To exist as a Nation, to prosper as a State, and to live as a people, we must have trees.

President Theodore Roosevelt
We owe a lot to family forest owners.

Families, not the government, and not big companies, are the stewards of most of America’s forests. America has a growing reliance on the benefits family stewardship provides — clean air, clean water, recreation, renewable resources that build our homes and communities, and good-paying jobs. But as a nation, we’re too often making choices that force family forest owners into an impossible position, torn between a desire to embrace their heritage and the need to make ends meet.

Family forest owners know that the threats to their land are real and growing every day. Owning a piece of America’s natural heritage means they face massive pressure to sell or parcel out tracts. They struggle to stave off pests and pathogens, worry about drought and catastrophic fire. Crunch the numbers to see if what the market will bear for sustainably harvested wood will mean paying the bills or not. The trees they plant today will likely be harvested by the next generation, or the one after that. And, for many forest owners, the nagging question, “Will the next generation step up and be here?” never goes away.

In the following pages, we tell the story of family forests. The value they bring to America’s culture, economy, and quality of life. What losing this legacy would mean for all of us. And, the solutions we need to stem the loss of America’s private forests.

The American Forest Foundation works on the ground with families, teachers, and elected officials to promote stewardship and protect our nation’s forest heritage. A commitment to the next generation is what unites our nationwide network of forest owners and teachers working to keep our forests healthy and our children well-prepared for the future they will inherit.

We welcome your support in our efforts to stem the loss of America’s family forest legacy.

Tom Martin
President and CEO
American Tree Farm System® Certified Tree Farmer
“It is not so much for its beauty that the forest makes a claim upon men’s hearts, as for that subtle something, that quality of air that emanates from old trees, that so wonderfully changes and renews a weary spirit.”

Robert Louis Stevenson

When the first Europeans landed in North America, they were amazed to find a land covered in thick, endless forest. From that moment on, America’s forests have been inseparably bound to our economy and quality of life, while playing a critical role in our collective sense of who we are as a nation.

Forests have helped build America — providing wood for our homes and businesses, schools, and churches. Wood from our forests kept us warm and helped move goods and people across land and water. Wood held up our mines and fenced in our livestock. Forests provided habitat for wildlife, protected our soil, and filtered our air and water. Our forests seemed to go on forever.

“"It’s the wood that builds our homes and schools, our churches and communities.

Chuck Leavell, American Tree Farm System®
1999 National Certified Tree Farmer of the Year and keyboardist, Rolling Stones
A healthy and prosperous America relies on the health of our natural resources, and particularly our forests.

Today, our forests are under siege from a variety of threats. How America protects and manages what forest land remains has never been more important for the country’s economic and social well-being.

Most of America’s remaining forests are not owned by the government, but rather by individuals and families.

The American Forest Foundation works on behalf of the 11 million private woodland owners who are the caretakers of America’s forest legacy. By generating more recognition for the public benefits private forests provide, and giving woodland owners the tools they need to manage these resources sustainably, we can help ensure America’s forest legacy continues.

Gone are the days when letting nature take its course was enough. Now, sustainable management is the only conservation choice for healthy forests.

To ensure America’s family forests are not just part of our history, but part of our future, policy makers from the local level to the federal level must address the challenges faced every day by family forest owners from Maine to California.

And woodland owners — no matter the size of their holdings — need the educational resources and the commitment to embrace sustainable management as a noble and necessary responsibility.

Stem the Loss provides an introduction to the many important roles family forests play in our economy, our quality of life, our natural heritage, and the national imagination. The report provides background on the growing challenges to private forests and offers the experiences of six private forest owners who can tell us much about what it means to steward America’s forest legacy. It concludes with a look at public policy solutions that can help ensure that America’s forest legacy continues for generations to come.

Centuries ago, Americans who lived in and off of our abundant forests could not imagine the types of challenges forest owners face today: drought and catastrophic fire, pests and pathogens, development pressures, economic policies, and market fluctuations. To address the confluence of these challenges requires a greater understanding of who owns America’s forests and what they need to keep them healthy and productive for the long term.
On John Burke’s Virginia Tree Farm, Burke Woodlands, you will find Blenheim House, a historic residence that served as General Grant’s headquarters after the Union Army occupied the region during the Civil War.

“General Grant just walked up to the house, knocked on the door, and announced that he and the soldiers behind him would be taking over the property,” John recalled. Blenheim is right across from a chapel where General Robert E. Lee and other Confederates worshipped when they held the same area.

John’s Tree Farm has been in his family for four generations, but it’s definitely not a museum piece. A successful working forest, John grows and sells pine and hardwood trees and products on the property. It’s also in a beautiful location, crossed by streams and dotted with hills where Virginia’s Piedmont meets the Tidewater region. John grew up on the farm, worked as a corporate lawyer, and then gradually took over managing the Tree Farm after his father’s death in 1990. His father was recognized in 1961 as one of the early members of the Virginia Tree Farm System. John manages the Tree Farm full time now, and it’s easy to understand why.

“It’s exciting,” he said. “I’m passionate about making sure this property that’s been in our family for close to 150 years is managed well. And I love the hands-on part of it. It’s incredibly satisfying to watch a stand of timber as it matures, to walk through it, smell it, touch it.”

Experimenting with different kinds of trees and forestry techniques is also one of John’s keen interests. Experimental forestry is one of six guiding principles John follows and he has more than a dozen experimental projects going throughout Burke Woodlands.

John’s passion for his family’s woods makes him even more focused on the challenges to all family forest owners. “The biggest challenge is probably finding the balance between keeping a forest commercially productive, and at the same time being a good steward,” he said. “Mother nature and society throw so many curves at you.”

One of the most pressing issues, he said, is how the current economic conditions have hurt markets for wood and forest products. “We need healthy markets to keep our forests healthy.” Unengaged landowners who have neglected taking steps to keep their forests productive is also a pressing concern.

“We’ve got to reach out to them to let them know what tools are available to keep their forests viable. Doing nothing isn’t the right thing to do.”
The Living Legacy

Our father went into the woods — a phrase that had almost the same emotional power as “went into the service” or even “went to war…”

Bette Lynch Husted in Oregon Humanities

From clean air and water, to wildlife habitat and wood products, to education and recreation, America’s forests give abundantly.

Ninety-five percent of Americans see trees as an important part of where they live and integral to their quality of life, according to a November 2010 poll conducted by The Nature Conservancy. Of the respondents, 77 percent live near a wooded area, and chances are, that wooded area is privately owned.

And yet, few Americans know about the crucial role family forests play in protecting and sustaining the trees they love.

If you ask Americans, “Who is taking care of our forests?” chances are most will say, “The government.” After all, aren’t America’s forests owned, protected, and managed as public land?

No, in fact, families and individuals are responsible for managing more forest land than the federal government or industrial owners. Of the 751 million acres of forest land in the United States, 56 percent is privately owned.1 Of that, 62 percent is owned by families and individuals. These privately owned lands are the largest area of forest ownership in the United States — 251 million acres, the size of the Eastern Seaboard from Georgia to Maine. They comprise the nation’s most biologically productive forest land and play a key role in protecting water quality, providing forest goods and services, wildlife habitat and recreation, and protecting against floods. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, “private forest lands store more total carbon than national forests because private forest lands make up a much larger total area.”2

Area of forest land in the United States by ownership, 20063

Managing a working force for wood products, is a business that forces people to think in terms of generations, not months or years. “If you plant a stand of trees, it’s going to be anywhere from 15 years to 80 years before you can sell the full grown trees,” said John Burke, an American Tree Farm System® (ATFS) certified Tree Farmer in Caroline County, Virginia.

That’s one reason nearly one-third of family forest acres belong to a single family for generations.4 The larger the woodland property, the more likely the land has been passed down. Fifty-four percent of forest owners with 500-999 acres inherited some of their land, and 62 percent of these families owned their land for more than 25 years.

The long life cycle of forestry also encourages families who bought forests more recently to try to keep woodlands in their family as part of their heritage. “When we were first married, we bought timberland as an investment,” said Judy Kerns, who with her husband Jim owns 240 acres in Iowa. “But as we had children, we realized we wanted it to be a legacy for our children. That’s why we’ve involved all six of them, ever since they were little, in working with the trees and enjoying the woods.”

The specific roles woodlands play have changed over time, of course. But forests today remain critical to our economy, the health of our ecosystems, our quality of life, and our national sense of who we are.

When we speak of legacy, we speak of something that we have over the last 27 years put our soul and heart into. For myself, it’s a passion of being connected to the earth.

Brookie Hayden, ATFS Certified Tree Farmer

Salem Saloom, 2010 National ATFS Certified Tree Farmer of the Year
When Jim and Judy Kerns first bought their Tree Farm in Iowa, they saw it as an investment. Newly married and in their early twenties, it was not long before they realized that their woodlands were a lot more.

“Our own kids live and breathe our woodlands,” said Judy. “They work and play here.”

Starting from an early age, the Kerns children have helped out. The youngest picked up nuts or pulled out wild mustard, while the older ones helped with thinning and harvesting. They experience the fun of the woods, too, starting with pretend games in the forest and moving on to hunting, fishing, and sleigh riding. And the Kerns help their children learn as they work and play, teaching them about nature and forestry.

It’s not just the Kerns children who benefit. “When our kids started school, we realized we could help the school system teach kids about nature,” said Judy. That led to a program they are still involved in, bringing second-grade classes to their woods for wildflower walks, visits to river beds, scavenger hunts, and other activities that let the children experience and learn about nature.

They now work with the local schools on similar programs for older students, too. “We get calls from kids all the time, who say, ‘I just finished my college environmental science class, and it’s all stuff we learned on your forest,’” Judy said.

The Kerns hope the experiences they’ve given their children will encourage them to sustain the Tree Farm long after Jim and Judy are gone. But preserving the legacy remains a major challenge. “Even if our kids are as passionate about our woods as we are, the tax laws and other changes could make it hard to keep the farm in the family,” said Jim.

“With six kids, our goals for our farm have really changed, we now see it as a legacy—for our children and for others.”

Jim Kerns
Private Forests, Public Benefits

“The Tree Farmers are the incredible men and women across the nation who love their land, who care for it with or without accolades, and who serve as the foundation for sustaining and stewarding America’s woodlands.”

Jane A. Difley, President, Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests

Private forests play a vital role in protecting the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the wildlife we love. Where you find forests, you’ll find rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds. Forests protect soil from erosion. They anchor the ground and intercept water from rainfall and snow, storing it and releasing it slowly. As a result, they protect farms and population centers from avalanches and downstream flooding.5

Private forests also help millions of Americans in an absolutely crucial, but rarely noticed way. As Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack noted, “When Americans turn on a faucet, most don’t realize the vital role that our rural lands — and especially our forests — play in ensuring that clean and abundant water flows out of that faucet.”

Forest land absorbs rain, refills underground aquifers, cools and cleanses water, slows storm runoff, and sustains watershed stability and resilience.6

25% of America’s fresh water comes from private forests.
Protecting Watersheds

The importance of family forests to protecting watersheds was a central focus of the report *Private Forests, Public Benefits: Increased Housing Density and Other Pressures on Private Forest Contributions*, published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2009.

According to the USDA Forest Service analysis, 57 million acres of private forest land could experience a substantial increase in housing density from 2000 to 2030. As noted in the report, “With more than half of the nation’s forests in private ownership, the contribution of private forests to the supply of high-quality water in the conterminous United States is exceptional.”

More than 25 percent of Americans’ fresh water flows out of and is filtered by private forests.

Investing in forests to protect watersheds also makes good business sense. Every dollar invested in watershed conservation in the Catskills Mountains — including protecting private forests — avoided $6.00 of water treatment infrastructure spending for the water that flows to faucets in New York City.

Reducing Carbon Emissions

Forests are one of the nation’s most important assets in the campaign to address climate change. Around the world, forests and the soil beneath them absorb about a quarter of all carbon emissions. In the United States, forests and forest products capture and store 12 percent of carbon emissions.

Again family-owned forests are crucial. Private forest lands not only store more total carbon than national forests, they also help to reduce emissions by supplying renewable energy and wood products.

Family forests have the potential to play a bigger role. The Environmental Protection Agency predicts that by encouraging woodland owners to adopt even better management practices, forests could store up to 20 percent of all U.S. carbon emissions. Keeping family forests healthy, therefore, offers one of the most immediate solutions to addressing climate change in a cost-effective way.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done. You give us nice clean oxygen for us to breathe. You also clean the air pollution. If you didn’t do that we would be trying hard to breathe.”

Fourth grader, St. Paul Lutheran School, Florida, in a letter thanking the Sand Pine tree, as part of a Project Learning Tree® Forest Exchange Box
For Amelia “Mimi” Wright, managing her forest land for wildlife, recreation, timber production, and water quality “just makes good business sense.” Mimi, who has been a Tree Farmer in southern Delaware and Maryland since 1972, owns land certified by the American Tree Farm System®, and was recognized as Delaware’s ATFS Certified Tree Farmer of the Year in 2001 for her sustainable forestry practices. “For a lot of people, timber land management means a one-time sale. That’s not how I manage,” said Mimi.

Wildlife and water quality are high priorities for Mimi, whose acreage includes sensitive wetlands, streams, and habitat for abundant wildlife, including the endangered Delmarva fox squirrel. To protect the Chesapeake Bay watershed and the birds, fish, and animals that call it home, “I try to use fewer chemicals, and use backpack sprayers rather than helicopters. Timber harvests are conducted using site-specific best management practices. I try not to have a monoculture forest, which is more susceptible to invasives and pests like pine bark beetles and phragmites,” Mimi said.

These days, though, sustainable forest management is increasingly challenging for forest owners like Mimi. All but one of the timber companies that in the past provided her with guidance, technical assistance, and timber markets have gone out of business. “With them out of business, there are fewer markets for my trees, and that’s a problem,” she said. “If you don’t have markets, you’re not going to have sustainable forestry.”

Policies and private sector standards — like the U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED green building rating system that discourages the use of wood products — are a source of intense frustration to Mimi. Heavy bureaucratic requirements and financial costs to private forest owners, and LEED’s “strong emphasis on concrete and steel use over renewable wood” as certified building materials means Mimi has fewer markets for her wood. She also worries about the fact that policy makers, who increasingly live in urban areas, simply don’t understand forestry. “They don’t understand the difference between hogs, chickens, and timber as a business investment,” she noted. “Private landowners need to do a better job of telling the environmental story of our forests.”

Getting the necessary permits to harvest her timber also causes headaches. “Timber harvest is very time sensitive and weather dependent. We can’t sit around and wait for a permit,” she said. Yet that’s exactly what often happens. One of Mimi’s recent permit applications “disappeared on the wrong desk within the bureaucracy” when she had good weather and a logger available to do some necessary thinning of her trees. “Had I not known the players in the permitting process, I don’t know when the permit would have gotten issued,” she related.

Yet despite all the challenges and frustrations, Mimi remains committed to managing her forest land well. “If I have land, I believe it should be managed in the best way possible. When I can no longer do that, I shouldn’t own it. I enjoy the fruits of my efforts. If I didn’t enjoy it, I wouldn’t do it.”

People were here before us, and people will be here after us, and we need to do no harm. Amelia “Mimi” Wright
Protec7ng Wildlife

If you care about wildlife, you need to care about what’s happening in America’s private forests. As a USDA Forest Service report, *Threats to At-Risk Species in America’s Private Forests*, points out, “America’s private forests harbor thousands of species — from butterflies, bears, birds, and bats; to salmon, snails, and salamanders that inhabit streams and wetlands; to flowers, trees, and shrubs that feed and protect wildlife and enrich human lives.” 

Not only does private forest land provide core habitat for thousands of plant and animal species, these lands also provide critical migratory corridors. Wildlife that need large areas to roam do not stop at the boundaries of public land and private land.

Much like the contribution of private forests to watershed health, private woodlands are central pieces in the habitat puzzle that keeps wildlife healthy — and in many cases, private forests are critical to keeping wildlife from going extinct.

Overall, 60 percent of all plants and animals that the Endangered Species Act classifies as “at risk” of decline or extinction on the mainland 48 states need private forest land — that’s more than 4,600 native animal and plant species. The key deer, Louisiana black bear, and red-cockaded woodpecker are examples of wildlife that benefit from private forest land. In some areas, 95 percent of forest-associated, at-risk species occur only in private forests.
“Like a phoenix rising” is how forest owner Nancy Livingston described the 180 acres on her 280-acre Hancock, Wisconsin, Tree Farm bursting with new growth after being completely destroyed by wildfire in 2005. With incredible support from businesses and individuals in her community, from local fourth-graders who planted the first trees after the fire and from the Plum Creek Timber Company, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association, and even the University of Wisconsin women’s basketball team, Nancy and a host of volunteers watched her burned acres slowly being restored. More than 150,000 trees have been planted since the fire, and “we now have knee- and thigh-high trees growing,” she related.

Nancy lives in a farmhouse surrounded by 100-year-old white pines on land originally purchased by her father as a retirement property in the 1950s. “When I was a teenager, he took me aside to teach me about tree farming. As I understood more and more about the land, it became more and more important to me,” she said. “There is peace here.”

When Nancy told the story of the fire that nearly destroyed her home, she wasted no time on self-pity. “My stubbornness kept me from giving up,” said the retired disability advocate who was once disabled herself. Her circumstances, and a supportive community not willing to give up on this intrepid single woman whose love for her land is obvious, are an inspiration. For her, taking on the challenge meant coming out of retirement to take a job at a local convenience store so she could pay her property taxes. She also refinanced her home to pay for the clearing of the burned acres and for the purchase and planting of new trees after the fire.

Nancy’s restoration plan includes providing habitat for the endangered Karner Blue butterfly and planting jack pines, red pines, and blueberry to attract federally endangered Kirtland’s warblers. Once found only in Michigan, the birds now nest just eight miles from Nancy’s home, and she provides housing for the student volunteer who monitors warbler nests every summer.

After winning the ATFS Regional Tree Farmer of the Year award in 2007, Nancy traveled to every field day held in Wisconsin to help educate others about the importance of forests and the dangers of wildfire. “I felt it was my responsibility,” she said. She also worked tirelessly to get the Wisconsin legislature to change the Managed Forest Law so that taxes can be rolled back to a pre-disaster rate if fire or wind destroys a Tree Farmer’s crop. “Right now, I pay taxes as if the fire never happened,” she explained. Changing the law is not the 70-year-old’s only goal. “I need to stick around at least another 20 years to see the first thinning of the new trees,” Nancy vowed.

Preserving the integrity of the land is my goal, not just for me, but for the youngsters who will come after me. Children today have very little opportunity to be outdoors. If I can encourage just one child to embrace the land, I’ll feel like I’ve been a success.

Nancy Livingston
My Tree Farm is a business, but it’s much more than that. There are few businesses in this country that provide wildlife and scenic views like Tree Farms.

Mark E. Nussbaum, 2009 Missouri ATFS Tree Farmer of the Year
Connecting Children to Nature

Family forest owners also know that they can offer their community the outdoor classroom that so many children today need for their own health and well-being. Many family forest owners are very involved in environmental education; helping children learn about nature through experiences in the woods. There is an increasing awareness of the strong, positive effect that experience in nature has on children’s ability to learn and even on their physical and mental health. As noted by Dr. Courtney Crim, Assistant Professor, School of Education, Trinity University, “Fresh air, exercise, and creative exploration of the forest are just a few of the benefits children can experience when they spend time outdoors. Encouraging children to be active while outdoors is important for their physical, cognitive, and social development. By fostering more opportunities for outdoor learning, we will help the next generation of conservation leaders grow and develop as they build an appreciation for nature at an early age.”

Getting kids out in nature is more essential today given that children are spending half as much time outdoors as they did 20 years ago. Children ages 8-18 are spending nearly 8 hours a day using entertainment media and only 6 percent of children ages 9-13 play outside on their own. We are at risk of losing an entire generation’s appreciation for how nature works and what it needs to remain healthy and productive. By keeping children rooted in America’s natural forest heritage, family woodland owners can help the next generation feel connected to that heritage and informed on how to protect it.

And time in the woods is not just good for children. According to “a seminal study from the University of Michigan, people can better learn after walking in the woods than after walking on a busy street.”

Project Learning Tree® (PLT), a program of the American Forest Foundation, uses forests as a window on the world and trains 30,000 educators a year to use environmental education curriculum that can be integrated into lesson plans for all grades and subject areas.
Slicing and Dicing
Development, long understood as a threat to America’s private forests, has exploded in the last decade. Despite even the recent economic slowdown, development on forest land is projected to keep surging. Far too often forest landowners are forced to sell property because of economic circumstances beyond their control, not because they are making the best choice for themselves or their families. Good markets and good policies can support keeping forests as forests.

Given the pressures to sell, and the continued need for more housing, millions of acres of forest land are at risk. USDA Forest Service researchers predict that housing density will increase on more than 57 million acres of America’s private forests from 2000-2030. In many regions, almost three out of every four acres of private forests will suffer a substantial increase in housing density. That means more power lines, septic and sewer systems, shopping centers, roads, and more roads in what are now woodlands — changing forests from a source of tranquility and well-being into more suburban sprawl.

This slicing and dicing of America’s private forests also means fewer native fish and wildlife. Already “land use conversion owing to development has contributed to the decline of approximately 35 percent of all imperiled species nationwide.” 14 And, it contributes to poorer air and water quality and less outdoor recreation. According to the USDA Forest Service, “Although many private forest landowners specifically strive to protect and enhance wildlife habitat through careful and sustainable management, continuing loss and fragmentation of private forests could cause local populations of some forest-associated species to decline or disappear.” 15

Losing forests means losing the timber for the fiber and wood products we all demand. Currently 92 percent of all forest products in the United States come from working private forests.

Forest fragmentation is among the primary threats identified in the Statewide Forest Resource Assessments and Strategies, a mandatory, comprehensive review of forest assessments completed by states and territories and submitted to the USDA Forest Service in June 2010. Increasing fragmentation, according to the assessments review, “increases the difficulty of addressing all types of forest health issues, including insect and disease concerns, managing lands to reduce wildfire risks, and managing forests for their economic or carbon sequestration benefits.”
Will the Next Generation Step Up?

The pressure to develop forest land comes from many places — but none stronger than the coming unprecedented transfer of private forest land.

People who are 75 years or older own about 52 million acres — 15 percent of private forest land. A total of 170 million acres of private forest (about 60 percent of privately-owned forest) are owned by people 55 years or older. An aging population of forest owners is forcing many families to liquidate property to pay for medical care, to pay estate taxes, or to provide the next generation with immediate capital for other uses.

Selling family forest land should be a choice, not an economic imperative. But far too often, woodland owners are forced to give up their land.

Eighty-two percent of family forest owners make less than $100,000 a year. Estate taxes, in particular, pose a significant threat. For example, if the estate tax level reverts back to 2001 levels ($1 million at 55 percent), the number of family forest owners caught in the estate tax web will increase by 400 percent.

The pressure to convert woodlands to other uses is ever-present. As noted in the Statewide Forest Resource Assessments and Strategies, the “economic incentive to convert forest lands to non-forest issues must be addressed to have a meaningful effect on the loss of forest lands.”

Passing their land onto their heirs is the number one concern of family forest owners. Today, the successor generation is more likely to consider selling the land for development rather than managing it to sustain forests.

David A. Watson, a financial advisor and ATFS certified Tree Farmer, sees this dilemma from both sides. In a letter to Secretary Vilsack, Watson noted, “The emerging issue of ‘inter-generational transfers’ is a significant threat to the well-being of the families themselves, the forest products industry, and our nation. The majority of our timberland is in private ownership. These owners need to be adequately compensated for not only the physical fiber and fuel they grow, but also the many societal benefits they produce.”

Catastrophic Fire

Fire, one of the oldest threats to forests, is still one of the most dangerous. In fact, in the last half decade, family forests have been under greater threats from fire than ever before. In 2006, approximately 83,000 fires burned nearly 9 million acres of public and private forest in the United States — the highest total ever recorded. Today, more than 400 million acres of private forests are at risk of wildfires, especially in areas where forested boundaries and communities meet.

The fire threat stems from several major sources. First, changing climate cycles have brought years of drought and record-setting heat in summer, increasing the chances of fire. In addition, lack of proper forest management in many forests has allowed brush and dead trees to build up — making them full of what fuels wildfires.

And encroaching development dramatically increases the risks of fire. Carole Walker, the executive director of Rocky Mountain Insurance Information Association, noted that “fire has emerged as more and more a mega-catastrophic risk like we saw with Katrina.”
When you talk to Craig and Janet Olver, or to their 23-year-old daughter Tara, you quickly learn how managing their Pennsylvania mixed hardwood forest land has sustained and strengthened their family. Trees have been a part of every family milestone, beginning two weeks before Craig and Janet’s wedding, when the couple planted 1,700 timber seedlings on the “back 22” acres of his parents’ property.

When they brought newborn Tara home from the hospital in 1987, Craig and Janet walked their woods. “Before we even went into the house, she was maybe three or four days old,” said Craig. “Once I could walk, Dad put me to work,” Tara said with a laugh. “It was tough at times growing up with so many acres, because there was always stuff to do. I didn’t want to wake up at 5:30 in 15-degree weather. But at the end of the day, it was always a good day. We work really well together. We all know our parts,” added Tara.

Tara, a full-time nursing student who will graduate in May 2011, worries that not enough young people are getting involved in their families’ Tree Farms. “If you don’t get family involvement, it puts the future in question,” she noted. Tara also worries about how she’ll be able to develop the skills she needs “to do what’s best for the woods.” Luckily, Craig is a former county forester and Tara will be able to use what she learned during her lifetime of working alongside her father.

Craig and Janet are confident in their daughter’s abilities and commitment to their land, but concerned that unless legislators change the law, inheritance taxes could make the property unaffordable for Tara. They also worry about more immediate challenges to their livelihood: insects like the Hemlock wooly adelgid, the Asian longhorned beetle, and the Emerald ash borer have had a devastating impact on Pennsylvania forests. Invasive plants like ferns, barberry, and multiflora rose are hard to control and detrimental to young trees. “Deer don’t like to eat those plants, but they really love tree seedlings,” Craig noted.

Like so much of what they do, educating others about forests — including the need to cut timber for forest health — is a family affair for the Olvers. They hold one or two community field days each year, where invited speakers talk about forest management and the Olvers stage demonstrations of sustainable logging methods. Janet cooks dinner for the hundreds of attendees. “I like any excuse to cook,” she said. These events are also a showcase for the Olvers’ affiliation with the American Tree Farm System.® “We’re really proud of our two signs — the Tree Farm sign and the 2007 state winner sign,” said Tara. Added Craig, “We wear our Tree Farm shirts. All the equipment has Tree Farm signs on it. We don’t take it lightly. It is important to us to grow a healthy productive forest. It’s who we are.”

To have healthy woods, you harvest trees to give room for other trees to grow and develop.

“We like to think of ourselves as conservationists, not preservationists. I worry that Tara will face more government regulations that have no relationship with common-sense forestry practices.”

Craig Olver
Family forests are also threatened by invasive species — nonnative insects and plants, and natives that migrate to forests outside their normal habitat, or have longer active seasons than in the past.

Whether it is the Emerald ash borer in the lake states, sudden-oak death in Oregon, Asian longhorned beetle in the northeast, the European wood wasp in New York, or cogon grass in the south, every forested region is facing more threats from pests that arrive from other regions or even from overseas. The world has never been smaller and invasive species never more widespread.

Nationwide, at least 58 million acres of U.S. forests are at risk of tree mortality from insects and disease.¹⁹ Of this amount, more than 27 million acres of state, county, and private forests are at risk.²⁰

The spread of invasives was identified as one of the primary threats to America’s forests in the 2010 Statewide Forest Resources Assessments and Strategies, noting that “as global trade increases and people and goods travel more widely and more frequently, invasive species are arriving at an increasing rate.”²¹

Exacerbating the damaging impacts of pests is a changing climate. As the National Forest Restoration Collaborative observed, “Climate change has also been predicted to affect the dynamics of forest insects and diseases, and these effects are becoming apparent.”²² The report noted that “all aspects of insect outbreak behavior will intensify as the climate warms.”²³
According to the USDA Forest Service, climate change will affect the ability of forests to deliver “a broad range of benefits, including clean air and water, habitat for wildlife, opportunities for outdoor recreation, and more.” And, therefore, “the stewardship of America’s forests … will become more critical than ever.”

Vanishing Markets

Family forests are also put at risk by economic changes outside forest owners’ control: traditional markets for forest products are disappearing. In the West, most lumber goes into the housing market. The historically precipitous decline in new housing since 2008 decimated the forest products industry and sent timber prices to historic lows, shuttering sawmills and putting thousands out of work.

In the South and East, paper production has been moving offshore, dealing a powerful blow to pulpwood markets. In fact, markets for wood products of all kinds are declining. Without cash flow to the family landowners, it becomes extremely difficult to sustain working forests. Without a market for forest products, the pressure to sell off woodlands increases.

The global economic meltdown certainly intensified the damage to the traditional markets for family forest owners. But even a major economic recovery will not bring those markets back. The demand for traditional products from family woodlands has been heading downward for more than a decade.

During the four-year period, 2006 through 2010, the forest products industry lost 28 percent of its workforce.

At the same time, policies are being put in place at the federal, state, and local levels that discourage the use of wood products in one of the only growing markets — green building. This is extremely problematic, given how important the building market is for keeping family forests as forests.

Forest Products Industry Employment*

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*Includes paper and allied products, wood products, and timber harvests.
In 1980 a young man named Jim Cota got a job with Melcher Logging, a family-owned forest products company founded in western Oregon in 1952. Working his way up in the company, Jim formed close friendships with Scott Melcher and Robbie Melcher, grandsons of the firm’s founder. For 20 years, Jim, Scott, and Robbie worked together establishing a group of successful forestry contracting companies, serving private and government forests large and small.

As they worked together, the three men realized they shared a common goal — to have a forest of their own so they could create a legacy that would benefit their children and later generations of their families.

In 1999 they achieved this goal when the three men purchased a 320-acre parcel of timberland and started Fun Forest Tree Farm. Fun Forest has grown steadily during the years, and now consists of 1,500 acres spread across plots of varying size. Many of the parcels had been neglected by previous owners, so Jim, Scott, and Robbie devoted significant time, skill, and resources to rehabilitating, restoring, and sustaining their forest land.

In the last two decades, they also worked hard to make Fun Forest a resource not only for their families, but also for the local community and schools. “We have pretty much an open policy when it comes to our neighbors hunting and fishing on our land,” said Scott. “Just call us first, is all I ask them.”

“We work with students from pre-school to college,” said Jim. Younger kids come out to the farm to dig fossil clams and snails. Elementary and high school students do forestry study. In fact, Jim, Scott, and Robbie worked closely with the local high school to support the forestry club and to restart a forestry class after it was canceled.

In addition to making their forest land available to the school, they help with fundraising and donations. And a few years ago, they started a scholarship program. “It provides financial aid to kids who are going to study forestry in college,” said Jim.

While Fun Farm is now well established, Jim and Scott are very aware of the challenges to the future of family forests. They are heavily involved in their county and state forest associations, where market challenges are a major concern.

“We have a big advantage because of our expertise in harvesting and marketing logs,” Scott said. “So we’re constantly monitoring markets and adjusting. Other family forests are much more at the markets’ mercy.”

For Scott and Jim, without a doubt generational transfer is Fun Forest’s biggest challenge. That challenge was brought home in an all too tragic way when Robbie died at an early age in 2010. “Scott and I are constantly talking about how we can keep the Tree Farm whole after we’re gone,” Jim said. “We don’t want to have built it up, only to see it torn apart.”

We’re constantly monitoring markets and adjusting. Other family forests are much more at the markets’ mercy.
In the second decade of the twenty-first century, family forests are themselves a kind of “endangered species.” They face a range of serious challenges that, if not confronted, could threaten their future, putting at risk the many benefits woodlands provide to every American. There is no single solution to stemming the loss of America’s private forests. The myriad of challenges facing family forest owners must be met with a variety of actions. Individuals, county and state leaders, and industry and federal policy makers need to acknowledge the value and necessity of private forests and help:

• Bridge the knowledge gap
• Strengthen markets
• Focus on forest health
• Provide tax policy solutions
• Support forests in the Farm Bill
• Support environmental education

Bridge the Knowledge Gap
Americans are passionate about their love of forests, but the fact is they only vaguely grasp all the benefits forests provide. And most have no idea that family forest owners are the ones making decisions that impact the quality of life we all enjoy.

Government policies must make it easier for landowners to continue to maintain their forests as forests.

Secretary Tom Vilsack, America’s Great Outdoors Listening Session, Concord, NH, 2010
The forest community must take on the woodlands knowledge gap — that great divide between the recognition of the many critical benefits family forests provide to all Americans and the public’s limited awareness of who owns and manages most of America’s forests.

Another part of the knowledge gap is what is happening on the ground. Far too many woodland owners believe that the right thing to do on their land is to do nothing. With the multitude of threats facing forests, letting nature take its course is no longer a viable option.

And millions of woodland owners who do harvest or remove trees from their land do not seek out professional guidance to make the best decisions. Only 4 percent of America’s 11 million family forest owners have a forest management plan, despite the fact that 46 percent of these owners (owning 69 percent of the total family forest land) have harvested or removed trees.26 This leaves millions of acres without strategies to ensure healthy and productive woodlands. Forest owners need more and better access to information that will set them on the track toward better stewardship.

Strengthen Markets for Forest Products

The demand for green buildings and energy efficient construction will continue to rise. This green trend should be a boost for family forest owners looking for new markets. After all, wood products are one of the most energy-efficient and environmentally-friendly building materials available. Unfortunately, family forests have not benefited as much as they could from America going green.

Congress, state legislators, and local governments should support the use of wood products in government buildings and government-funded buildings, especially buildings certified as green. When compared to other materials, such as steel and concrete, using wood in construction results in significantly lower emissions (70 percent to 88 percent lower compared to steel and concrete), reduced energy use, and less air and water pollution.

Trees, brush, and other materials grown in well-managed, family-owned woodlands are also sources of renewable energy that can reduce our nation’s dependence on foreign sources of oil and reduce our carbon emissions, especially when used in place of fossil fuels.

Congress must fix existing renewable energy policies that do little to encourage the use of materials from well-managed family forests.

In addition to strengthening markets for green building and renewable energy supplies, focus must be directed toward developing environmental markets to reward woodland owners for the public benefits they provide. These include other “ecosystem services” such as clean water, wildlife habitat and carbon storage. Adequately compensating forest owners for all the goods and services generated from sound management will help give woodland owners resources they need to manage their land sustainably.

As Dave Murphy, 2010 Missouri Outstanding ATFS Certified Tree Farmer said it,

“Imagine the huge benefits of bringing best management practices to more of our forests. Imagine the increased food and cover for wildlife. Imagine the enhanced protection of watersheds and water supplies. Imagine the benefits of protection from invasive plants, animals, disease, and insects. These are just a few of my reasons for bringing our forest under management.”
Provide Tax Policy Solutions
Forcing families to sell off their forest land piece by piece is one of the gravest threats to forest land — and the current tax structure actually encourages it, because most family forest owners are “land rich and cash poor.” In particular, the nation’s estate tax laws have forced many forest owners to sell parts of their Tree Farms to get the cash they need to pay the taxes they owe.

Congress’s 2010 passage of a short-term fix to the estate tax — raising the exemption level to $5 million and lowering the tax rate to 35 percent — will keep most family forest owners from being forced to sell their land to pay an estate tax bill. But these changes are temporary and could be undone in 2012.

To ensure woodlands continue to be a resource for all Americans, Congress should find a permanent solution to the estate tax burden on America’s family forests. For example, legislation that exempts family forest owners from estate taxes if they keep lands forested and in the family is a promising solution. In addition to the estate tax, Congress needs to address issues such as income tax rates on timber investments, tax rates on forests that have been hit by disasters, tax incentives for good forest management, and continue incentives for conservation easements.

Focus on Forest Health
We can expect more drought, more severe wildfires, more insect and disease outbreaks, and overall tough conditions for keeping forests healthy.

Congress should support programs that will address forest health issues such as invasives, pests, and pathogens. Strategies on the ground to improve forest resiliency are needed to ensure forests stay healthy and continue to provide public benefits.

Focus on Forests in the Farm Bill
The Farm Bill is the largest private lands conservation bill that comes before Congress, and it must be “reauthorized” every five years. The 2008 Farm Bill improved conservation, forestry, and energy programs within the USDA. For family woodland owners, it provided more access to educational, technical, and financial assistance to strengthen forest management and conservation.

Still, federal spending on forests is low compared with federal funding for other uses of agricultural land. For example, only six percent of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the largest cost-share program in the Farm Bill, is devoted to forest management.

When Congress takes up the Farm Bill again lawmakers should ensure that Farm Bill programs provide sufficient resources to support the healthy management of America’s family forests that provide a multitude of public benefits. Even in extremely tight budget years, Congress should fund the conservation, forestry, and energy programs so important work under way can continue. House and Senate leaders should ensure forest owners have access to the forestry technical assistance and conservation programs they need. The 2012 Farm Bill is also an opportunity to provide incentives for producing sustainable forest biomass for energy and other wood products, and to strengthen forest education, outreach, extension, and research and inventory capabilities.

Support Environmental Education
All across the country, family forest owners have worked closely with schools and colleges to give students the opportunity to witness the wonder of the natural world. Whether it be a group of fourth graders or a college student researching an endangered warbler, family forest owners have offered their woods as a living classroom because they understand that part of preparing children for the future must include learning about the environment. For more than 35 years, Project Learning Tree®, a program of the American Forest Foundation, has trained tens of thousands of teachers each year to include environmental education in their classroom.

Studies show that environmental education improves student achievement in core subject areas and also makes students more interested in learning overall.
Furthermore, getting kids outside and active promotes a healthy lifestyle that is essential to fighting obesity and reducing symptoms associated with attention deficit disorder, depression, and stress.

Congress can do much more to ensure the next generation is well prepared for the future they will inherit by supporting reauthorization and full funding for the National Environmental Education Act and passing the No Child Left Inside Act.

For the Love of Trees
Healthy forests are the cornerstone of America’s economic and environmental health. They provide rest, recreation, and rejuvenation, while inspiring artists, poets, writers, and people from all walks of life.

Family forest owners play a unique and largely under-acknowledged role in ensuring that this essential national resource survives and thrives. Today, family forests are at risk. But the challenges they face can also be opportunities for all of us to step forward to help protect America’s forest legacy. After all, who among us is willing to give up all the benefits these forests provide us every day, all day long?

Who among us would not agree with this fourth grader from the Cold Springs Environmental Magnet School in Indianapolis, Indiana, who wrote:

“I love you tree, I love you tree
You are the thing we need
You give me air, you give me food
I couldn’t live without you.”