

# PROFILE: LAND AREA IN COMMUNITY FORESTS IN THE U.S.

## A Preliminary Assessment

Community-based forestry (CBF) is challenging to define and even more challenging to assess. Ironically, the reasons for this difficulty are CBF's greatest strengths: that it is home grown, reflecting the local cultural and ecological context; that it is shaped and driven more by practice than theory; and that it is iterative and continually evolving. This paper is an attempt to describe the range of community forests in the U.S., using a lens that is more inclusive than exclusive, in order to capture its diverse and dynamic nature.

### Community Forests in Context

Although community forests have a lengthy history in the U.S., the concept is more established elsewhere. Access to forest land and the ability to capture multiple value streams from forests are important for CBF initiatives, and some CBF initiatives benefit from community-owned forests. At least 25 percent of forests in the developing world are owned or actively managed by communities and indigenous peoples.<sup>1</sup> Worldwide, communities invest more than \$2.5 billion in money and labor in conservation of their forests — more than twice the amount invested by international organizations.<sup>2</sup> In some countries, such as India and Nepal, CBF has become integrated into public policies and governmental institutions to an extent not yet seen in the U.S.

Still, in the U.S. more than 3,000 communities in 43 states own and manage some 4.5 million acres of forestland.<sup>3</sup> And there are countless examples of de facto community forests, where access to the forest and its diverse benefits substitutes for outright ownership, or in the case of federal land, where land is held in common by a broader community of which the local stakeholders are just one part.

### Public Lands

#### Municipal

A 1953 survey by the American Forestry Association

found 3,226 community forests in the country, representing more than 4,382,000 acres.<sup>4</sup> Although town-owned forests are still found across the country, the highest concentration is found in New England. Municipal ownership of forestland in Northern New England currently includes 80,000 acres in 120 towns in Vermont, 103,000 acres in 188 towns in New Hampshire (including 10,200 acres owned by the Town of Randolph), and approximately 150,000 acres in 170 municipalities in Maine.<sup>5</sup>

Community-owned forests are also reported in Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Montana.<sup>6</sup> The 1984-acre Arcata Community Forest in California is often cited as a model for urban community forestry.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, a 1933 report by USDA known as *A National Plan for American Forestry* (a.k.a. *the Copeland Report*) recommended increased public ownership of woodlands, including community forests. In 1937, the Forest Service laid the groundwork for a National Community Forest Program, but President Roosevelt deleted the provision due to concerns that it would not be financially self-sufficient.<sup>8</sup>

#### States & Counties

In 2005, Oregon enacted legislation making it the first state in the nation to create a Community Forest Authority. The CFA is designed to serve as a source of funding for conserving large areas of forestland. The Deschutes County Forest Authority, the first in that state, formed in 2006 to acquire and conserve the 33,000-acre Skyline Forest. The forest would be the Northwest's largest community forest.<sup>9</sup>

In Minnesota, Aitken County's 220,000 acres of forestland<sup>10</sup> have received much attention in recent years, in part because it was among the first public forests to become SmartWood certified.

Wisconsin is home to at least three county-owned

<sup>1</sup> Scherr, S. J., A. White, and D. Kaimowitz. 2003. *A New Agenda for Forest Conservation and Poverty Reduction: Making Forest Markets Work for Low-Income Producers*. Washington: Forest Trends.

<sup>2</sup> White, A. 8/15/07. "Governments Must Axe Their Hold on the Forests." *The Guardian*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2007/aug/15/guardiansocietysupplement.comment>

<sup>3</sup> Communities Committee, Community-Owned Forest Project.

<sup>4</sup> [www.forestkarma.com](http://www.forestkarma.com)

<sup>5</sup> New Hampshire Office of Energy and Planning, Maine Department of Conservation: Forest Service, and Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, cited in Community Forest Collaborative. *Community Forests: A Community Investment Strategy*.

<sup>6</sup> Communities Committee, Community-Owned Forest Project. <http://www.communitiescommittee.org/COFcases.html>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> [www.forestkarma.com](http://www.forestkarma.com) and McCullough, R. 2005. *Community Forests — A Perspective*. Paper presented at "Community-Owned Forests: Possibilities, Experiences and Lessons Learned," Missoula Montana. [www.communitiescommittee.org/conference/presentations/mccullough.pdf](http://www.communitiescommittee.org/conference/presentations/mccullough.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Community Forestry Resource Center; Deschutes Land Trust. [www.deschuteslandtrust.org/protected-lands/current-projects/default-page](http://www.deschuteslandtrust.org/protected-lands/current-projects/default-page)

<sup>10</sup> [www.co.aitkin.mn.us/departments/Land%20Dept/land-dept/landhome.htm](http://www.co.aitkin.mn.us/departments/Land%20Dept/land-dept/landhome.htm)

community forests (totaling more than 67,000 acres), and Illinois has 10 “county forest preserves.” Forests in over half of Michigan’s counties are owned by local governments (counties, towns, and cities) and managed with local interests in mind.<sup>11</sup>

### **Federal**

**Stewardship Contracting:** Congressional legislation enables the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to work more flexibly to achieve land management objectives, with an explicit emphasis on community collaboration and working with local businesses. During FY 2005, 45 contracts and agreements were awarded across 11 states, and a total of 35,478 acres were treated using stewardship contracting.<sup>12</sup> The number of contracts has steadily increased since 1999<sup>13</sup> and a variety of maps are available.<sup>14</sup>

**Restoration:** Restoration work (e.g. fuels reduction, trail maintenance, watershed restoration) can be and has been implemented with a similar community emphasis, but was not documented for this report.

The Collaborative Forest Restoration Program (CFRP), created under the Community Forest Restoration Act of 2000 (Title VI, Public Law 106-393), established a cooperative forest restoration program in New Mexico. This program provides cost-share grants to stakeholders in forest restoration projects on public land which are designed through a collaborative process. Projects must involve a diverse group of stakeholders and address specific objectives, such as wildfire threat reduction and ecosystem restoration. CFRP has been authorized for up to \$5 million annually.<sup>15</sup> There has been growing interest in expanding the program to other regions.

**Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP):** NTFP harvesting on national forests is another example of how public lands can and are functioning as de facto community

forests. Historically, NTFPs have not been considered in management plans on national forests. As recently as 2000, only 25% of Eastern national forests included NTFPs in their management plans.<sup>16</sup> Although the Forest Service requires permits for NTFP harvesting, harvest data is largely qualitative<sup>17</sup> and inconsistent across regions.

**Recreation:** With nearly 214 million visits to national forests and wilderness areas in 2005, recreation represents another significant source of benefits to local communities.<sup>18</sup> For example, the Forest Service reports it has issued 5,700 outfitter/guide permits.<sup>19</sup> A series of “Recreation Forums” sponsored by the National Forest Foundation and the American Recreation Coalition in the spring of 2007 uncovered widespread interest in greater involvement of local communities in recreation management.<sup>20</sup>

### **School Trust Lands**

School Trust Lands are federal lands that generate revenue for public schools.<sup>21</sup> Revenue is derived from a variety of land uses, including grazing, agriculture, forestry, mining, commercial uses, and rights-of-way. In 2001, the 45 million acres of School Trust Lands generated \$1.4 billion.<sup>22</sup>

### **Tribal Lands**

There are roughly 562 federally recognized Tribes in the U.S., with a total membership of about 1.7 million.<sup>23,24</sup> Forests account for 16 million acres on 214 reservations across 23 states. (Almost half of this expanse is considered timberland.) Forests play a major economic role: a 1991 study found that forestry activities and related programs generated over 465 million dollars and 9,000 jobs in surrounding communities.<sup>25</sup>

Indigenous lands are often cited as examples of community forestry in action, where community well being, ecological sustainability, and a multigenerational perspective are central. Menominee Tribal Enterprises<sup>26</sup> is

<sup>11</sup> [www.communitiescommittee.org/conference/cfotherus.php](http://www.communitiescommittee.org/conference/cfotherus.php)

<sup>12</sup> USDA Forest Service. 2006. Forest Service Implementation during FY 2005 of the Stewardship Contracting Authority provided by Section 323 of the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2003 (as contained in division F of P.L. 108-7; 16 U.S.C. Note): A Report to the Appropriations Committees of the U.S. House and Senate. [www.fs.fed.us/forestmanagement/projects/stewardship/reports/documents/2005/2005\\_SC\\_Report\\_to\\_Congress.pdf](http://www.fs.fed.us/forestmanagement/projects/stewardship/reports/documents/2005/2005_SC_Report_to_Congress.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> USDA Forest Service. 2005. [www.forestsandrangelands.gov/news/stewardship-contracting05-2005.shtml](http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/news/stewardship-contracting05-2005.shtml)

<sup>14</sup> [www.fs.fed.us/forestmanagement/projects/stewardship/projects/index.shtml](http://www.fs.fed.us/forestmanagement/projects/stewardship/projects/index.shtml)

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/spf/cfrp/>

<sup>16</sup> Chamberlain, J.L. 2000. The Management of National Forests of Eastern United States for Non-Timber Forest Products. PhD Dissertation, Virginia Tech. <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-12122000-145202/>

<sup>17</sup> Lettman, G. and K. Kutara 2005. Creating an Indicator for Non-Timber Forest Products Summary. Oregon Department of Forestry. [http://oregon.gov/ODF/RESOURCE\\_PLANNING/docs/NTFP\\_Information100405.doc](http://oregon.gov/ODF/RESOURCE_PLANNING/docs/NTFP_Information100405.doc)

<sup>18</sup> USDA Forest Service. 2005. [www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/facts/facts\\_sheet.shtml](http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/facts/facts_sheet.shtml)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> American Recreation Coalition and the National Forest Foundation. 2007 Recreation Forum Summary Proceedings. <http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/rsfmp.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> See also [www.childrenslandalliance.com](http://www.childrenslandalliance.com)

<sup>22</sup> National Association of State Boards of Education. School Trust Lands: A Significant Alternative Funding Source for Public Schools. NASBE Policy Update, Vol. 10, No. 6. [www.childrenslandalliance.com/NASBE%2006.pdf?ClassSess=fbc0606c669e301a860dbacdd8b87fab](http://www.childrenslandalliance.com/NASBE%2006.pdf?ClassSess=fbc0606c669e301a860dbacdd8b87fab)

<sup>23</sup> National Congress of American Indians.

<sup>24</sup> A map of tribal lands is available at [www.nps.gov/history/nagpra/DOCUMENTS/ClaimsMAP.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/nagpra/DOCUMENTS/ClaimsMAP.htm)

<sup>25</sup> Intertribal Timber Council, An Assessment of Indian Forests and Forest Management in the United States. 1993.

<sup>26</sup> [www.mtewood.com](http://www.mtewood.com)

perhaps the most well known, but there are many others. Community forestry (or approximations of it) is by no means universal practice on Tribal lands as the struggles over forest management on the Navajo Nation attest.<sup>27</sup>

Another factor to consider in understanding the potential role of indigenous forest management is the fact that there are several hundred groups seeking federal recognition — a process that oftentimes takes decades to complete — and countless outstanding land claims.<sup>28</sup>

## Spanish and Mexican Land Grants

From 1600-1850, the Spanish and Mexican authorities conveyed land to individuals and communities in Florida, Texas<sup>29</sup>, Arizona, California, and New Mexico to encourage settlement, to establish political “buffer zones,” and as a reward for service and loyalty. Some grants were also made to Native American groups.

Of particular relevance to community-owned forests were grants to communities, in which most of the land was typically held in common. In New Mexico, home to the oldest land grants, there were 295 grants, of which 154 were to communities.<sup>30</sup>

When the region fell under U.S. control, the American government heard land grant claims, but only a small percentage of the 35 million acres claimed were approved.<sup>31</sup> Disputes continue to this day, although two Government Accountability Office reports have attempted to put the issue to rest.<sup>32</sup>

Few of the remaining land grants in New Mexico still have land, but there are at least two examples where land is being managed effectively as community-owned forests: Manzano and Truchas. With more than half of New Mexico under federal and state jurisdiction, the interplay between land grants and public lands is a central theme.

## Community Land Trusts

The Institute for Community Economics developed the concept of community land trusts in the 1960s to stimulate ownership of housing by residents and to encourage local control of land and other resources. Community land trusts are more closely aligned with CBF than are conventional conservation land trusts because of their central

emphasis on social equity and local benefit. The newly-formed Community Land Trust Network lists 81 member organizations in 29 states.<sup>33</sup> The Woodland Community Land Trust in Northeastern Tennessee is an excellent example.

Still, traditional land trusts are playing a role in establishing and managing community-owned forests. Examples include the Downeast Lakes Land Trust in Maine (27,080 acres) and Oregon’s Deschutes Land Trust (discussed elsewhere). In addition, while it doesn’t consider itself a land trust, the 13 Mile Woods Association in New Hampshire (5,269 acres)<sup>34</sup> is a community-based non-profit corporation that owns and manages a community forest.

## Private Landowners

### Forest Cooperatives

In 1994, non-industrial private forestlands (NIPF) in the U.S. totaled 232 million acres, or 59 percent of the total forestland.<sup>35</sup> NIPF lands account for a higher percentage of forestland in the Eastern U.S. than in the West. NIPF landowners also accounted for 60 percent of all U.S. timber removals in 1997.

Although landowner cooperation is not unique to the U.S.,<sup>36</sup> landowner cooperatives first formed in the U.S. in the 1910s.<sup>37</sup> A 2006 Forest Service report estimates there to be 15 to 20 forest landowner cooperatives at various stages of development, most of which are in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Other cooperatives are reported in Massachusetts, Virginia, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Washington.<sup>38</sup> However, because this estimate is limited to cooperatives of landowners, and doesn’t include, for example, cooperatives involving producers or value-added manufacturers, the actual number is likely to be higher.

One interesting initiative is the Sustainable Woods Network, which is designed to link landowners and value-added producers locally. The Network reports a membership of 22 groups, representing 4200 landowners and 900,000 acres. It is a joint project of the Community Forestry Resource Center and the National Community Forestry Business Alliance. The Network has members in Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont, Virginia, North Carolina, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, Washington, and Idaho.

<sup>27</sup> Atencio, E. 1994. After a heavy harvest and a death, Navajo forestry realigns with culture. High Country News 10/31/94.

<sup>28</sup> National Congress of American Indians, [www.ncai.org/Federal\\_Recognition.70.0.html](http://www.ncai.org/Federal_Recognition.70.0.html)

<sup>29</sup> [www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/LL/mp11.html](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/LL/mp11.html)

<sup>30</sup> Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: Definition and List of Community Land Grants in New Mexico (GAO-01-951, Sept. 10, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> New Mexico Viewpoint, (blog), 2006. [http://nmviewpoint.typepad.com/new\\_mexico\\_viewpoint/2006/02/renaissance\\_of\\_1.html](http://nmviewpoint.typepad.com/new_mexico_viewpoint/2006/02/renaissance_of_1.html)

<sup>32</sup> Treaty Of Guadalupe Hidalgo: Findings and Possible Options Regarding Longstanding Community Land Grant Claims in New Mexico (GAO 04-59, June 2004).

<sup>33</sup> See also [www.citnetwork.org](http://www.citnetwork.org), <http://smallisbeautiful.org/citdirectory.html>

<sup>34</sup> Community Forests: A Community Investment Strategy.

<sup>35</sup> Birch, Thomas W. 1996. Private forest-land owners of the United States, 1994 Resour. Bull. NE-134. Radnor, PA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Northeastern Forest Experiment Station.

<sup>36</sup> Kittedge, D.B. 2006. Forest Owner Cooperation Around the World: Where, How, and Why It Succeeds. Pp. 31-38 in Jakes, P. 2006. Forestry cooperatives: what today’s resource professionals need to know. Proceedings of a satellite conference; 2003 November 18. St. Paul, MN. Gen. Tech. Rep. NC-266. St. Paul, MN: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, North Central Research Station. [http://nrs.fs.fed.us/pubs/gtr/gtr\\_nc266.pdf](http://nrs.fs.fed.us/pubs/gtr/gtr_nc266.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Rickenbach, M.G. In Jakes, p. 25.

<sup>38</sup> Jakes.

In considering cooperatives, it is important to recognize the role they have played as a tool for economic empowerment and social change. A leader in developing and supporting cooperatives toward these ends is the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, a service, resource and advocacy association with a membership of 25,000 low-income farm families and landowners organized into over 100 cooperatives in rural communities across 11 states in the South. Membership is concentrated in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina. The Federation operates a forestry program and an associated training center, which was one of the Ford Foundation's Community-Based Forestry Demonstration Program's projects.

### **Large Private Holdings**

On industrial forestland, especially in the Northeast, there is a tradition of public use and access — for example hunting, snowmobiles, and long-term “camp” (cabin) leases. The Taylor Ranch near San Luis, Colorado, is one example of a large individual landowner managing land with local interests in

mind.<sup>39</sup> It is unclear how many other instances exist.

### **Timberland Investment Management Organizations (TIMOs)**

As of 2002, TIMOs collectively owned 18 million acres around the world, valued at \$14.4 billion.<sup>40</sup> In the U.S., as of 2003, the 10 largest TIMOs managed 9.4 million acres—more than the largest forest products company.<sup>41</sup> Just less than half this acreage is in the South.

### **Additional Resources**

Smith, W.B. et al. 2001. Forest Resources of the United States, 1997. General Technical Report NC-219. St. Paul, MN: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Service, North Central Research Station. <http://nrs.fs.fed.us/pubs/845>

United States of America. 2005. National Report to the Fifth Session of the United Nations Forum. [www.un.org/esa/forests/pdf/national\\_reports/unff5/united\\_states.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/forests/pdf/national_reports/unff5/united_states.pdf)

USDA Forest Service. 1994. National Woodland Owner Survey. <http://www.fia.fs.fed.us/nwos>

<sup>39</sup> Hess, K. and T. Wolf. 1999. Treasure Of La Sierra: Management of Taylor Ranch Near San Luis, Colorado. Reason, Oct, 1999. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1568/is\\_5\\_31/ai\\_56640768/pg\\_1](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1568/is_5_31/ai_56640768/pg_1)

<sup>40</sup> Ravenel, R., M. Tyrrell, and R. Mendelsohn, editors. 2002. Timberland Investment: A Summary of a Forum Exploring Changing Ownership Patterns and the Implications for Conservation of Environmental Values. Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies: Global Institute of Sustainable Forestry.

<sup>41</sup> The Forestry Source. December 2004. Investors Increase Timberland Holdings. Eight Percent of “Investable” US Forestland Held by Investment Managers. [http://www.safnet.org/archive/1204\\_ownerships.cfm](http://www.safnet.org/archive/1204_ownerships.cfm)