



# Professionals in Natural Resource Management

A Position of the Society of American Foresters

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## Purpose

To promote the involvement of forestry professionals<sup>1</sup> in forest management decisions in order to ensure the use of current, scientifically tested, sustainable, and ethically sound forest management practices on all forestlands in the United States.

## Scope

The role of forestry professionals who provide advice on the management of public and private forestlands in the United States.

## Position

The Society of American Foresters (SAF) encourages forest owners of both large and small tracts to seek assistance from forestry professionals when developing long-range plans or implementing specific management activities. SAF believes guidance from trained, experienced, and ethical professionals within the broad field of forestry should inform forest management decisions on both public and private forestlands. Land management organizations, including public agencies, must recognize the benefits from forestry professionals serving in technical, managerial, and executive positions.

## Issue

SAF defines Forestry as “the profession embracing the science, art and practice of creating, managing, using and conserving forests and associated resources for human benefit and in a sustainable manner to meet desired goals, needs and values,” (Deal 2018). When individuals without relevant knowledge, skills, and ethics make or implement forest management decisions,

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<sup>1</sup> “Forestry professionals” are people who, through a combination of education and experience in forestry and related natural resource disciplines, have gained a thorough understanding of sustainable forest management practices, abide by recognized ethical standards (such as the SAF Code of Ethics), and exercise prudent judgement in service to employers, landowners, and stakeholders. These individuals are recognized by peers and colleagues as trusted professionals with knowledge in the broad field of forestry. These individuals have the knowledge, skills, and a grounding in the science and ethics of forestry or other natural resource disciplines to ensure the nation’s forests are managed sustainably and equitably.

unwanted outcomes may occur. This can jeopardize the health, productivity, and long-term sustainability of public and private forestlands or result in an unfair distribution of costs and benefits among parties. Owners of small tracts, who have limited knowledge of forestry practices, are particularly susceptible to inappropriate advice. Both landowners and the forest products industry win when the economic, social, and ecological benefits from forestry are shared equitably. Bringing trained and experienced forestry professionals into the process helps to ensure this happens.

On larger tracts of private land, and on public lands, requirements for professional credentials are generally in place, but shifting priorities such as the emphasis on wildfire in western states or a strict focus on financial management, can leave gaps in these organizations' knowledge bases as professionals trained in natural resource management retire and are replaced by those with other backgrounds. Large landowners of all kinds now rely more heavily on a contract workforce than they did in the past. Managing these contracts is complex—requiring technical expertise that forestry professionals are well equipped to provide.

## Background

### *The Need for Forestry and Natural Resources Professionals*

**Providing Support to Family Forest Owners:** About one-third (38%) of the forest land in the United States is owned by around 10 million family forest owners (Butler et al. 2020), many of whom could benefit from advice and services from, or training by, forestry professionals. Numerous organizations and agencies provide such high-quality advice and training to forest owners. Professional forestry consultants work with landowners to meet their management goals and objectives, and routinely maximize harvest returns for the landowner by marketing and negotiating the sale among all available forest product markets (Clark 2018).

Some federal or state extension services and other landowner assistance programs are facing challenges as funding declines. Removing access to this source of expertise can cause some landowners to rely on advice from other sources, some of whom may not share the landowner's financial interests or concerns about sustainable practices.<sup>2</sup> Many managers of wood processing facilities see this as a threat to maintaining a sustainable wood supply. In response, they are increasingly including reliable forestry professionals in their supply networks who recognize the importance of equitably sharing benefits.

**Maintaining Expertise on Large Land Holdings:** Large holdings account for the remaining two-thirds of America's forests. These are controlled by private companies, non-governmental organizations, or administered by a variety of government agencies (Butler et al. 2016). Since the 1980s, there has been a shift from integrated forest products companies (those owning land and wood processing facilities and often conducting forest operations) to a separation of these activities into different firms. TIMOs (Timber Investment Management Organizations) and REITs (Real Estate Investment Trusts) are now the principal owners of private industrial forests (Oswalt et al. 2019). In general, they either have forestry professionals on staff or under contract to provide this expertise.

A concerning trend has been the shift from people with specific training in forestry and other branches of natural resource management to fire management in both state and federal land

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<sup>2</sup> SAF can help landowners identify either training for themselves or professionals who adhere to the SAF Code of Ethics and can assist landowners in developing and achieving their individual management objectives.

management agencies. For instance, in 1998, the USDA Forest Service had more than three times as many employees devoted to forest management than fire. By 2015, there were about 10% more employees devoted to managing fire than forest management in a workforce that had also shrunk by about 10% (USDA Forest Service data). A related issue is that some states are experiencing difficulty funding their state parks or forestry departments. When this happens, staff reductions or redirections shift focus to managing and maintaining recreational areas and facilities. Consequently, forest management can be neglected, either because there are inadequate resources or insufficient available trained personnel. In this case, a lack of active management guided by a professional could have long-lasting, negative effects for the sustainability of the forest's ecosystems.

**SAF Code of Ethics:** Natural resource professionals, through membership in professional organizations, abide by a code of ethics. This helps to protect and serve society by guiding and governing individuals in the conduct of their professional lives. These ethics, among others, include the responsibility to manage forests for current and future generations, strive for continuous improvement and understanding of our methods, treat others fairly, and respect the laws that govern forest management in this nation, “See SAF Code of Ethics at <https://www.eforester.org/CodeofEthics.aspx>.”

**Importance of Education:** Forestry professionals gain their knowledge, skills, and abilities through a combination of education and experience. A firm grounding in the theory and practice of forestry or other natural resource sciences is essential to providing sound advice to forest landowners and managers. Academic organizations play a key role in recruiting and training individuals with diverse backgrounds as forestry professionals. Compared to the 1980s, there are now far fewer students enrolled in forestry programs. Although there is evidence that the remaining programs continue to fill the demand for forestry professionals (Sharik 2021, pers. comm.), there are, however, legitimate concerns that accelerating retirements as baby boomers retire will change this situation if the number of forestry graduates remains constant. There is also a concern that without increasing ethnic and racial diversity among forestry graduates that some landowners will be less likely to seek out assistance from forestry professionals (Sharik 2015). Currently US forestry schools are doing a better job of reaching parity in terms of gender diversity than they are with racial and ethnic diversity (Sharik 2021, pers. comm.).

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