

## Female Forestland Owners: Characterization of Assistance Needs

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**Abstract:** There is a limited amount of research focusing on female forestland owners. In looking at female forestland owners as a group researchers are often left with more questions than answers. What is the role of these landowners in the forestry sector? How do female forestland owners manage their lands? Do female forestland owners possess unique characteristics, needs, and interests? From the limited research available, it appears that female forestland owners do express some similarities; they are older, own small amounts of acreage, and have a more pronounced interest in ecological management (Warren 2003, Lidestav and Ekstrom 2000). This paper characterizes female forestland owners in their land management practices and their accessibility to knowledge dealing with their land. The data consists of information received from 39 semi-structured personal interviews with female forestland owners in rural Alabama

### INTRODUCTION

Non-industrial private forestland owners form the base of our nation's timber supply. Non-industrial private forestland owners (NIPF) own more than 60 percent of the timberland in the United States (Bourke and Luloff 1994) and this percentage continues to increase (Birch 1997). Timberland accounts for 71% of the total land area in Alabama (Hartsell and Brown 2002) equaling 22.9 million acres. The majority of this timberland base is in the hands of non-industrial private landowners (NIPF), accounting for 78% (18 million acres) of the total ownership of Alabama (Hartsell and Brown 2002).

The subject of NIPF landowners has been widely researched, in part because of the impact they play in maintaining and sustaining forests. There is a wealth of information available dealing with the landowner's roles, decision-making processes, and overall management and involvement with their forestland. However, there is a limited amount of research that has been conducted on characteristics of female forestland owners.

This topic is of relevance to policy makers because of recent public disclosures that the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the past has discriminated against minority farmers in a manner which contributed to black land loss (United States Department of Agriculture 2001). The USDA Forest Service wants to examine the question of service provision to forest land owners. In this paper, the focus is on female forestland owners in Alabama, specifically motivations, experiences, and the education.

This study was conducted in two regions of Alabama, the Black Belt and the Piedmont. Both of these regions are heavily forested but differ in how these resources are used and in their demographic profiles. Alabama is a prime location for a study such as this because of its significant contribution to forestry. Alabama is home to over 1,100 forest manufacturing operations, has 70,000 citizens directly employed in forest related occupations, and timber the dominant crop harvested in 34 of Alabama's 67 counties

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(Alabama Forestry Commission 2002). The heart of this enterprise is the timberland base in Alabama.

Three major objectives were covered in this study:

- 1) Review the status of female forestland ownership in Alabama including the extent to which these populations are underserved by public agencies that support the forestry sector.
- 2) Characterize the relationships between female forestland owners and their land holdings; including management objectives, timber production, and current resource uses.
- 3) Identify the major sources of programs related to forestry issues used by female landowners.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Women Forestland Owners.* Compared to the literature on women's roles in agriculture and farming (Effland et al. 1993, Haney and Knowles 1988), there have been relatively few studies looking at women as forestland owners. There has been some research on this topic from Sweden which concluded that the average size of women's land holdings was significantly lower than men's (Lidestav & Ekstrom 2000). The authors noted that in the U.S. the same trend exists, that on average, women's holdings constitute one-third the acreage of men (Lidestav and Ekstrom 2000).

This study also revealed some notable differences in the forestry practices between males and females. They found that there are fewer timber sales among female owners and harvesting activity was found to be less frequent on female land holdings. Females were also more inclined to regenerate their timber (Lidestav and Ekstrom 2000). Several of these differences can be linked to external factors including ownership size, site quality of the land, and age of the landowner. However, at the conclusion of the research, it was determined that some of their results could not be attributed to the above confounding variables but were only explained through the analysis of gender (Lidestav and Ekstrom 2000).

*Women Forestland Owners in Alabama.* In a recent survey by the Alabama Forestry Association (2003), trends affecting female forestland owners were examined. The study was done using a random sample of 300 forestland owners, of which 30 percent were women.

A high percentage of women, 42 percent, indicated that they felt the first role for forests in Alabama was to provide wildlife habitat. This was compared to the 26 percent of men who indicated the same sentiment (Kennedy and Roche 2003). This data confirms past studies (Lidestav and Ekstrom 2000, Warren 2003) that show that women tend to place other values on forests besides timber production. When asked the primary use of their forestland, 33 percent indicated recreational (including wildlife related activities), while 40 percent said it was to raise and harvest timber.

The percentage of women harvesting timber was lower than the percentage of men, 75 percent compared to 82 percent. The management practices of both males and females from this survey appear to be fairly consistent, although they express different attitudes toward the role of forests.

The Kennedy and Roche study also addressed the educational needs of the landowners. There were differences between the interests of males and females. Thirty-seven percent of the women landowners felt that wildlife conservation was the most important educational topic provided by landowner agencies, with 24 percent interested in learning more about Best Management Practices, and 15 percent about marketing timber. However, the males felt that marketing timber was the most important educational topic, 28 percent, with 24 percent interested in wildlife conservation and 20 percent in Best Management Practices (Kennedy and Roche 2003). This difference again demonstrates the interest of women in forest values other than timber. This information can be used in future educational opportunities by resource agencies to best meet the needs of female forestland owners.

The existing literature does not address whether women landowners are underserved in the field of forestry. Do they receive the same benefits from land ownership as men? Are they aware of programs which are available to provide either financial aid or educational help?

## **METHODS**

The methods used for this study were primarily qualitative rather than quantitative. A qualitative approach best fit the overall objectives of the study by providing a framework for exploratory research, given that there are limited data available on African-American and women forestland owners. This study seeks to address this gap by using qualitative methods to answer the questions of why, what, how, and who pertaining to the underserved. The purpose of qualitative methods is to “describe and explain processes and relationships” (Bliss and Martin 1989: 604). Within this framework, hypotheses are developed rather than tested. Qualitative research may provide the foundation for future quantitative efforts by clarifying central questions that need to be addressed.

Snowball sampling was used to locate respondents for interviews. This sampling method starts with a base of potential informant names and branches to include any recommendations given by the informants. The names of potential forestland owners who fit the objectives of the study were collected from the County Extension Agent, the United States Forest Service County Forester, the Natural Resources Conservation Service director, the Alabama Forestry Commission Minority Outreach Forester, local forestry consultants, and several other key informants.

Interview questions were written and pre-tested before being taken to the field. The survey consists of 30 questions fitting into four categories: ownership history, management, assistance, and demographics. Interviews were conducted both over the phone and face-to-face. When possible, the interview was conducted at the landowner’s home, but in the case of absentee landowners this was often not possible. Interviews were also conducted over the telephone in accordance with the landowner’s preference.

## **RESULTS**

### Forest Landowner Demographics

The demographic characteristics of this study confirm the existing literature on female forestland owners (Warren 2003). The average age of these individuals is above 60, and most are retired from the workplace. The land distribution for female forestland owners follows the general pattern of distribution for the counties studied, but on average the amount of acreage owned was below the average. Thirty-nine female forestland

owners were interviewed, 29 white and 10 African-American. Twenty-seven of the landowners lived in the same county as their land while the other 12 were classified as absentee landowners from surrounding towns or distant cities.

### Ownership History

There are strong ties that bind female forestland owners to their land. In the case of land inheritance, these ties are associated with the past owner of the land, often the male head of the family. These feelings are especially strong amongst the widowed women who express a desire to 'keep things the way that he did.'

There is a general assumption that many women forestland owners receive their land from inheritance (Warren 2003), either through a deceased spouse or close family member. Though the data from this study confirms this view (72 percent inherited all or part of their land), this does not mean they are passive in their land management style. Female respondents, who inherited their land, exhibited a strong drive to protect and to manage the land in a 'right' way.

In several interviews, women would tell how their family had been in the region for at least a hundred years, many tracing their history to the cotton plantation days. A woman described how her land originated with her great-great-grandfather when he homesteaded some of the land back in the 1830's. The land used to be used as mainly a family farm with mostly cotton and corn crops, until someone in the family let the land grow over and it became seeded with timber. Many of the older women have this same deep connection with the land that traces back to their birth. The land that they currently own is the land that they grew up on, it is the land that they have always known and thus holds a unique and special place in their life. Although most of the younger landowners do not share this same depth of experience, the same sentiment of preserving family history often is expressed. 'Amy,' a landowner from Randolph County, recently inherited a piece of heir land that she shares in ownership with her cousins she said the land was purchased in 1928 and has been passed down through the family since then. She said that her parents used to live on the land but that she did not ever visit it until only recently. She said that her primary interest is to build the land back up and put a home on it so that the family will always have a place to stay whenever they want to return to Alabama.

There was a strong tendency for the women to refer to their land as being inherited from the male patriarch in the family. The female respondents spoke of their land inheritance as coming from their 'grandfather' or 'father' rather than their mother or grandmother. In fact, twelve of the seventeen linked their inherited land to patrilineal sources, two linked it to the matrilineal and the other three linked it to the general term 'family' or 'heir.' These references to family were usually followed by a story or a memory connecting the past to the present. A woman lovingly told how her land was originally cotton plantation farmed by her father and then after her father grew older it was leased to another farmer for production. Once in her possession, they decided to plant it in pine trees. She has kept this part of the property because her father once had a lot of property but he lost a lot of it during the depression. This was one of the pieces that he kept and he used to take her out on it and tell her that she would go to college off the trees that she saw.

The link between the male head of the family and the land is one that may correspond to the landowner's memories on the land. Those who associate the land with the patrilineal tell of times with their father or other male figure just as those who associate the land with the matrilineal share memories about their mother. One woman

talked a lot about her mother and the memories that they shared in the old homeplace. 'Eloise' who had just turned 90 years old recalled that, "Back when her mother owned it, they grew sorghum, sweet cane, potatoes, peas, cotton, corn, and rice. They also had chickens, cattle, and turkeys." In her home she had a picture of her mom, probably in her 90's, feeding the chickens; it was a full circle of ownership. Thus, there appears to be a link between the persona dominating the memories associated with the land and the persona identified as the giver of the inheritance of the land.

Though their name is on the deed, it seemed that some of the women thought of the land as belonging more to the person that they inherited it from. A respondent described how she inherited the land after her uncle passed away. She said that he was a sharp man and took every opportunity that he had to invest in the land, and that she has been trying to do the same.

To these women, land is a part of their heritage, a memory of a past loved one, and they feel that it is their job to maintain the integrity of that heritage. Maintaining this heritage means not only keeping the land deed in the family, but also upholding the past practices of the land. They express a duty to uphold the practices of the owner before, to "try and do the same."

This sentiment is felt strongly within the widowed landowners as well. Ten of the respondents are widows, all but one of whom received their land through inheritance of their deceased spouse. Among these women, the purpose of 'family tradition' was more prevalent as a response to primary interest on the land. Those who were widows overwhelmingly wished to "keep up the land just like he did." In a recent article, Sarah Warren (2003, 3) sets out to disprove the 'just widows' assumption that is sometimes held by forest managers. She states that it is frequently suggested that 'just widows' inherit wooded land from husbands, but have no idea about forest management. Or, they are more likely to be cheated by unscrupulous timber buyers... 'Just widows' are dependent on others for decision-making and land use planning. 'Just widows' have little impact on the goods and services provided by forested lands. As with all generalizations, these assertions are not always true.

The widows interviewed in this survey tended to break the bounds of the 'just widows' assumptions by carrying on the legacy of their spouse through 'good' land management activities. Their fervent desire to 'keep up the land just like he did' propelled them to make wise decisions about the present and the future of their inheritance.

### Management

The management objectives of women forestland owners focused on a balance between timber and conservation. One woman best summed this approach by saying that she was "Tickled with the timber sales but that the land also brought her a warm feeling." Another woman described the same sentiment, "I want the money from my hardwoods, but I don't want to cut them to get money from them." This desire for balance impacts every aspect of the women's land management from planting to harvest.

*Timber.* Nine of the 39 respondents, 23 percent, had a professionally written management plan. Five of these plans were written by professional forestry consultants, the other four were written by a professional government forester. The women with management plans owned, on the whole, greater amounts of acreage than those without a management plan; of the nine with management plans, six held acreages above the average for the respondents. This is consistent with literature which supports the view

that the greater the acreage, the more intensive the management (Birch 1997). Also, five of the women with management plans had loblolly pine plantations on their land which would seem to indicate an objective of economic returns. However, only two identified economic potential as their primary interest in the land.

Seven respondents had a forestry consultant to help them achieve their management objectives. This characteristic was examined against the factor of acreage and the data showed that three of the women held acreages above the respondent average. When asked about their involvement with forestry consultants, some responded negatively. One respondent said that she had a management plan but was not pleased with it because she felt that it concentrated too much on cutting timber instead of her objectives. She described forestry consultants as "...not concerned with 'balance' in the system."

The primary objective of nine study participants was timber production. There appeared to be a correlation between factors indicative of intensive management and the primary objective of timber production, with five of the nine indicating that they did have a forestry consultant and had pine plantation stands. All of the nine had sold timber off their land. There was no general trend between the objective of timber production and age or acreage. One woman responded that, "My primary interest in the land used to be for timber, but since the prices are so low, I don't have another interest in it except to keep it in the family." This quote may indicate that the interest in timber production is directly dependent on the market prices of production. If the prices are not adequate, then the landowner chooses to use the land for other purposes.

In total, thirty of the 39 respondents (78 percent) had harvested timber from their forests. This percentage is similar to the statewide Kennedy and Roche survey finding at 75 percent. Eleven of these sales were made from a pine plantation, while the remaining were sold from a natural pine/hardwood mix. Fourteen of the landowners re-planted their land in pine plantation, including the two that previously were pine. Additionally, five of the previously natural stands were re-planted in pine plantation after harvest. The high levels of re-planting further support the desire of women landowners to participate in management practices that sustain the life of the forest. There did not appear to be a correlation between timber sales and age or acreage.

Seventeen women had sold timber under a logging contract and bidding process. However, several mentioned having negative experiences with loggers. One female said that the process of selling timber was satisfactory but that the "loggers left a big mess" on her property. Another woman shared the same sentiment that the process was fine but remarking that the land was so ugly when the trees were cut it looked like it had been "raped." Finally, in another case the respondent was highly dissatisfied with the logging that was done. She said that they totally butchered the land and took whatever trees they wanted and added that the dishonesty of logging contracts would be a good thing to write a paper on.

'Sustainability,'<sup>1</sup> of the land was also highly emphasized by respondents in the interviews. When asked the question, "What are your future plans for the land," every answer was directed towards a desire to pass the land along to their descendants. This desire was not just to pass along the deed of the land, but also to conserve the resources that the land provides for the next generation. One respondent indicated she learned does

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<sup>1</sup> The actual term 'sustainability' was never used in an interview. However, by drawing upon its definition by the Brundtland Report, "Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the needs of the future," I feel that the attitudes expressed by the landowners were concurrent with the term.

everything she can to make conservation the focus of her land management because she remembers a time when it was not a priority. In addition, two women indicated that conservation was one of their primary interests in the land. They expressed this conservation value by engaging in management practices such as re-planting and following the Best Management Practices guidelines.

*Wildlife.* None of the respondents indicated that wildlife management was their primary interest in the land; however, many of them described wildlife as a positive aspect of the forestland. Thirty-four of thirty-nine (87 percent) said that they encountered wildlife on their land ranging from game to non-game species. Six landowners (15 percent) leased a part of their land to a hunting club. A landowner in our survey with over 500 acres told that the leases for her property are sold for \$5,500.00 a piece which brings additional income to her on yearly basis. Additionally, a woman praised her involvement with hunting leases. They also manage for wildlife, including plots of pure hardwood trees for acorns. They have a local hunting club of 20 members who use their land almost year round. They said that the hunters on their land will usually keep them updated as to the status of their timber.

The upkeep service that hunters provide is especially helpful for women who are not able to go out on their land on a regular basis. However, the down-side to hunting clubs is that it immediately leaves the landowner open to various liabilities that might occur if an accident were to happen on the land. One respondent said she is not willing to take that risk. She said that they actively manage for wildlife including deer, quail, and turkey for their personal enjoyment and hunting but do not want to lease out any of their land for a hunting club or licenses because of the liability. Another recounted that in the past she has been asked to permit hunting leases on her land, but won't do it because she is a nature-lover and the thought of someone killing a baby deer on her land doesn't sit well with her. With or without hunting leases, a few of the respondents said that they believe hunting takes place on their land without their permission. One woman whose land is near the Talladega National Forest has trouble keeping hunters off of her land because they confuse her property with public domain. Still another woman says that she allows local adolescents to hunt both deer and squirrel on her land because she knows that they would probably be there anyway.

The role of wildlife and wildlife management appears to be important to many of these women landowners. The wildlife gives the owner a personal enjoyment and a means of recreation whether in sightseeing or hunting. In the survey done by the Alabama Forestry Association they found that 42 percent of the women felt that providing wildlife habitat was the first role of Alabama forests. This statistic further supports the views of the women in our survey indicating that wildlife are an integral part of the forest and an issue of concern and importance.

### Assistance

*Education.* Eight of the 39 respondents said that they had attended some type of education program on land management. All of the responses from these programs were positive. Most of the women attending these programs were relatively younger and had land holdings greater than the average. The women also tended to participate in more management activities. The types of programs varied from those offered by county agencies to those offered by forestry groups such as the TREASURE forest organization. The involvement that women have in these programs varied as well. One woman said,

“They go every chance that they can get” while others described going to one or two depending on their interest.

Four of the women, 10 percent, indicated that they were members of the TREASURE forest organization and attended meetings regularly. These women tended to own greater amounts of acreage than those who did not attend the programs. Several of the women, when asked about their involvement in landowner organizations, mentioned that they had an interest in the TREASURE forest county meetings that took place, but had not attended the programs due to scheduling conflicts or lack of adequate and timely information. The organization appears to be the most actively attended landowner organization. The respondents were not members of any other type of landowner organizations such as the Alabama Forest Landowners Association or any type of environmental organization.

In addition to scheduled educational programs and landowner meetings, there appeared to be a network of information that was passed from woman to woman in social circles. This network consisted of social ties through outside groups such as bridge clubs and civic and church organizations. The information spread through this network is selective in both its distribution and depth, however in small rural communities such channels are a major means of communication for many.

Female landowners tend to seek information sources in which they have built trust. Several women indicated that a lot of their education about land management comes from their close family and friends. Absentee landowners especially rely on the help of local relatives to monitor the status of their land and provide any kind of protective measures that may be needed. One woman sought the assistance of her friends when seeking a logger to cut her timber. Another woman received information about local financial opportunities through a cousin that had been involved in the program. Still others are related to professionals in the field of natural resources who offer them advice on management of their timberlands. It is interesting to note that this education received from family/friends is not legitimized through professional status but through trust. The landowner gives value to the voice that has their best interest in mind rather than the voice that might have the best knowledge.

*Financial.* A total of 16 of the 39 respondents had applied for a financial cost-share program for their land. Twelve of the landowners had received grant monies while the other four had either been turned down or their grant was pending. Most had learned about these programs either through their forestry consultant or local advertising. Those most satisfied with the programs tended to be those that had received funds. One such landowner praised the financial grant process. She said that the program has been marvelously helpful to fill in the gaps between the time of planting her pine plantation and the time of harvest. Another recipient praised the cost-share program she had been involved with saying that it gave her the financial opportunity to re-seed her forest after the land had been cleared in harvest. Through this, she was able to meet her goal of maintaining the forest for the future.

However, in another case a woman was turned down for a grant and the result was detrimental to her land. She said that the resource agency told her that she would receive the grant, but later told her that they could not provide her funding. So, she said after that she hasn't had any interest in re-planting. The impact of obtaining these grants in these two cases changed the dynamics of the forest. In one, success led to the owner's renewed interest in the land, in the other, disappointment led to the owner's disengagement of interest.

The process of applying for a cost-share program can often be problematic. 'Mary,' a younger woman with a Ph.D degree complained that the grant process was confusing and full of discrepancies. "I was amazed at how complicated the programs (FIP, CRP) were and that if I can't understand it how does a person with a high-school education deal with it?" This complicated process leads some landowners to the conclusion that one woman put simply, "I'd rather do it myself than mess with the government."

The financial aid programs available to forestland owners are limited. The NRCS director in one of my counties of study estimated that they received around 30 applicants for the Forestry Incentive Program (FIP). Of these 30 applicants, only four are funded. According to NRCS data, from 1999-2002, ten white females and no black females received FIP cost-share programs from my two counties of study. The average funding covers around 200 acres for site-prep and planting.

## CONCLUSIONS

The information collected from interviews with females helps to fill in a gap of knowledge regarding unique characteristics of this group of landowners. The data revealed that female forestland owners have some of the same characteristics as male forestland owners, but that there are points of division where females tend to have a greater interest in the ecological and wildlife value of the forest. The expressed interest in non-timber values of forestland are further pronounced among women who have inherited their land and wish to keep it sustainable for the future generations. Seventeen of the 39 female respondents who had inherited their land listed family tradition as their primary objective in land management. In addition, four of the women who had purchased their land named family tradition as their primary objective. In total, 54 percent of this study's respondents stated that maintaining a family tradition of land ownership was a primary goal. This emphasis on family tradition has not previously been documented in the literature. This, along with other traits, provides depth to the base of knowledge on female forestland owners on which further research can be conducted.

Women with larger acreages tended to be more actively involved in management, specifically for timber. There was a strong anti-logging sentiment from the respondents based on previous bad experiences with loggers and personal beliefs. The women forestland owners generally managed their land with outside help either through a forestry consultant, government agency representatives, or close family and friends. This was especially true with the widowed and absentee landowners. The involvement of women in assistance programs tended to be higher among younger women with larger landholdings. There also appeared to be a greater involvement by women who were involved in other aspects of the community such as local bridge clubs or church and civic organizations. This correlation can be linked to the spread of information through social ties within the community. The overall satisfaction of the women involved with these programs was fairly high. However, the respondents who had not been involved tended to have a negative view of the process of obtaining financial grants, labeling it as biased towards larger landowners.

Further research is needed to examine the characteristics of female forestland owners in different settings, and to relate these characteristics to services (governmental and private) available to forest land owners. The information presented in this study presents only a small picture of what is occurring in underserved land ownership. Female

forestland owners represent only one group of the underserved. Other groups, including minorities and limited-resource landowners also fall under the category of underserved in terms of their access to government landowner resources. There is still little known on these individuals in terms of their motivations and management. Research on service provision to underserved forestland owners are needed identify better methods of reaching and meeting the unique needs of these groups.

In the case of female forestland owners, more service concentrating on non-timber values such as wildlife and conservation appears warranted based on the results of this study. Female respondents involved in this study, have a strong interest in wildlife and conservation values associated with ownership of forests and a desire to learn more about ways in which they can manage their lands accordingly. In addition, information transfer should occur through pathways of trust. It is through these encounters that female forestland owners are most likely to gain knowledge.

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