

# Research & Policy Brief Series

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## Management Activities of Private Forest Landowners in New York State\*

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### What is the Issue?

Over sixty percent of the land in New York State is forested. Most NYS forest land is privately held, rather than under state or federal control. Decisions made by the more than a half million individual and family owners (controlling 14.2 million acres of forestland in the state) collectively shape the landscape and the benefits that it provides. Some of the many social, ecological, and economic benefits provided by private forestlands include recreation, forest products, wildlife habitat, and aesthetics. Private individual and family forestlands are an essential component of New York's natural landscape. It is important to understand not only what forest management activities are being undertaken and planned, but also the diversity of perspectives of both rural and urban private forest owners, since those perspectives influence management decisions and ultimately the land.

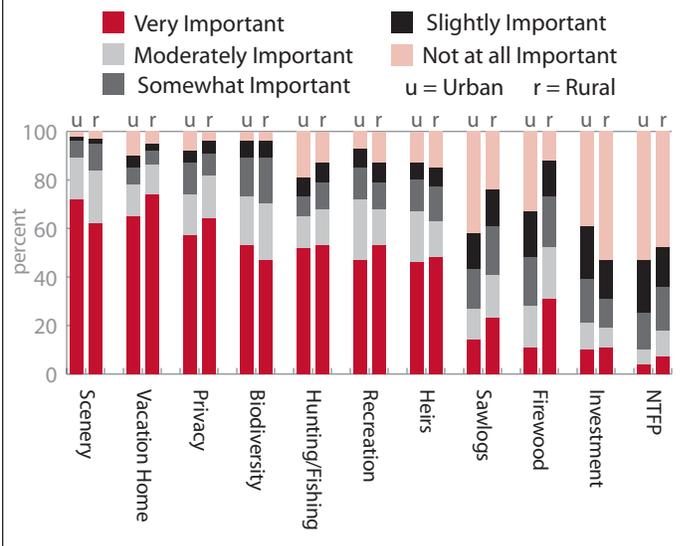
### Data and Methods

To explore the views and decisions of private individual and family forest owners of New York State, a questionnaire was mailed to 2,200 forest owners, and a telephone survey was conducted with approximately 50 rural and 50 urban non-respondents to assess whether there was any response bias between responders and non-responders. The rural sample consisted of 1,100 forest owners who resided in the same county as their property and whose property was in a county with less than 150 persons per square mile ("rural private forest owners" or "rural owners"). The urban sample consisted of 1,100 owners who resided in different counties than their property and who lived in a county with over 500 persons per square mile ("urban private forest owners" or "urban owners"). The samples were drawn from the 2006 Assessment Rolls of the NYS from the Office of Real Property Services and included parcels of 25 acres or more and property classified as likely wooded and not in public or industrial ownership. When the term "significant" is used to describe the results in this document, this term denotes a statistically significant difference between the urban and rural respondents at the  $p < .05$  level.

### Why do forest owners own their land?

Rural and urban private forest owners view their land and the reasons for owning similarly in terms of motivations but differently in terms of the intensity of that opinion. Urban forest owners identified most with scenery, having woodland as part of their home, vacation home, or farm, privacy, protecting biological diversity, and hunting or fishing. Rural forest owners indicated that owning forestland was important to them because it is

**Figure 1:** How important are the following as reasons for why you own wooded land in New York? (Urban and Rural Respondents)



part of their home, vacation home, or farm, and that they valued privacy, scenery, and hunting or fishing opportunities the land afforded them (see Figure 1).

### What management activities are most prevalent?

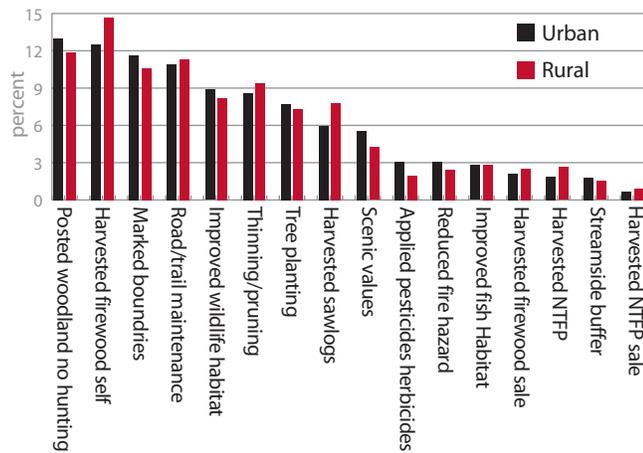
When asked what forest management activities they had undertaken in the last 10 years, urban forest owners were most likely to report posting their land for no hunting, harvesting firewood for their own use, marking the boundaries of their property, conducting road and trail maintenance, and improving wildlife habitat. Rural owners reported harvesting firewood for their own use, posting the land for no hunting, maintaining or repairing roads and trails, marking the boundaries of their land, and thinning or pruning trees (see Figure 2). Improving scenic value was the least frequently cited management activity for both rural and urban forest owners. Rural owners were significantly more likely than urban owners to have undertaken cutting firewood, thinning, and timber harvesting compared to urban forest owners.

### What are owners' plans for the next 5 years?

When asked about their plans for the next 5 years, harvesting firewood was the most frequently cited activity for both groups of owners, but particularly for rural owners. Rural owners were also significantly more likely to include conducting commer-

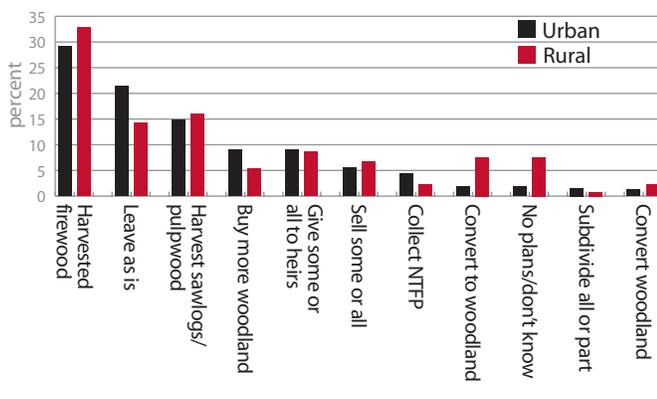
\* Please see Connelly et al. 2007 for a full reporting of the survey methodology and results (full report can be accessed at [www.dnr.cornell.edu/hdru](http://www.dnr.cornell.edu/hdru)).

**Figure 2: Management activities done in the last 10 years. (Urban and Rural Respondents)**



cial timber harvests and collecting non-timber forest products (NTFP) in their upcoming plans compared to their urban private forest owner counterparts. Urban dwelling forest owners were significantly more likely than rural owners to indicate a “hands off” or laissez-faire approach to management. Leaving the land as is was in the 5 year plan for over 38% of urban forest owners and 31% for rural owners. Also, urban residing forest owners were significantly less likely to have any plans or not know what their plans are (23%) compared to rural forest owners (16%). Selling their forestland was not in the 5 year plan of most private forest owners, whether urban (5.5%) or rural (3.6%). Of note is that almost 9% of both urban and rural residing forest owners plan to pass their land on to heirs in the next 5 years.

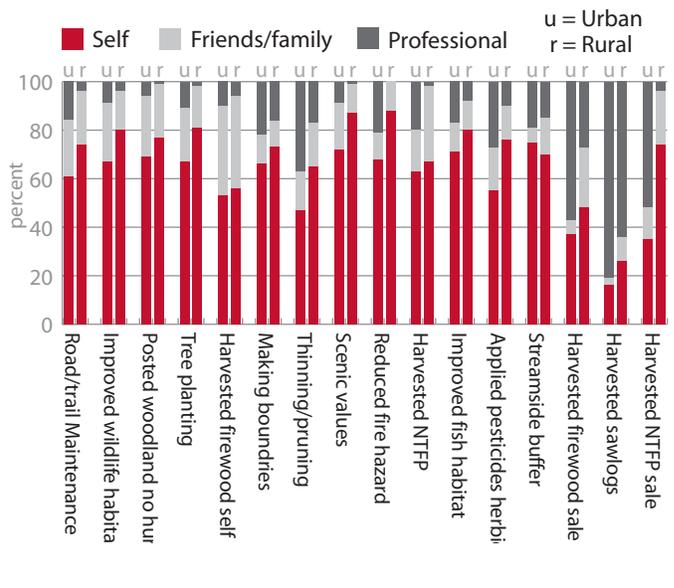
**Figure 3: Plans for forestland in the next 5 years. (Urban and Rural Respondents)**



**Who is involved in the management activities?**

When undertaking forest management activities many forest landowners —whether rural or urban—are very self reliant, but some rely on the help of family and friends, and professionals with the notable exception of timber harvesting (see Figure 4). Thinning is another activity for which rural owners enlist the aid of a forestry professional. Urban residents rely on professional involvement for a broader range of management activities, while rural private forest owners indicate more self reliance. Those

**Figure 4: Involvement of forest landowners, friends and family, and resource professionals in management activities on private forestland. (Urban and Rural Respondents)**



landowners who did not work on their wooded property when they desired to do so identified the lack of time, lack of equipment, expenses, their physical health, and lack of knowledge as factors.

**Conclusions and Policy Implications**

Many private forest landowners see value in managing their forestlands. However, many landowners do not feel that professional assistance is needed for most of the management activities other than timber harvesting. Professional foresters are trained and can provide assistance to forest landowners in managing their land sustainably for a variety of outcomes including timber, recreation, and wildlife. However, many management decisions take place without such professional guidance—decisions which can affect the viability and sustainability of forestlands in New York State. When forest owners act without adequate knowledge and awareness of the environmental and ecological impacts, the sustainability of forestland is threatened. Those who deliver professional assistance and services to forest owners must focus on addressing the barriers to owners seeking professional assistance, appealing to ownership motivations, and providing guidance on management activities that include timber harvesting, but also focus on wildlife, recreation, and scenery.

The impending turnover in forestland ownership also has implications for the viability and existence of forestland. Approximately 9% of landowners plan to pass their land on to heirs in the next 5 years, the mean age of respondents is nearly 60 years, and many forestland owners are retired. Previous research has shown that the views of forestland differ between current owners and their offspring. As years pass, a new cadre of forestland owners, many of whom may have had little or no involvement in the management of forestland will enter into such ownership and begin making decisions that have implications for the condition of forestland across New York State. This turnover in ownership, coupled with the need to deliver professional assistance to existing and future forestland owners presents a considerable challenge. ♦

