago, life would be different for these kids (SC10).

For many owners, the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program was their first opportunity to become involved in forestry. The forestry program was seen as key to involving the larger African American community with the land and retaining land for future generations.

Prior to now, we didn’t have much knowledge. We’ve gotten more info from [this program] than we’ve ever gotten. Someone might tell you this or that, but not the whole package....[The program] brought to light what kind of value our land has. We knew it had value, but not what kind....If it can be more for us and our children, that’s what is so important to us. We appreciate the enlightenment (SC10).

It’s about sharing information that we didn’t have before. African Americans were not aware, still aren’t, or are skeptical. As the program expands, as the older group becomes more familiar, and as more African Americans become involved, the information will spread (SC16).

Many landowners were just beginning to focus on their land and its management after years of inattention. The responses of these landowners revealed deliberate processes of information gathering, family discussions, and decisionmaking that highlight the fact that people are making long-term decisions about a significant economic asset and place with meaningful ties to family his-

tory. Although the program was inspiring them to undertake this effort and helping them through this process, our observation is that progress will take time and sustained assistance as people need to learn about their options for land management, attempt to come to family agreement, learn more about the legal implications of customary landownership patterns, become educated about forest management and forest industry, decide which providers to trust, fulfill requirements for applications for assistance, and develop and implement management plans.

### Land Management Interests

While some landholdings were entirely forested, many included agricultural fields and pastures. Despite the farming history, few families continued to farm, and many fields had been abandoned and had grown up in trees. Some fields were still farmed by a family member or rented out. Some people were happy to be supporting a neighbor or a young farmer, whereas others felt that they were not getting enough economic return from the rental and were reconsidering their rental arrangements and land use. Gardens, sometimes quite large, were often common. Because some living ancestors remembered the hard work of clearing land and creating a farm, sometimes there was family resistance to reforestation. As one said, “My grandparents would pull up trees, dynamite the stumps. They would say, ‘now you want to put trees back on the land? That’s crazy.’ But that was 100 years ago. Things have changed” (NC7). Another reported that his mother had always said to “never stop farming because you have to take care of the land and trees would kill the soil” (SC17). One landowner believed there were tax advantages to keeping land in agriculture that made it easier to hold on to land. Many landowners indicated that they had no plans to farm in their retirement due to age and the amount of work involved.

Despite minimal involvement in forestry in the past, there was considerable interest in future involvement. Not surprisingly, this was stronger among the core participants in the pilot projects. Yet the interest was broad, reflecting a general interest in retaining ownership of and making rural land more productive in ways that were not labor or cash intensive. Many wanted to use land more productively than in the recent past, sometimes looking to nearby industry or government forestland as a model.

Several landowners expressed interest in producing both long-term and short-term income by combining timber production with pine straw harvesting or agroforestry, although wildlife and esthetics were important, too.

I love the idea of growing trees back there. I would support that. When [the program] talked about that, I got it, and I understood that this would be good for the land that’s not being used. A management program would help us get the best value from the land. Not just let wild trees grow (SC3).

I would like to plant trees and make some money—that’s the number one goal....The ultimate goal is to make some money and keep it for future generations. And keep a pristine view for next generations....The first thing I would like to do is go ahead and replant the plant and get some pines going. That’s going to be several years down the line, but at least then we can put our heads together about development on the land that could produce some income for us (SC7).

Many landowners also had a family history of hunting on their land. Some continued to hunt, whereas others had largely given it up but still provided opportunities for others to hunt—often family members, friends, and neighbors. Views on hunting leases and hunting clubs varied. Sometimes a family member was the link to a hunting club, which provided cash or meat in return for the opportunity to hunt. Hunting leases provided income to help some landowners to defray tax payments and other expenses, and they could also help keep other unwelcome hunters off the property. Other landowners worried about losing control of their land to hunting clubs or about the hassle that might be involved in dealing with hunting clubs. Several landowners were endeavoring to provide habitat for wildlife but did not allow hunting. Wildlife observation, particularly of deer, turkey, and songbirds, was valued by many landowners.

We want to be good stewards of the land. I love the trees. In Harrisburg, there are no trees. I don’t care too much for the city. I love the animals. I love the turkeys and the squirrels. The Lord gave us this land, so we want to take care of it (AL13).

### Forest Conditions

Pilot project or contract foresters visited the landholdings of interviewees to assess the condition of their forests. Nearly all of the forest stands were unmanaged natural regeneration, often densely stocked or with a dense understory, reflecting the absence of prescribed burning and thinning. Some older stands had sawtimber or chip-and-saw,

whereas many lacked sufficient large trees and were only suitable for pulpwood harvest. A number of stands had sufficient trees and forest health for the forestry recommendation to be continued growth with scheduled thinnings or harvest within the next 5 or 10 years. Other stands had been heavily harvested recently, had ice or windstorm damage, or had overall poor stand development; in these cases foresters recommended clearing and selling any merchantable wood followed by site preparation and replanting. Most stands also needed construction of fire lanes and introduction of prescribed burning. A few stands showed rutting or other soil damage from prior harvest. Forester recommendations included protecting stream buffers, leaving bottomland hardwoods and wetlands for wildlife, and encouraging owners to market smaller stands collectively with nearby landowners to make forestry operations more feasible.

## Outreach Strategies and Accomplishments

The pilot projects took a multifaceted approach to engage and assist landowners. Identifying and reaching landowners were often difficult and they began by working through existing social networks, for example, foresters, extension agents, churches, and civic groups. Enthusiastic participants were recruited as ambassadors to help reach as many landowners as possible and to promote the program in their communities and churches. Workshops and training programs were held to first provide landowners basic information about the program and later to present technical information on forestry or heirs' property. Natural resource professionals and foresters were invited to these meetings, which presented important opportunities for landowners to meet them and for networking among landowners. State forestry agencies and the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service were actively involved in the overall program and played critical roles in ensuring that landowners have appropriate access to services and opportunities. Several consulting foresters worked closely with the pilot projects. Each pilot project had the ability to provide landowners with legal assistance for resolving heirs' property or other ownership issues, and each pilot project was led by a local community-based organization. By providing an integrated program of assistance involving private and government partners

and by building relationships, the pilot projects have helped landowners get the information and services they need over time. The newly developed capacity is likely to continue beyond the program's initial investment because of local participation and network building.

## Conclusion

Engaging African American forest owners represents both a historical and a contemporary challenge, requiring continuous efforts to engage landowners, create awareness of forestry opportunities, and ensure that financial and technical assistance is available. Our research indicates that African American forest owners in the US South have had very little engagement with forestry besides occasional opportunistic timber sales. Forest management techniques, such as treeplanting, prescribed burning, and thinning have rarely been undertaken, and forest owners often have had little contact with forestry professionals or conservation personnel. A significant portion of owners have heirs' property issues that require time and assistance in working with other family members to define and update their landownership status to a point where they can begin to fully engage in forestry. Forestry assistance without such legal assistance will have few benefits for these owners. Many African Americans are managing land that has been in their family for many years, and the heritage value of this land is immeasurable. Although nearly all landowners want to keep this land in their family for generations to come, few are earning any returns from their land. Sustainable forest management provides a land-use option that can fit well with the lifestyle of many owners, who are often either older and retired or busy with jobs and with limited time to devote to their land. Resolving heirs' property issues can encourage land owners to adopt sustainable forest management, while, at the same time, potential sustainable forest management income can provide impetus to families needing to resolve heirs' property. The Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program is addressing these issues in an integrated fashion and shows how programs of this nature can simultaneously redress past inequities for African American landowners, ensure future timber supplies in states where forestry is one of the major economic activities, and protect watersheds and wildlife habitat.

## Endnotes

1. Heirs' property or "tenancy in common" is inherited land passed on intestate, without clear title, typically to family members.
2. Subsequent to the pilot projects, in 2015 and 2016 the Program received additional funding for continuation and expansion from the US Endowment and USDA.
3. Only 40% of all forest owners and 18% of African American forest owners in the US South report income from farming or grazing (Butler et al. 2015).
4. African American and white landowners in the southern United States are very similar in education levels (Butler et al. 2015).
5. Quotation codes reflect the state and interview number for that state. SC, South Carolina; NC, North Carolina; AL, Alabama. There were 20 interviews in each state. Thus, SC14 refers to interview 14 in South Carolina.

## Supplemental Podcast

This article includes a podcast interview. Visit the online version of this article to listen to the podcast.

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