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## Protection

**CONSERVATION'S  
NEW CONVERSATION**

**SOCIAL REGISTER**

**ROWING TO SAVE A  
SHORELINE**





# CONSERVATION'S New Conversation

In the Face of Unrelenting Development: How to Keep Forests in Forest?

by Jane Braxton Little

**D**on't blink! By the time you open your eyes, an acre of open space in America will be gone: Plowed under, paved over, and built on.

It might be the grassy meadow where your kids play. It might be the shaded beach beside the lake where you picnic in the summer, or the ranchlands just past town. It almost certainly includes a grove of trees: pines, oaks, or birches.

By the end of the day, somewhere in America 6,000 acres of natural landscape will be forever lost. The pace of the conversion of private forests and ranches to houses, parking lots, and shopping malls has doubled in the last five years and is accelerating at such a rapid rate that it is drawing even protected public lands into its vortex. Over the next 20 years, land bordering national forests and grasslands will face development pressure and increased housing on parcels here and there that add up to a landmass nearly the size of Colorado, according to a recent U.S. Forest Service study.

The growth of residences scattered about historically rural landscapes threatens everything Americans cherish about forests and open space: wildlife and water, timber and recreation, carbon storage, bird-song and backcountry solitude. Keeping forests as forests is the critical issue for land managers at every level in the United States today. How they respond will determine the future of not only America's privately owned forests but also the 193 million acres in the national forest system.

"We can't keep on gobbling up green spaces and converting them to subdivisions. When we lose forests, we're losing a lot more than timber," says Scott Wallinger, a member of the National Commission on Science for Sustainable Forestry and past president of AMERICAN FORESTS' board of directors.

The alarming conversion of timberlands to development and the projections for losses over the next few decades have scuttled traditional management practices, thrusting everyone who cares about forest ecosystems into a scramble for new tactics. Some are pursuing tax incentives, some new markets, some outright land acquisitions. What's clear to federal land managers, private forest owners, and conservationists

alike is that they can only stem the losses by working together. "It's going to be a battle. All of the values the American public has taken for granted for the last century are at stake," says Bob Simpson, senior vice president with the American Forest Foundation, a nonprofit working for long-term stewardship of private forestlands.

He and a growing coalition of forest activists have embraced an approach to saving forests and open space that balances environmental significance with economic potential. Their goal is to maintain working landscapes—places that continue ranching, logging, and other traditional activities while providing wildlife habitat and healthy watersheds.

Many private property owners would not sell to developers if they had a way to make a viable living off their land, Simpson and others believe. Their alliance is protecting working landscapes through a combination of conventional timber harvests and nontraditional activities that include selling nontimber forest products, promoting ecotourism on forests and ranches, reducing taxes through conservation easements, and capitalizing on emerging markets for carbon storage and other ecosystem services.

Working landscapes are the beginning of a new conversation about conservation—one that holds promise for private lands and the public lands that neighbor them, says Larry Selzer, president of The Conservation Fund, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting landscapes and waterways.

"Balancing nature and commerce is the only way we will have any landscape-scale success at saving forests, ranches, and open space," Selzer says. "This is an all-hands-on-deck prospect."



ADVENTURE PHOTO/ISTOCK

*Left, Sprawl is projected to affect pristine wilderness around Tahoe National Forest.*

*Above, right: USFS reports more areas near national forests will sprout development.*



**Bob Simpson,**  
**the Forest**  
**Foundation vice**  
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**Faced with**  
**higher taxes**  
**and higher**  
**management**  
**costs as well as**  
**reduced markets**  
**for their timber,**  
**who wouldn't be**  
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**top-dollar offers**  
**from developers,**  
**he says.**



#### TIMOS & FAMILY FORESTS

America's forests began experiencing dramatic changes in the late 1980s, when market forces and tax laws combined to launch the wholesale transfer of industrial timberlands into new ownerships. Champion International's 1989 sale of 300,000 acres in New York and New England sounded an alarm over the potential loss of forests at a landscape scale. Since then almost all the nation's 68 million acres of industrial timberlands have changed hands. This sweeping shift in forest ownership left Weyerhaeuser Co. in Washington as the last of the major timber companies to own its own timberland. Many watching the trend predict America will have no traditional forest companies within 18 months.

Most industrial timberlands were acquired by timber investment management organizations (TIMOs), which manage them for the financial benefit of their stockholders (see *American Forests*, *Timberlands in Turmoil*, Winter 2006). The most profitable use of these historically timbered lands—their “highest and best use”—is generally residential and related commercial development. Since 1982 more than 10 million acres of timberlands have been converted to houses, buildings and parking lots, according to a U.S. Forest Service report. By 2030, government estimates put the total over 26 million acres.

The family forest owners who control 58 percent of America's forests have been caught in the undercurrent of these industrial timberland sales, according to the American Forest Foundation. The transactions come at

a time when the number of mom-and-pop forest owners is increasing from today's 10 million individuals to an expected 12 million over the next two decades. As the number of owners surges, the size of their individual holdings declines. The smaller the forest stand, the more difficult and expensive it is to manage. Coupled with the loss of local industry-owned sawmills to market their products, many family forest owners are on the brink of selling their lands for development.

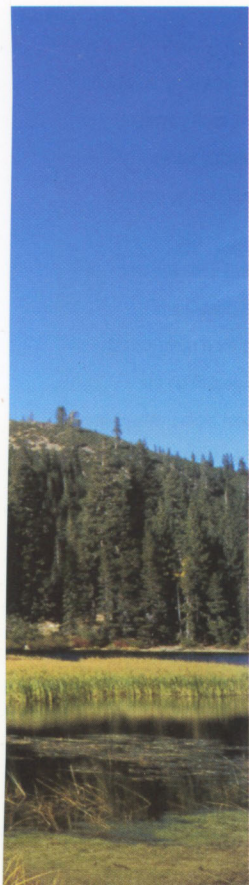
Bob Simpson, the Forest Foundation vice president, blames the widespread sale of family forests on a sheer lack of commercial incentives. Faced with higher taxes and higher management costs as well as reduced markets for their timber, who wouldn't be tempted by top-dollar offers from developers, he says. No cash flow means no conservation. “If these family forest owners cannot make enough money, of course they will sell. It's prime real estate,” he says.

#### IMPACTS ON NATIONAL FORESTS

The primest of the prime real estate is adjacent to national forests and parks. Everyone wants to live next to a wildlife refuge or wilderness area, says Selzer, the Conservation Fund president. The migration to rural areas has already drawn over 2 million people away from metropolitan centers since the 1990s. With the nation's population expected to swell by 135 million by 2050, no one believes this trend will decrease.

That will put houses, people, and pets on an additional 22 million acres of land surrounding national





GARY MOON (2)

forests, according to National Forests on the Edge, a U.S. Forest Service study completed late last year. The surge of development will affect almost all national forests in the East. The George Washington-Jefferson National Forest in Virginia and West Virginia is expected to be the most heavily impacted. Development on private lands scattered next to its borders is projected to encompass an area almost as big as all of West Virginia, according to the Forest Service study.

The Mark Twain Forest in Missouri stands out among Midwestern forests with increased development projected on more than 1.3 million acres of neighboring lands—as much as all the Hawaiian Islands put together.

In the West, the Bitterroot Forest in Idaho and Montana will experience the greatest impacts from development, with housing density predicted

to increase on nearly half the private lands that surround it. The development will leave the forest divided by a corridor of highways, houses, and shopping malls, with ominous implications for migrating elk and other wildlife. On the Plumas and Tahoe national forests in California, the study projects development increases on 25 percent of the adjacent land.

Although these federal lands themselves are protected, they are increasingly vulnerable to adjacent activities. The vision of national forests as green enclaves surrounded by ever-widening circles of development poses serious consequences for the natural resources they safeguard. The national forest system is the largest single source of fresh water in the United States. Development will affect the 180 million people who depend on forests for their drinking water.

As the private lands engulfing national forests become ranchettes and gated communities surrounded by fences, the effects will put 340 animal species at risk. National forests provide habitat for countless fish and wildlife species, including one-third of all those the federal government considers threatened or endangered. The most explosive impact of development on national forest management is undoubtedly fire. More houses and people are already increasing the number of wild-fire ignitions, especially in the East, where nearly 75 percent of the recent wildland fires were human caused, according to National Forests on the Edge.

In the West, where most forest ecosystems have evolved with natural fire as an essential ingredient, fed-

eral land managers are finding it more and more difficult to introduce fire and allow natural fires to burn under their supervision. Land managers are increasingly hamstrung by complaints about smoke and the danger of flames escaping into residential areas. When fires do occur, the proliferation of houses complicates fire suppression, drawing attention away from natural resources to protect structures.

Despite the obvious and momentous impacts of development on national forest management, U.S. Forest Service officials have been slow to respond. They waited until Earth Day 2003 to formally sound the alarm. Then-chief Dale Bosworth included development on a short list of threats to national forests and grasslands. That triggered a series of "On the Edge" reports, which have generated enough data to get the attention of even the most sanguine bureaucrat.



At left, a Forest Service study project development increases on 25 percent of land adjacent to Tahoe National Park.

The agency's response—Forest Service Open Space Conservation Strategy—issued in November, emphasizes cooperation across ownership boundaries. To reduce the impacts of development on national forests, it calls for developing national policies and markets to help private landowners conserve open space and participate in community growth planning.

Some of that already is happening. In the Highlands region of New York and northern New Jersey, where 14 million people recreate annually, the Forest Service helped convene a bi-state group with 120 participants who developed conservation strategies producing open-space acquisition programs in seven counties. (For more on this area, see "The Highlands: Ecosystem in Peril, American Forests, Summer 2007.) In Topeka, Kansas, the Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service brought together partners to develop a stormwater plan that promotes tree planting on commercial sites and establishes a stream buffer ordinance to preserve key lands along the city's waterways. This is part of a regional approach to reducing pollution and flooding to improve Mississippi River watershed health.

Above, a new home goes up near Tahoe National Forest.



## MAINTAINING A STEWARDSHIP TRADITION

Russell Turner plants his boots in a patch of snow just outside the century-old frame house where he was born. Canada geese honk in the thin spring mist hanging over fields that stretch past a cluster of barns. The timbered hillsides beyond rise steeply to 6,700 feet and the craggy peaks of Yuba Pass in California's Sierra Nevada.

Although this scene is as familiar as the cab of his pickup truck, Turner takes it in with a quiet sense of wonder. "We feel close to the land," he says. "We feel fortunate we have it, and we want to take care of it."



JANE BRAXTON LITTLE

*Russell Turner has felt pressure since development began booming in the 1990s around Lake Tahoe, just 40 miles south. Realtors have come calling in hopes of transforming his property into a subdivision with 80 ranchettes.*

A soft-spoken man with a thick crop of white hair, Turner, 66, has guaranteed that the stewardship he and his predecessors have devoted to this land will continue through time. He has sold the right to develop the 725-acre Turner Creek Ranch to Pacific Forest Trust, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting working forests. The San Francisco-based Trust used funds approved by California voters for the bulk of the purchase; Turner contributed by donating part of the easement value.

In exchange for the development rights, the agreement guarantees that Turner, his son Kevin, Kevin's children, and all the Turner children who follow can maintain their family's 158-year tradition of ranching and logging. "This ranch is my family's history. This is the legacy I will leave," Turner says.

The conservation easement he negotiated with Pacific Forest Trust is a tool in use across the country to keep forests as forests, ranches working, and open spaces open. Landowners like Turner continue to own and manage their private property but voluntarily

sell their rights to develop it to a land protection organization, which promises never to exercise them. In addition to a cash payment, the landowner can expect reduced annual and estate taxes because the land has a lower assessed value without the development rights.

The Turner ranch was settled in 1850 by three brothers who were among the thousands poking around the mountains of California hoping to strike gold. They left mining for a more certain investment in this land tucked into a productive pocket on the southwest edge of Sierra Valley, one of the largest alpine valleys in the nation. Successive generations of Turners have raised hay and livestock, and logged the timbered portions of the ranch.

Russell Turner has felt pressure since development began booming in the 1990s around Lake Tahoe, just 40 miles south. Realtors have come calling in hopes of transforming his property into a subdivision with 80 ranchettes.

"The Tahoe billionaires are crowding the millionaires out. Guess where they're heading? These hills are full of people looking," says Turner. With the Tahoe National Forest his neighbor on three sides, the Turner Creek Ranch is prime residential real estate.

The conservation easement Russell Turner negotiated helps maintain the ecological integrity of Sierra Valley, which Turner and other local ranchers share with deer, antelope, migrating birds, and 50 species of butterflies. The land stewardship ethic these families employ not only restores and protects the headwaters of the Feather River, it also supports conservation management across the Tahoe Forest. And that's the kind of private-public partnership essential to conserving forest ecosystems, says Laurie Wayburn, Pacific Forest Trust president.

Conservation easements nationwide are contributing to the continued productivity of both private and public lands. "Without the income streams from conservation easements and other market tools to support private landowner stewardship, we will see the continued decline—and in some places collapse—of resource-based economies in the United States," says Wayburn.

For Turner, agreeing to a conservation easement was simple, stubborn good sense: "We like doing what we always did. We like the land the way it is. I don't know how much difference it will make in the long run, but development all out in these woods is not a good thing." —Jane Braxton Little

American Forests' Global ReLeaf Forests program funds tree-planting of native species in forests damaged by a variety of conditions. One of the most prevalent is wildfire. This year American Forests' California Wildfire ReLeaf fund will plant 426,000 trees in 11 projects that span the state and restore habitat for species ranging from salmon to spotted owls.

- In Plumas National Forest, for example, planting 21,000 of four conifer species will help maintain diversity after a September 2006 fire. Forest health, resiliency, and wildlife habitat in Tahoe National Forest will benefit from more than 26,000 ponderosa pine, jack pine, sugar pine, Douglas-fir, and incense cedar planted after a wildfire there.
- For a complete list of 2008 Global ReLeaf Forest projects—or to plant trees at \$1 per tree—visit [www.americanforests.org](http://www.americanforests.org)



## CONSERVATION COALITIONS

The agency's intentions are well and good, says Simpson, the American Forest Foundation official. And they complement the efforts of the coalitions already formed to enhance the economic opportunities available to private forest owners. But what's required is an institutional change within the Forest Service that transcends ownership boundaries and year-to-year budgets.

"They find it difficult to work beyond the national forest system. Until they realize the world does not stop at their borders, we're in big trouble," Simpson says.

In an effort to keep forests as forests, local leaders and conservationists alike have been working with some agency officials to overcome the disconnect between public and private land management. Coalitions of strange bedfellows have formed across the country to protect open space:

- At Arnold Air Force Base in Tennessee, military officials are working with The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Tennessee Army National Guard, and state wildlife officials to restore and maintain 34,000 acres of woods, wetlands, and grasslands that provide habitat for the endangered gray bat and Eggert's sunflower. In addition to harvesting sawlogs and pulpwood, they are reintroducing fire to 4,000 acres of grassland barrens on the base.

- In Blackfoot Valley, Montana, ranchers and retirees working with Plum Creek Timber Co., the Forest Service, U.S. Fish & Wildlife, and a variety of state agencies have protected 95,000 acres of private land from development and restored 38 miles of stream, 3,000 acres of wetlands, and more than 13,000 acres of native grasslands. The group's many projects are organized and guided by community leaders who live in the watershed east of Missoula.

- In central Maine near the town of Millinocket, The Nature Conservancy helped Great Northern Paper Co. delay bankruptcy by purchasing some of its loans and coordinating creation of a conservation easement on 195,000 acres abutting Baxter State Park. The alliance of farmers, loggers, hunters, and business owners has conserved a total of 750,000 acres of unbroken forests.

Coalitions like these have achieved remarkable accomplishments in protecting forests and open space, says Al Sample, president of the Pinchot Institute for Conservation and a member of the National Commission on Science for Sustainable Forestry.

But he is skeptical that conservation easements, tax incentives, and the sale of ecosystem services will provide long-term security for the natural values of these lands. Conservation easements are only as good as their overseers, Sample says. In most cases, no one is supervising these lands to guard against violations of the agreements protecting them from development.

Until federal regulations exempt private forest and ranch owners from estate taxes, families will continue to sell out to developers, he says. And while many owners are eager to sell the carbon their forests sequester

and other ecosystem services their watersheds provide, few buyers are purchasing them.

Sample advocates federal or state acquisition to protect the conservation values of forests and open space: "It's time to call the question. If it is really important to protect these values, public acquisition is the only way to do it. Everything else is a weak alternative."

His proposal faces enormous odds. The Forest Legacy program, established by Congress in 1990 to purchase environmentally sensitive lands, has protected more than 1.5 million acres in 37 states. But funding for the program administered by the Forest Service has dropped from a high of \$71 million in 2004 to \$12.5 million in the president's budget for 2009. More critically, public distrust of federal land management makes new acquisitions problematic. Both environmentalists and timber industry representatives argue—for opposite reasons—against giving the Forest Service any more land to manage. Adding to the agency's land base is so unpopular that Congress amended the Forest Legacy legislation to place acquired properties under state management.

As the conversion of critical wildlife and watershed lands to development continues, the drive to stem the losses is coming not from the federal but the grassroots level. Charleston County in South Carolina recently awarded \$200,000 to the Francis Marion National Forest to help acquire a stand of longleaf, pond, and loblolly pines on private parcels surrounded by federal lands.

In the headwaters of the Feather River in northern California, ranchers, environmentalists, and officials with a variety of agencies are using funds approved by voters statewide to raise the water table in wet meadows surrounded by Plumas National Forest.

Local tax and bond initiatives across the country have raised \$47 billion for conservation since 1988—a passionate expression by communities to keep open space open. The nation is beginning to wake up to the full value of forested and open space lands, says Wallinger, the former AMERICAN FORESTS board president.

But the challenge is daunting and time is fleeting. Most forest advocates believe we have only a slender 10- to 15-year window to keep forests as forests. If the window slams shut without protections at a landscape scale, every American loses.

"I wish I could say I'm optimistic," says Wallinger, "but unless we create a new set of forest policies relevant to the 21st century, we're not going to solve the development issues we are facing." AF

*Contributing Editor Jane Braxton Little covers environmental issues from Greenville, California.*



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