

Landowner Demographics

Wisconsin has an estimated 9.1 million acres of non-industrial private landowners (NIPF) land and approximately 218,000 NIPF landowners. Although countless management decisions are being made daily on these lands yearly that could affect the flora, fauna, water and soil productivity of these lands relatively few landowners seek professional advice. For example, the Department of Natural Resources estimates that only 15-20% of those landowners who ever harvest timber ever consult a natural resource professional for management advice or assistance. According to research published in 1994, only 5% of the private landowners have a written management plan (Birch, 1994).

In general, most people either own forested land for recreation or as part of a residence (Birch, 1994). In Wisconsin, nearly one-third of all private timberland is held by owners who have fewer than 50 acres (Leatherberry, 2000). This creates concerns about timber production because, in general, these smaller tracts cannot be managed effectively as sustainable timber-producing units.

Overall, individual forest landowners are employed in a variety of occupations with 21% employed as white-collar workers; 18% blue-collar workers; and 13% farmers. Retirees account for over one-fourth of the individual landowners, and as a group, they hold nearly one-fourth of the privately owned timberland in Wisconsin (Leatherberry, 2000). It follows that then that one-fourth of Wisconsin's timberland will be changing hands in the next 10-20 years with accompanying changes in management goals.

Dominate vegetation, parcel size, and primary use all differ from north to south across the state. Most of the forest exists in the northern 1/3 of Wisconsin where largely unbroken tracts of forest dominate the landscape. Land ownership in the northwest averages 45 acres per landowner while in the northeast the average is 66 acres per NIPF landowner (Leatherberry, 2000).

Most of Wisconsin's Managed Forest Law (MFL) lands are found in the north. The MFL is a landowner incentive program designed to encourage sustainable forestry on private woodlands in Wisconsin through offering property tax reduction in exchange for forest management and public access to the land. The public benefits are forest products and recreation. This program requires that landowners who enter into the program have a majority (80%) of their land classified as "productive" forest, have a comprehensive multi-resource management developed, will harvest as deemed necessary by the DNR forester, will keep open their land to non-developed public recreation, and pay the state a portion of the returns from timber sales.

In southern Wisconsin the landscape matrix is much more open, dominated by farms with patches of forest stands. Ownerships are typically much smaller in size. The average parcel size for the southeastern portion of the state is 17 acres (Leatherberry, 2000). Most lands are or were farms, and true habitat type is largely masked by repeated disturbances to the forest.

Forest industry owns another 7% of the forests in Wisconsin (Figure 2). This land is largely in the north or west-central region and is focused on timber production and is held in larger tracts. However, recent pressures are causing the large industrial blocks to go on the market (see the next section on changes in ownership and the section on threats for more information). As these lands are being sold in the regions they are being sub-divided in to smaller units, mostly for second homes. Information compiled from the USFS shows the highest percentage of second homes in the northern and central regions (see Map 3).

Changes in Ownership

Over 90% of the industrial lands have changed ownership in the last few years. In recent history these have represented significant land blocks of private land and have been diverse in location, soils, topography and habitat. This trend is resulting in an increase of development, particularly where these lands have lakes or streams, and a decrease in the area of continuous forest. Even in instances where one industry has sold to another, management changes significantly and the companies often are forced to sell the most desirable portions for recreation or home development. Another result is that these acres, formerly open to the public for hunting and recreation, are closed. The following are examples of sales in just the last few years:

Goodman Forest Industries sold 1000 acres in Silver Cliff - Marinette County, in Fall 1998.

It has since been subdivided in 80-acre parcels.

Tigerton Lumber Company sold 54593 acres in the summer of 1998.**

Champion International sold 9,952 acres in June 2000.

Lake Superior Land Company sold 67,362 acres in June 2000.

Consolidated Papers sold 322,979 acres in September 2000.*

Four States Timber Ventures sold 158,587 acres (approximate breakdown):

80,000 acres Tomahawk Timberlands (to be managed)

26,000 acres Tomahawk Highlands (to be sold)

14,000 acres to various investors in above firms

30,000 acres to Wachovia Bank (held in 4 separate ownership accounts)

30,000 acres State of Wisconsin (The Great Addition)

The Timber Co may sell 228,097.89 acres, announced summer 2000***

* - Consolidated has just sold off 9,000 acres to various individual bidders.

** - Still known as Tigerton Lumber Co management has changed. 1440 acres w/drawn for a hunting preserve, and outlying lands listed with various real estate agencies.

*** - Not official as of this printing

Landowners as well are changing. New landowners tend to be younger, better educated, and earn more than a decade ago (Birch, 1994). This trend has been interpreted to mean that these landowners may be less interested in harvesting because they do not need the income and the increased education has raised their environmental concerns about harvesting (Marcin and Skog, 1984).

As indicated on Map 3, second homes are having a significant impact on the forests in the northern and central parts of the state. This trend is expected to increase, creating more fragmentation and parcellization in these areas as city residents purchase vacation homes in Wisconsin's Northwoods.

Recreation pressures are also increasing as many new landowners choose to close their land to the public. Industrial lands once under MFL or former tax law programs allowed access for hunting, fishing and non-motorized recreation. As these lands are sub-divided and not longer eligible for the state tax programs, the public access is being lost as well.

Finally, the current tax assessment formulas tax recreational and forest land the heaviest. In the year 2000 when agricultural land assessments went down, forest land and wetland assessments went up 26% and 13% respectively. High property taxes are one of the leading reasons landowners sell their land.