

ANTICIPATING THE FUTURE OF FORESTS AND USES IN THE SOUTH: IMPLICATIONS FOR FOREST MANAGEMENT

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Contemplating the future of forests can involve either the study of historical trends or the modeling of the variety of social and environmental forces that reshape forests and the services they provide. A combination of the two can be used to inform not only what the future might hold, but also where the future is least certain. Using the recently completed Southern Forest Futures Project and Forest Service Resource Planning Act Assessment as a foundation, this talk explores the potential futures of forests in the South as a series of alternative trajectories and identifies some key uncertainties. One key issue behind forest forecasts is the demand for land in other uses. These assessments indicate that a long period of forest accumulation in the United States may be reversed over the next decade as urbanization continues apace but also as returns to cropland have and are expected to grow. A declining forest area could encourage more intensification and concentration of forest management, especially in the South. The area of planted pine forests would likely expand—as it has over the past three decades—with a consolidation of output from these forests. Expanding human populations in many areas of the South lead to concerns about the ability to actively manage forests in many areas, but management consolidation provides an offsetting effect. These and other anticipated changes may indicate that southern forests are on the cusp of a period of rapid change.