Forest Service unveils first comprehensive forecast on southern forests

May 17 2011

The USDA Forest Service and the Southern Group of State Foresters released the first phase of the Southern Forest Futures Project report on Tuesday, May 17, which identifies areas forest managers will focus on to maintain southern forests in the coming years.

According to the report, urbanization, bioenergy use, weather patterns, land ownership changes and invasive species will significantly alter the South's forests between the years 2010 and 2060. About 23 million acres of forest land are projected to decrease. People are also expected to influence water resources, wildlife, recreational opportunities, fire and other issues.

Project team members used computer models and expert analysis to develop the report. It will serve as a guide as Forest Service personnel seek to maintain the vitality and efficiency of forests in the south.

"The agency is poised to respond to the implications of the findings in the summary report," according to Forest Service Southern Regional Forester Liz Agpaoa, "The summary report clearly demonstrates the urgent need for developing a collaborative strategy to conserve and restore southern forests. "A healthy and prosperous America relies on the health of our natural resources, and particularly our forests."

The technical and summary reports completes phase one of the two-phase project and begins a 60-day public comment period, wherein people can submit remarks via the Futures Project website at

http://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/futures/.

To put the report's forecast into perspective, Rob Doudrick, director of the Forest Service Southern Research Station, said the potential decrease in forest area is equivalent to the state of South Carolina. "Urbanization along with population growth equates to more demands for additional goods and services from a declining forest base. This could have a dramatic impact on our Southern forests," he said.

Additional key findings are:

- Population growth will bring more runoff from roads, buildings and parking lots as well as increased pollution, impacting supplies of clean drinking water and the quality of aquatic habitats
- More numerous and severe wildfires are forecasted
- More frequent and intense wildfires will pose additional challenges to community and forestry wildfire organizations
- The spread of plant, insect and disease pests could severely affect native species, forest productivity and wildlife
- More than 1,000 plant and wildlife species of conservation concern could be threatened by urbanization, climate change and invasive species

"Over the next 50 years, multiple forces will interact to determine the future of southern forests," said Charlie Morgan, Mississippi State Forester and chairman of the Southern Group of State Foresters. "This report will give state foresters information they need to inform their programs and make decisions in their respective states."

More than 30 scientists, researchers, foresters and other experts with the Forest Service, state forestry agencies and universities contributed to the study.

"The Forest Service was well positioned to undertake this complex project," said Dave Wear, project co-leader and economist with the Southern Research Station. "In the South we have a network of scientists from the various scientific disciplines needed to address all of the issues and forest managers dealing with them on a day-to-day basis."

John Greis, the other project co-leader with the Southern Region of the Forest Service, added that "we reached out to the broad public to identify the important issues and subjected all the work to independent scientific review."

Beginning in Fall 2011, the Forest Service will release separate reports that detail the findings and implications for forest management and conservation for five sub-regions of the South, which are the Piedmont, Coastal Plain, Appalachian/Cumberland, Mississippi Alluvial Valley and Mid-South. The 13 southern states included in the study are Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

Provided by USDA Forest Service