Family Forest Management in a Budget-Constrained Environment: Evidence from Southern Illinois Forests

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Private family landowners own over 83% of the forested land in Illinois. A dearth of effective management activity on these family-owned forestlands undermines forest health and related socio-economic benefits. Much of the state’s forestland is found in southern Illinois, where the public Shawnee National Forest and privately-owned family forest parcels commingle to create a unique ownership mosaic characterized by an unusually high percentage of private forestlands (25%) governed by an explicit management plan. Although the number of family forest landowners has steadily increased, a lack of investment by the state of Illinois in private forestry management programs and state forestry agencies has hindered further growth of private management. Furthermore, the state legislature failed to pass a budget from F.Y. 2016 - F.Y. 2018, leaving state-funded forestry programs without support for several years. In this study we draw on qualitative data from 26 interviews with diverse forest stakeholders in southern Illinois to analyze the effect of this recent budget impasse on private family forests and highlight key issues facing more effective management of such forests. We conducted focus group and individual interviews with private landowners with and without management plans, local professional foresters, and public forest managers selected through snowball sampling in 4 main counties of the region. We find strong demand for forestry assistance as lack of available financial assistance has dissuaded landowners from managing on their own. In response, area nonprofits have sought to fill the gap in government programs by mobilizing volunteers and providing grant-based support to assist landowners in management activities. Processes to support cooperative management among landowners on adjacent properties and with public agencies have also been used to address challenges of managing in a budget-constrained environment. However, these measures have only been partially successful. Our results showcase ongoing challenges faced by both public management agencies and private forest landowners and reinforce the need for continued funding of private forest management activities through state legislation. This study contributes to broader literature on the effects of political instability on forest management through a detailed case study of contemporary challenges in a forest-rich, but understudied domestic region.