

New study outlines why Southern African-American forest owners less likely to use federal assistance

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Many Southern African-American forest landowners are not participating in federal assistance programs because of a mistrust of the government, unclear property titles and inability to pay required upfront costs, a new study from the University of Georgia finds.

About 60 percent of total forestland in the South—244 million acres—is owned by private individuals, called family forest landowners. A number of federal programs, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, are designed to guide and support these landowners to ensure sustainable management of their forestlands.

There are also special incentives in these federal programs for African-American family forest landowners to encourage their participation. But despite these incentives, participation rates among African-American forest landowners remain low.

It is critical to increase participation rates because as much as 90 percent of African-American forest landowners are located in the South, said the study's lead author Puneet Dwivedi, an assistant professor of sustainability sciences in UGA's Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources.

Previous studies that looked at this issue attributed the low participation to a number of factors, including age, education, lack of a management

plan and historical racial discrimination in how the loans and assistance have been distributed.

The new UGA study, published in the *Journal of Forestry*, studied what African-Americans and other stakeholder groups think about these programs. These results are a major advancement to existing understanding about low participation rates, Dwivedi said.

"Lack of participation could lead to loss of these forestlands to developers, whereas an active participation offers an opportunity where forestry could provide regular income to these landowners," Dwivedi said. "Improving management of their forestlands would also enhance various forest-based ecosystem services that society enjoys from sustainably managed forestlands."

The study was conducted as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities and community-based nonprofits in three rural regions launched pilot projects to increase income and asset value of African-American-owned forestlands and African-American landowner participation in federal forestry and conservation programs.

Dwivedi conducted the study with Warnell doctoral student Arundhati Jagadish and USDA Forest Service Research Forester John Schelhas, with the support of the U.S. Endowment of Forestry and Communities and the U.S. Forest Service Southern Research Station. The researchers held three workshops in North Carolina and South Carolina to study the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with federal landowner assistance programs that could be affecting the participation of African-American family forest landowners.

They analyzed the perceptions from three stakeholder groups: African-American family forest landowners, government employees and

nonprofit employees to understand the reasons behind the low participation.

Results from these sessions found that:

- All three groups felt that the federal programs must continue to offer professional advice to African-American family forest landowners, particularly as they often have little knowledge or experience in managing forestlands;
- Programs that require African-American family forest landowners—who typically have low incomes—to pay initial upfront costs are very problematic in making improvements to their forestlands;
- Many African-American forest landowners have what is called "heirs' property," which means their land has been typically passed down through the generations without a clear title and therefore are typically ineligible to participate in federal landowner assistance programs;
- An "atmosphere of mistrust" exists between African-American owners and government agencies based on a history of discrimination.

This study was part of work to establish a baseline for new programs being launched by the USDA Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to involve African-American forest landowners.

Dwivedi said results of this study could be used for improving the participation of African-American forest landowners in these assistance programs.

"Relevant policy changes with a more targeted and personal outreach approach coupled with legal assistance for clearing land titles is needed to increase their participation in federal landowner assistance programs,"

he said. "This is particularly true as African-American family forest landowners realize the importance of forestlands not only to themselves and their heirs, but also to the society at large."

More information: "Perceptions of Stakeholder Groups about the Participation of African American Family Forest Landowners in Federal Landowner Assistance Programs." DOI: dx.doi.org/10.5849/jof.14-152

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