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Our National Concern About Forestland Development

By Jeffrey Kline, Research Forester

As the U.S. population grows, many forestry professionals are thinking more about forestland development. Although forest policy debates often focus on whether to manage public forestlands for timber, ecological, or recreation purposes, almost three-fifths of the nation's forests are privately owned. While public forestlands will be with us for the foreseeable future, private forestlands have the potential to be lost to developed uses. Nationally, almost one million acres of forestland were lost to development annually from 1992 to 1997. Another 26 million acres could be lost by 2030. Should we be concerned?

Forestland development results from market forces. Population, income, and economic growth combine to increase demands for land in residential, commercial, and industrial uses, and public infrastructure. Demands also increase with people's lifestyle choices when, for example, people relocate to rural areas or desire second homes in scenic forest settings. When demands for developed land uses increase so do the financial incentives some forestland owners have to sell land for development. The incentive is the revenue they can earn from selling land over and above what they can earn from maintaining land in forest. When these market forces are at play, some forestland development is inevitable.

From a public policy viewpoint, forestland development raises two main concerns: 1) how does development affect our ability as a nation to produce sufficient forest commodities; and 2) how does development affect the many ecological, water resource, recreation, and scenic values we also desire from forests as open space? Regarding forest commodities, many forestry advocates worry that parcelization—the breaking up of large forest parcels into smaller parcels for development—hurts the economic feasibility of commercial forest management. Research suggests that managing several small parcels can cost more than managing a few large parcels. Regarding open space values, there is concern about loss of fish and wildlife habitat owing to forest fragmentation and changes in forest structure that accompany development, concern about the adverse effects development can have on water quality and the timing of supply, and concern about loss of access to many private forestlands for recreation and aesthetic enjoyment.

These concerns are all important. As a nation we typically have assumed a public interest in maintaining sufficient national supplies of timber and other forest commodities. As for open space values, most typically are thought of as public goods. We all benefit from them in some way even though a large share comes from

private lands. Moreover, the open space values of forestland arguably are of increasing importance to a nation with a growing population and gradually declining open space lands. They can be a major factor behind calls for controlling forestland development.

A third concern about forestland development also is often heard. It is the growing fear about the risks wildfires pose for homes located in fire-prone forests. From a public policy viewpoint, however, this concern is somewhat trickier. On one hand, public agencies typically provide firefighting services to private property owners, so there is a public interest in trimming firefighting costs by limiting structures in fire-prone forests. Also, as a nation we worry about the significant toll wildfires can reap in loss of life and property. On the other hand, it can be argued that property owners put themselves at risk by locating structures where they do. Who then should bear responsibility for the risks posed by wildfire, the public who provides firefighting services though public agencies or private property owners who choose to locate structures in fire-prone forests? The answer is not easy and depends on how we entitle different rights and responsibilities to each party.

Addressing forestland development through public policy is a persistent challenge. How do we encourage private forestland owners to continue to provide a share of the forest values we enjoy as a nation when development presents some of them with other opportunities? Regulatory approaches, such as zoning, can be a first line defense, but their long term effectiveness alone is limited by our national commitment to upholding certain private property rights. For this reason, policies that encourage the voluntary participation of private landowners in providing particular forest values or compensate them for land use restrictions imposed can be important complements to regulation.

All states, for example, have preferential taxation programs that reduce property taxes on forest and farmlands, lowering the costs of keeping land in forest even as its potential developed value increases. Greater protection comes at greater expense, by leasing lands for conservation purposes, or purchasing development rights, easements, and land in fee. Choosing the best approach means balancing our national desire for forest conservation with other social goals, as well as the needs of individual landowners. It begins with knowing what we value about forestlands, understanding the long-term challenges in maintaining those values, and finding appropriate and effective ways to meet those challenges.

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