

December 16, 2021

U.S. Forest Ownership and Management

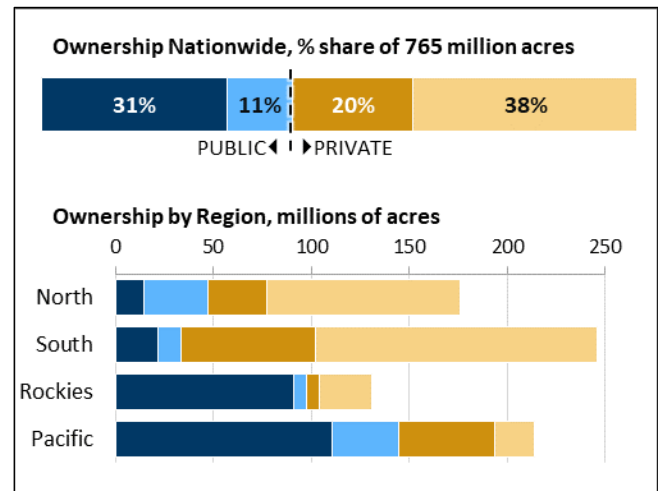
The United States contains 765 million acres of forestland. The potential scope of congressional involvement in U.S. forest resources varies, based primarily on ownership. The majority (69%) of U.S. forests are *nonfederal forests*: forests that are owned by private entities or state and local governments. The remaining 31% of U.S. forests are federally owned. The distribution of forest ownership varies nationwide and across the four major regions as defined in the *Forest Resources of the United States* report prepared by the U.S. Forest Service; see **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**. Most of the forests in the North and South regions are nonfederal, whereas most of the forests in the Rocky Mountain (Rockies) and Pacific Coast regions are federal. The variation in ownership patterns arises in part from the historic pattern of land settlement across the United States. For a more in-depth discussion, see CRS Report R46976, *U.S. Forest Ownership and Management: Background and Issues for Congress*.

Role of Congress

Congress has a direct role in the management of forests owned by the federal government but an indirect role in the management of forests in nonfederal ownership. Congress's role in nonfederal forest management generally relates to authorizing and appropriating funding for programs to provide financial, technical, or other resources to states, individuals, or other entities for forest ownership, stewardship, or management.

The U.S. Constitution authorizes Congress to acquire, dispose of, and manage federal property. As such, Congress has the authority to enact laws that address all aspects of managing federal forests and their resources. Much of Congress's legislative activity has focused on authorizing federal forests to be managed and used for specific purposes, and appropriating funding for those purposes.

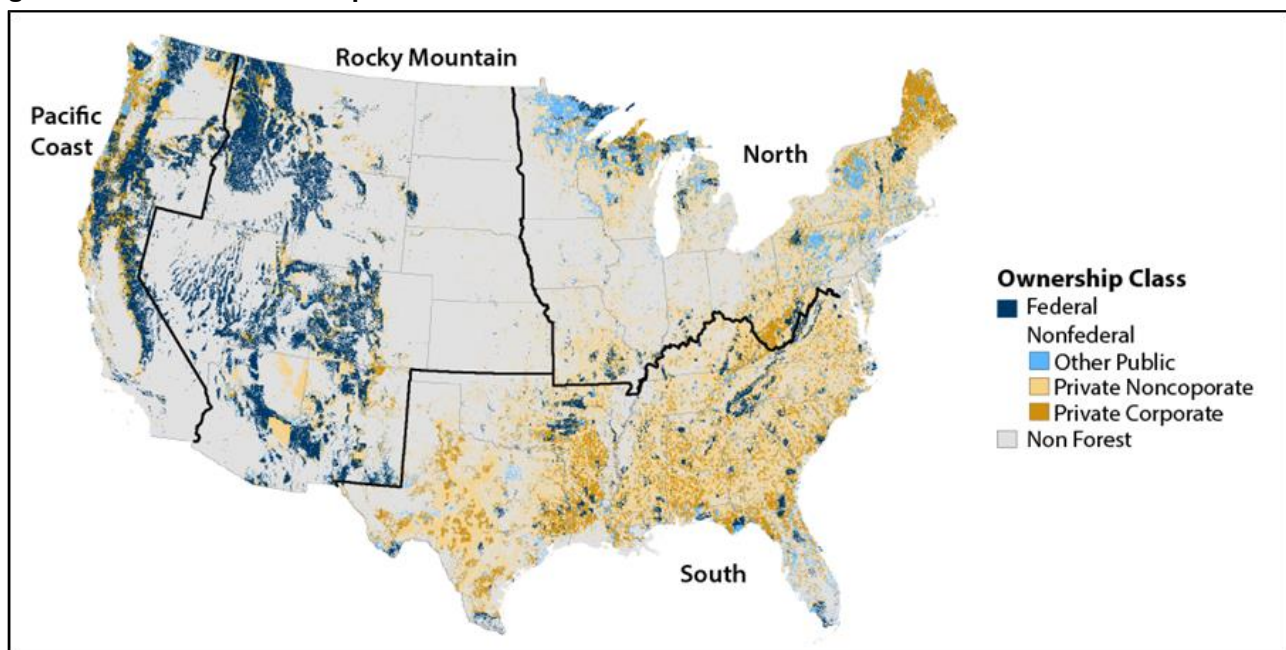
Figure 1. Summary of U.S. Forest Ownership



Source: Sonja Oswalt et al., *Forest Resources of the United States*, 2017, Forest Service, GTR-WO-97, 2019. Hereinafter, *FRUS*.

Notes: See **Figure 2** for the legend and map of the regions.

Figure 2. U.S. Forest Ownership



Source: FRUS.

Nonfederal Forests

Most of the 527 million acres of nonfederal forests in the United States are classified as privately owned (443 million acres); the other 84 million acres are publicly owned by state and local governments. Most private forests are in *family* ownership (272 million acres), followed by *corporate* ownership (156 million acres). See **Table 1** for a description of nonfederal ownership types.

Table 1. Nonfederal Forest Ownership

Name	Acreage and Description
Private Corporate	Private owners that are formally incorporated (e.g., industrial owners, timber investment trusts).
Private Noncorporate	Private owners that are not formally incorporated.
Family	Ownership by families, individuals, trusts, estates, and family partnerships.
Tribal	Ownership by Native American tribes or individuals within reservation boundaries. Excludes Alaska Native regional and village corporations.
Other Private	Ownership by unincorporated organizations, such as nonprofit organizations.
Other Public	Ownership by nonfederal levels of government, such as states and counties.

Source: FRUS and Brett Butler et al., *Family Forest Ownerships of the United States, 2018*, Forest Service, GTR-NRS-199, February 2021.

Forest management objectives vary considerably across and within nonfederal forest ownership types. Private forests are generally managed according to the goals of their owners. Private forest owners engage in varying levels of forest management, ranging from passive to active to intensive management, based on constraints such as knowledge or financial resources. Among the estimated nearly 11 million different owners, family forest owners most often manage their lands for nonmonetized amenities, such as scenery, wildlife, or privacy, and many do not actively manage their forests. Corporate forest owners generally manage their lands to optimize financial returns, usually (but not exclusively) from timber production.

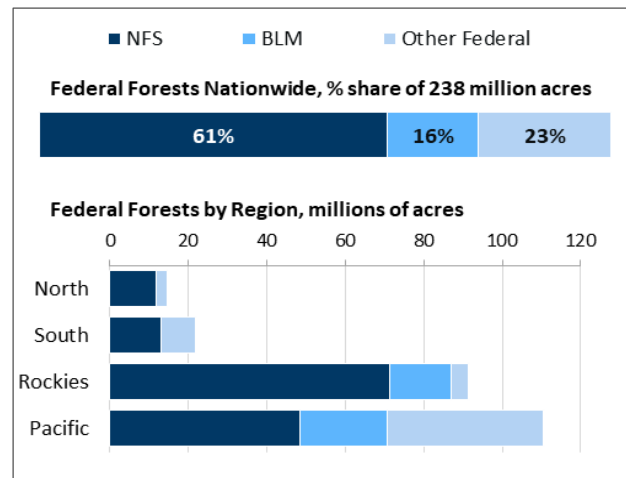
Other public forest management is stipulated by relevant state, county, and local laws. State and local forests vary across nearly all measures and do not support many generalizations about the management of these forests. An exception is for state forests that are *state trust lands*. State trust lands are specific parcels of land granted by Congress to states with the requirement that revenue generated from the sale or lease of the land benefit specific public purposes (primarily education). State trust lands have an explicit fiduciary responsibility to generate revenue, though the states vary in how the responsibility is fulfilled.

Federal Forests

The federal government owns 238 million acres (31%) of U.S. forests, most of which are managed by the U.S. Forest Service (FS)—as part of the National Forest System (NFS)—and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM); see **Figure 3**. The remaining federal forests are managed by the National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, other agencies in the Department of the Interior, the Department of the Defense, and others.

The FS and BLM manage most of their lands under similar *multiple use* and *sustained yield* statutory missions. Multiple use management means considering the relative values of the various resources and the combination of uses that best meets the needs of the American people. The multiple uses include livestock grazing; energy and mineral development; recreation; timber production; watershed protection; wildlife and fish habitat; and natural scenic, scientific, and historical values. Managing for a sustained yield means ensuring a high level of resource outputs are maintained in perpetuity without impairing the land’s productivity. Both the FS and the BLM engage in long-term land use and resource management planning to inform and guide their decisionmaking processes for balancing multiple uses and ensuring a sustained yield of resources.

Figure 3. Federal Forests



Source: FRUS.

Notes: Other primarily reflects lands managed by the Department of Defense or other bureaus within the Department of the Interior.

Timberlands

Two-thirds of the forests in the United States are classified as *timberlands* (514 million acres). Timberlands are a subset of forestland, consisting of forests producing or capable of producing crops of industrial wood that are not prohibited from timber use by statute or regulation. Forests classified as timberlands include areas where timber production is not logistically or financially viable. Private forests are more likely to contain timberlands. Less than half of the federal forests contain timberlands (108 million acres), most of which are located within the NFS (89%).

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