



# Leaves OF Change



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## Research

### Project Attempts to Stem the Tide of African-American Land Loss through Active Forest Management

**THE DECLINE** in rural African-American landholdings over the past century has been dramatic, dropping from a peak of about 15 million acres in 1910 to less than 2 million today. The causes are multiple: outmigration, voluntary sales, foreclosures, and lack of access to credit and capital, as well as outright exploitation, threats, and discrimination. Another major problem has been that much of the land has been owned as heirs' property, that is, land that was passed down through generations without benefit of a written will. Under heirs' property, multiple heirs of the original landowners jointly own the family land; however, without clear title, heirs' property creates obstacles to obtaining professional forestry services, procuring loans, and participating in conservation incentive programs offered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

The problem can be traced back to Reconstruction, when African Americans first gained property rights. At that time, African Americans rarely created wills because they were denied access to, could not afford, or did not trust the legal system.

As a former procurement forester

for International Paper and the current director of sustainable forestry for the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation (CHPP) in Charleston, South Carolina, Sam Cook has witnessed firsthand the steady disappearance of African-American landholdings in the increasingly valuable coastal low country surrounding Charleston. According to Cook, the problem with passing down property without a will is that over time, as the number of heirs reaches into the dozens or even hundreds, the risk of a forced sale increases as family members



Sarah Hitcher

Center for Heirs Property Preservation forester Sam Cook shows longleaf pines on forestland owned by an African American family.

become targets for real estate developers looking to buy cheap property in coastal South Carolina. "Much of the land around Charleston was given to African-American families because it was too sandy to farm. But, later the developers found out that sand was valuable for tourism. They used this unstable form of heirs' property ownership as a tool to force the sale of family land," says Cook.

Typically a buyer purchases one family member's share in the property. They essentially join the family and become another heir/owner of the property. The buyer is then able to initiate sale of the

land with the ultimate aim of obtaining the entire property. In situations with many owners/heirs, it is unworkable to divide the land, so the court typically orders a forced sale and division of the proceeds. Legal options to counter these schemes are often limited for land-rich and cash-poor African-American families due to attorney fees, court fees, survey fees, and other fees. Predictably, family members have been unable to outbid cash-rich real estate developers, and the family loses the land.

The work by Cook and the CHPP in coastal South Carolina is part of a pilot project called the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program funded by the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, in partnership with the NRCS and the USDA Forest Service. Other pilot projects involve the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in western Alabama and the Roanoke Electrical Coop in northeastern North Carolina. The goal of the pilot projects is to stabilize African-American land ownership, increase forest health, and build economic assets across the southern Black Belt.

Clearing up ownership of heirs' property requires that heirs define or create their family tree, track down every known heir, and agree on protecting the land. As a part of the partnership with the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, SRS-4952 researchers have been conducting interviews with landowners in the pilot project regions. The researchers are finding that the process of tracking down heirs, clearing up ownership issues, and establishing title is difficult for many families, but worth it in the long run. One Alabama landowner describes this way, "We're close—now that 100 acres are owned by about 25 people, scattered in different states. Some have no interest and no thoughts of it at all, and it's important for others to keep it. Some members might have to buy out other shares, or the whole family could lose it."

Another problem is that many African-American landowners are

not actively managing the land, even with substantial existing timber resources present on the property. Cook said offers to buy timber often entice landowners to harvest and sell without a forest management plan or professional forestry assistance. He says that he worked with one family that had sold timber from its 32 acres for about \$2,000, only to discover later that it was worth tens of thousands of dollars.

The community-based organizations involved in the pilot programs assist the families with starting or improving forestry management on their properties. As of July 2015, 207 families from the three pilot project regions had received technical and financial support. Those families collectively own 21,074 acres.

The community-based organizations have also had success in moving families into active forest improvement. For example, 42 landowners from the three pilot project regions have completed forest thinning or site preparation and another 130 landowners are in the process of implementing initial forest management activities. One of the goals is to get landowners connected with the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), a cost-share program also managed by the USDA and the NRCS. One hundred and fifteen landowners have received EQIP contracts, with the total awarded directly to landowners exceeding \$1.1 million.

Alan McGregor, vice president of the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, believes that forestry represents a huge latent resource for rural development in poor communities across the South, and the pilot projects have shown the way forward to improving forest management capacity among African-American landowners. "The community organizations tap into existing networks of support in the communities and then layer on another flexible support network related to forestry in the community, providing help with legal issues, loans, participation in government cost-share programs, and forestry management,"

McGregor says.

**John Schelhas**, a research forester with SRS-4952 who led the interviewing project, says that the conversations revealed that African-American forest ownership is often centered more on the family than on economics. As one interviewee in North Carolina expressed it, "I would like to see it be kept as family land. There was a lot of sacrifice and struggle to get and keep this land. It was passed on without any liens or loans—I don't want to be part of the generation that loses it, because of the sacrifices that were given to keep it."

The interviews revealed that African-American families valued their land highly for its connection to previous generations, and there was an almost unanimous desire to pass the land on to the next generation. As one interviewee from South Carolina stated, "It was drilled into our heads, don't you ever sell your land. Never sell the land."

Schelhas says that the African-American history of landownership and access to Extension and professional forestry services is dramatically different from that of white landowners. For example, the interviewed landowners indicated broad interest in starting professional forestry and wildlife management, but unlike many white landowners, relatively few African-American landowners have formal forest management plans, and most usually manage their land with little or no professional assistance.

**Cassandra Johnson-Gaither**, a research social scientist with SRS-4952 and one of the lead researchers on the interviewing project, says that the community-based groups such as the CHPP in coastal South Carolina, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in western Alabama, and the Roanoke Electrical Coop in northeastern North Carolina were essential in making the research possible. "This is a sensitive topic and in many places people are suspicious when outsiders come in and begin asking questions about their land. The community-based groups helped us make contact and overcome many of the

barriers that typically exist in research such as this,” says Johnson-Gaither.

According to Cook, the real value of the pilot project is making landowners aware of what they have. “Most African-American landowners might harvest their timber but then do nothing with the land,” Cook says. “This program shows landowners the

value in reinvesting in their land. A land management plan can provide an ongoing revenue source rather than a one-time payout, usually below market value, for the timber.”

Not surprisingly, Cook is very proud of CHPP’s work and the progress made in educating landowners about the value of their resources. “We are helping

generations see the value beyond what they are able to see today—ensuring that the next generation has something for the future.”

For more information about this research contact John Schelhas, (706) 559-4260, [jschelhas@fs.fed.us](mailto:jschelhas@fs.fed.us).

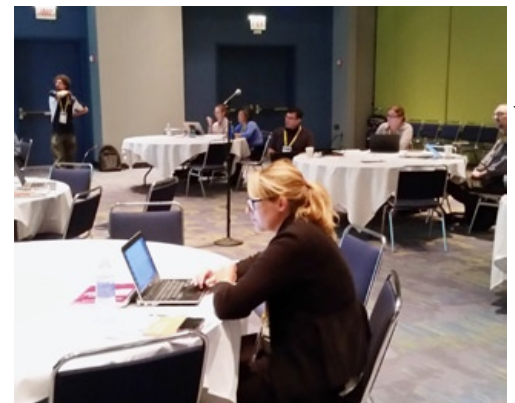
*Article by Josh McDaniel*

## Training and Outreach Activities

### 2015 WEFTEC Workshop

**ERIC KUEHLER**, technology transfer specialist with Urban Forestry South, chaired and co-presented a workshop at the Water Environment Federation’s Annual Technical Exhibition and Conference (WEFTEC) on September 26th in Chicago, IL. During the workshop several publicly available computational tools that help stormwater engineers quantify the direct and co-benefits of urban trees with respect to stormwater runoff mitigation were demonstrated. Benefits and limitations of trees in urban stormwater runoff mitigation and basic tree anatomy and physiology with regards to urban soils and infrastructure conflicts were also discussed.

Workshop presenters included Peter MacDonagh, Landscape Architect with Kestral Design Group (Co-Chair), Nick Martin, Assistant Manager of Inventory Services with Bartlett Tree Expert Company, Mike Galvin, Director of the Consulting Group with SavATree, Randy Neprash, Civil Engineer with Stantec Consulting, Ted Endreny, Research Hydrologist with State University of New York, ESF), Tom Taggart and Emily Stephan, Doctoral students at SUNY ESF in water resource and ecological engineering, and Robbie Coville, Urban Natural Resource Specialist with the Davey Institute.



Eric Kuehler, US Forest Service

WEFTEC workshop attendees try out some of the software tools that were demonstrated during the workshop.

### Kids in the Woods Team Garners Regional Partnership Award

**THE KIDS** in the Woods team was awarded the USFS Southern Research Station’s Director’s Partnership Award in recognition of outstanding and innovative approaches to partnerships with the Kids in the Woods Program at Westwood Middle School in Gainesville, FL. Kids in the Woods team partners include the USDA Forest Service (SRS-4952), University of Florida, Alachua County School District, Gainesville Parks and Recreation, and Alachua County Environmental Protection Department.

In the fall 2015, the Kids in the



**KIDS IN THE WOODS**

Woods program at Westwood Middle School in Gainesville began its third year of connecting 6th grade students with local urban forests, creeks, and wildlife. Agency partners work closely with middle school science teachers to get students out of the classroom and exploring the outdoors.

This helps them to connect with local nature, which inspires a greater curiosity, awareness and appreciation for the outdoors. Over one thousand sixth graders and five science teachers have participated in the program over the last two and a half years.

#### In Our Next Issue

We will highlight the US Forest Service’s National Technology and Science Delivery Team. This Forest Service team addresses critical urban forest technology and science delivery needs. The three main action items of this team include: (1) modernizing delivery methods; (2) engaging key stakeholders and delivery partners; and (3) streamlining information and flow of communication.

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### Upcoming Events

Date	Description	Location	Contact
February 11–13, 2016	<b>New Partners in Smart Growth</b>	Portland, OR	<a href="http://newpartners.org">newpartners.org</a>
Every 3rd Wednesday at noon (EST)	<b>i-Tree Tools Webinar Series</b>	online	<a href="http://www.unri.org/itreeworkshops/">www.unri.org/itreeworkshops/</a>
May 24–27, 2016	<b>Children &amp; Nature Network 2016 International Conference</b>	Saint Paul, MN	<a href="http://www.childrenandnature.org/connect/cnn-conference/">www.childrenandnature.org/connect/cnn-conference/</a>

Note: InterfaceSouth and Urban Forestry South are the science delivery centers associated with the USFS Southern Research Station work unit, SRS-4952: Integrating Human and Natural Systems in Urban and Urbanizing Environments ([www.srs.fs.usda.gov/humanandnaturalsystems](http://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/humanandnaturalsystems)), and the USFS Southern Region. They are collectively called the Centers for Urban and Interface Forestry.



This issue and past issues can be found online at:  
[www.interfacesouth.org/products/leaves](http://www.interfacesouth.org/products/leaves)