

# Indiana's forests are in danger, and the threat: You

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*(Photo: Sarah Bowman/IndyStar)*

Indiana's forests are in jeopardy.

Now before pointing to the "Save Yellowwood" sign in your front yard in agreement or sighing at the gall of the so called "tree huggers" in exasperation, this discussion is not about the state's public forests.

No — rather, it's the private forests at stake. The ones surrounding the house where you live, the ones where you go four-wheeling with family, the ones where you go hunting with friends or the ones where you chop wood to feed your fires. The ones you own.

Considering that nearly 85 percent — or 4.1 million acres — of Indiana's forests are privately owned, that's worrisome.

"Right now," Brian Kruse said, "the future looks bleak."

"I always have hope things will change," said Indiana's forester with the National Resources Conservation Service. "But it will probably get more bleak before it gets better, before people want to make a change."

For years, the changes have been slow and almost undetectable. The ages of those who own the forests have inched ever closer to triple digits. As their land gets passed on to heirs, the number of woodland owners has grown and the sizes of parcels of woodlands have shrunk.

Though seemingly benign, those trends and their convergence are creating a new crop of owners with often little knowledge of how to manage the state's forests on which Hoosiers so heavily rely. Worse still, few know where to find that information or are especially interested in seeking it out.

As invasive species run rampant and hundreds of thousands of acres are expected to transfer hands in the coming years, experts fear for the future of Indiana's forests.

"Our concern is that the next generation and set of owners might not have the same ethics and focus on stewardship," said Mike Huneke, a U.S. Forest Service stewardship program manager in Indiana's region. "Their decisions impact everyone because the ability of that private forest to produce clean air and water reaches us all."

At best, invasive plants and insects will wipe out the native oak, hickory, beech and maple trees. At worst, encroaching development and valuable timber will drive forests to be cut in ways that bear unfortunate resemblance to the state's treeless landscape of 150 years past.

That forecast, however, is not written in history books yet.

Forestry and natural resource experts say there is still time for woodland owners to call on the available resources, implement sustainable management plans and take on the role of forest stewards. Now, those experts just need to figure out how to reach them.

"Private land management," Huneke told IndyStar, "is more important now than ever."

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## The perfect storm'

The face of Indiana's typical forest owner is not what it once was, said Dan Shaver with [The Nature Conservancy's Hoosier chapter](#).

Painting a picture of a farmer with leathered skin and calloused hands, Shaver said today's new or soon-to-be owners more often sport blazers that they occasionally trade in for weekend uniforms of hiking boots or camouflage pants.

"When I think about forest management on our private lands," he said, "the first thing that always comes to mind is that it's such an unsure prospect."

He has no uncertainty about the importance of forest management, which, at its simplest, is meant to maintain and improve the health, diversity and productivity of forests. This can be achieved through invasive species control, trail building, tree planting and timber harvesting, among other tools.



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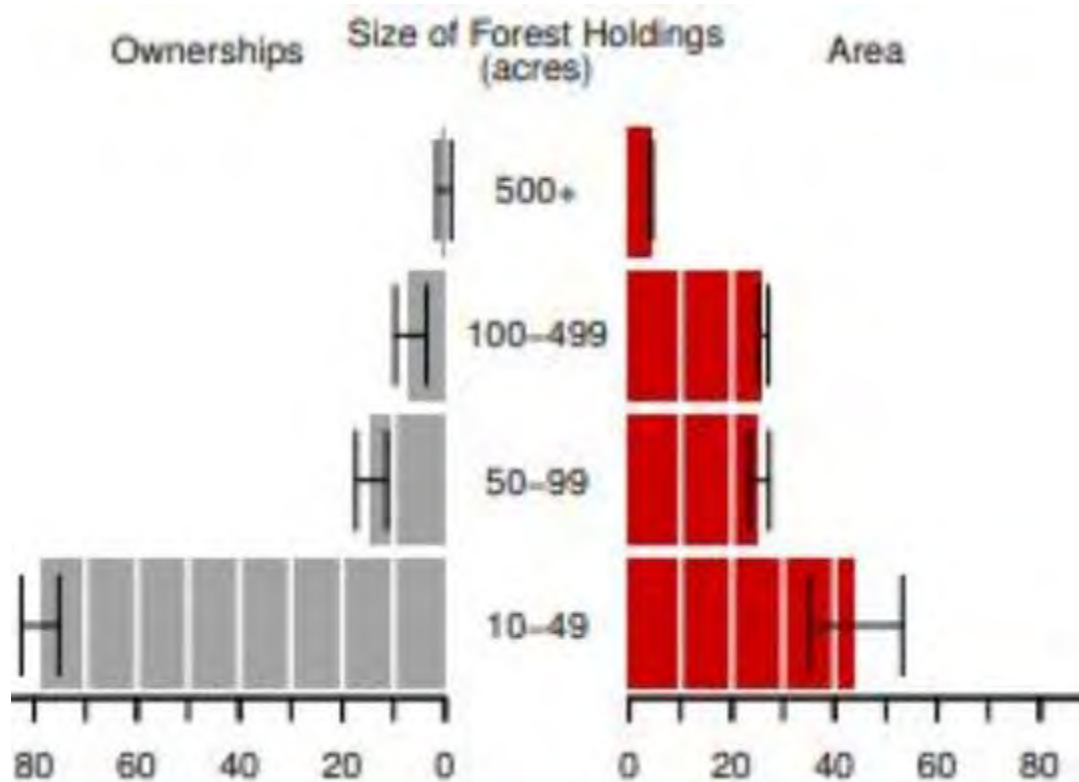
Tracks in the Yellowwood State Forest. Residents are fearful that vehicles like the ones that left these will have as much impact on the forest as the logging itself. (Photo: Emily Hopkins/IndyStar)

"But there is no guarantee who the future owner of the forest property will be," he added, "or what will happen to it."

Lenny Farlee with Purdue University could take a guess: Parcelization.

Otherwise known as fragmentation, this trend involves the continual dissection into smaller and smaller parcels. Properties that used to be nearly 100 acres or more may now be made up of 10 smaller tracts.

A [national survey from the U.S. Forest Service](#) shows Indiana's average parcel size is roughly 21 acres, according to the 2016 report, the most recent published data. That size falls short of many Midwestern neighbors, including Illinois and Kentucky at nearly 27 acres each and Michigan at more than 30 acres. Further still, more than half of Indiana's owners have parcels with fewer than 10 acres.



Over time, the parcel size of Indiana's privately owned woodlands has continued to shrink. The average parcel size in Indiana is around 20 acres, but many Hoosiers own parcels that are less than 10 acres (not included in this graphic). (Photo: U.S. Forest Service)

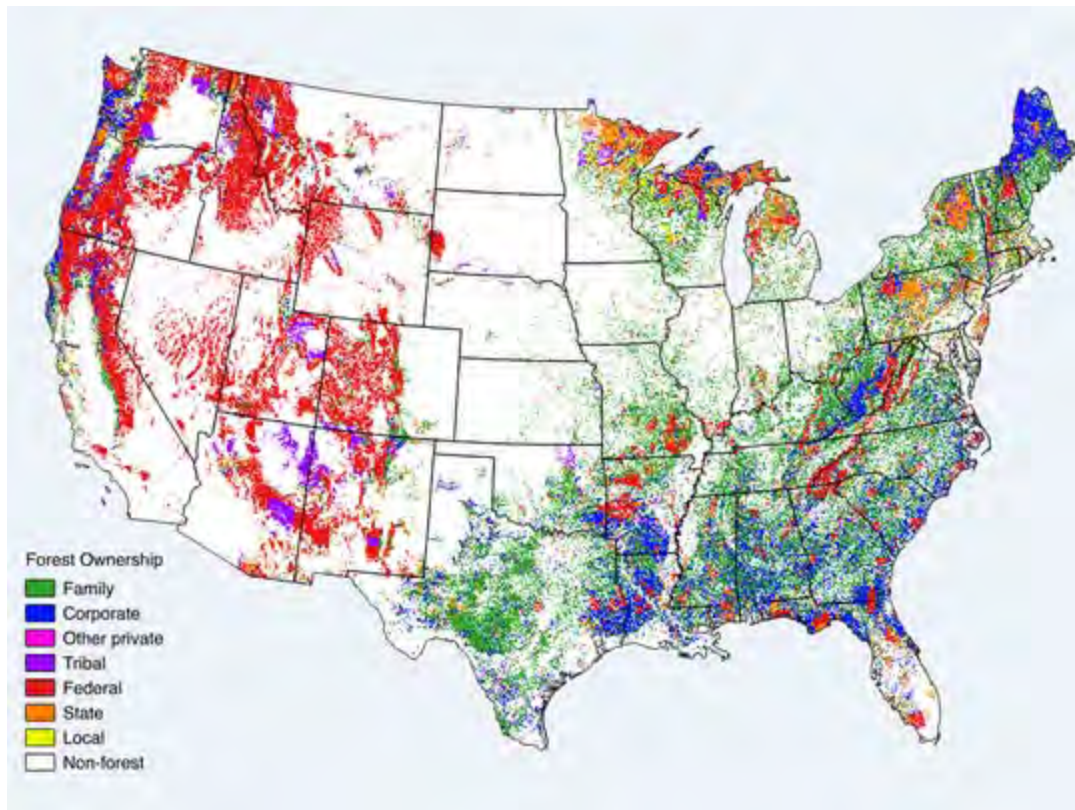
Dwindling parcel sizes begets a deteriorating ability to do any sort of active work or forest management, Farlee said. Work to control an invasive species on one property, for example, can be completely derailed if the invader is left untamed to encroach from a neighbor's land.

Parcelization creates a patchwork system of forests that are seemingly impossible to weave together in any distinguishable pattern. In other words, according to Liz Jackson, the health of forests as a whole suffers.

"Beyond that," said the executive director of [Indiana's Forest and Woodland Owners Association](#), "one of the bigger challenges is there are more landowners to reach, meet and teach."

As forest parcels are subdivided, more people are buying up their patch of paradise.

In the last 10 years, the number of landowners across the U.S. has grown by more than 1 million, according to the National Woodland Owner Survey. Indiana is no exception, with nearly 193,000 private forest ownerships currently across the state.



A variety of groups own forest lands across the United States, including both federal and state governments as well as private individuals or local municipalities. This map from the U.S. Forest Service shows that the majority of land on along the eastern half of the country, including in Indiana, is owned privately. (Photo: U.S. Forest Service)

Still, these two trends — parcelization and ownership growth — are not the biggest problem facing Indiana's forests, according to Huneke with the [Forest Service](#). It's current owners' graying hair and wrinkling skin.

More than [half of forest owners in the state are over 55 years old](#) and nearly a quarter are over 65. While some land has already been passed on, apparent by the ongoing fragmentation, it's likely only the beginning. Such demographics suggest a massive upcoming intergenerational transfer of lands, the national forester said, creating the "perfect storm."

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Consulting forester Tom Crowe has seen the writing on the bark.

"A lot of the landowners we are working with are older, and the land will pass from one generation to the next," said Crowe, whose company Crowe Forest Management works with over 100 different landowners. "But often the kids don't know what to do, and that's when poor decisions are made."

Those decisions include subdividing and selling the land or cutting all the trees at the promise of money in their pockets, the 35-year expert said.

Crowe's own forest suffered that exact fate before he purchased it. His woods had been in one family for 100 years, passing from the owner to his son and ultimately his grandson, a judge in Chicago. But being a state, and century, removed made a logger's offer to cut the woods all the more enticing — that is, until, all the best trees had been cut and only the worst left behind.

It's been 30 years since that cut, Crowe said, with decades still to go before it's a healthy forest once again.

"He knew the law but didn't know trees and didn't know where to go to get advice, so he made a decision," the forester said. "Afterwards, he realized he made the wrong one."

## 'Granny needs a new hip'

Stories such as Crowe's are too often told, said Farlee, the Purdue forester and hardwood specialist.

Robert Woodling of Allen County is an exception. When the landowner bought his first 20 acres in 1980, his mantra was that he would never cut a single tree. But a decision to enroll his woodlands in a state conservation program changed that course dramatically.

After some research and a few seminars, Woodling quickly concluded that to care for a forest extended well beyond his Boy Scouts knowledge.

"I realized I needed to learn something, that knowledge of this stuff was not innate," he said. "You have so many landowners who start out like me: well-intentioned but misinformed."

It is essential forest owners bring in someone who has made this his or her career, Woodling said, which he did as a new landowner.

"Let's say you buy a car, something you've wanted for a long time. You may not delve into auto mechanics because of it," Woodling explained, "but you certainly would get one's opinion on how to care for it."

Many individuals apply that same diligence, conducting research and asking opinions, before seeing a doctor or hiring a lawyer. But in the case of forest management, owners leave themselves vulnerable.

That possibility often comes as a knock on the door, or a Sunday afternoon call or a postcard in the mailbox. On the other end is usually a logger offering money to cut your trees in exchange for cash that day.

Jackson said the Indiana Forest Owners Association receives numerous complaints from landowners caught in this situation. What started as a handshake with little in writing often ends in devastating disappointment and a depleted forest.



Trees marked by the Department of Natural Resources in the Yellowwood State Forest Back Country Area. (Photo: Indiana Forest Alliance)

People all too frequently sell their timber without knowing its worth or getting the advice they need, Huneke said.

"When granny needs a new hip or we need to pay a college tuition," he said, "then managing the forest becomes driven by finances instead of stewardship driving our forest decisions."

Those situations are when owners sees their forests high-graded: removing all the best, high grade, timber and leaving the inferior trees behind. Imagine if a gardener picked all the prettiest flowers and left only the undesirable weeds to regenerate.

Not all timber buyers use such aggressive tactics, said Steve Morgan, a contractor with Tiger Hill Sawmill. While he said he always tries to mark trees for a sustainable harvest — primarily to be able to return for another cut in 15 years — he acknowledged timber buyers will be inclined to mark anything that makes them money.

Which is why Morgan believes that foresters provide better management than a logger would.

"Proper management is best for everyone," he said, "but that's up to the landowner."



## 'Overwhelmed and overworked'

When left to the landowner, many take the approach of no management at all.

Whether out of ignorance, ease or a belief that the forests should be left alone, all are equally problematic for Jackson. Such inaction does nothing to curb the [invasive species that are taking over](#) the state's woodlands and [threatening the native plants](#) that make up the fabric of Indiana's forests.

And still, that is what the majority of landowners do.

So few people — roughly 20 percent of owners — have sought advice from a forester or other expert. Fewer still — only about 8 percent — have put a management plan in place for their forest land. Alternatively, nearly 65 percent of owners — holding more than half of the state's woodlands — have taken no action at all, according to U.S. Forest Service data.



The majority of private woodland owners in Indiana have taken no action at all for the management of their forests, which concerns many forestry experts and officials. Only about 8 percent of owners have a management plan and only 20 percent have sought advice from a forestry official. (Photo: U.S. Forest Service)

"I think a lot of people have the opinion that the best thing to do for woods is to leave them alone and let nature take its course, a no management opinion," said Kruse with the USDA's conservation arm. "But we aren't living in a natural habitat anymore, we've invaded mother nature and have to manage for that."

But even if private landowners made the decision to seek guidance on management, there's a problem: Many foresters — especially those in the Department of Natural Resource's Division of Forestry — are overwhelmed and overworked. A shrinking budget over the years has left the agency short-staffed, Kruse said. He knows the feeling well being the Conservation Service's only forester in Indiana.

Just 18 DNR district foresters [oversee both public and private forest lands across the state's 92 counties](#). Indiana's 4.1 million acres of private forests alone would completely cover Marion County and 16 neighboring central Indiana counties.



**Figure 2.—Private (■) and public (■) forest land**

In Indiana, the majority of forest land -- at nearly 85 percent -- is owned privately. The state owns less than 1 million acres, while private owners hold more than 4 million acres of Indiana woodlands. (Photo: U.S. Forest Service)

"In the DNR, the budget cuts really have taken a big toll on getting the word out to private landowners," Kruse said, "where other states have taxes or programs to supplement that."

Having worked in both Missouri and Illinois, he explained they have funding structures to provide for various forest management and conservation efforts. Without such systems in Indiana, the USDA funds most of the assistance for landowners through cost-share programs.

Though it doesn't provide funding, Indiana's [Classified Forest and Wildlands program](#), created in 1921, provides property tax incentives to retain and manage forest lands. Based on a [2014 program report](#), roughly 750,000 acres — less than 20 percent of all private lands — across 15,000 owners were enrolled in the program.

DNR officials did not respond to the Star's interview requests.

Still, in the Division of Forestry's [Strategic Direction Plan](#), officials set continued program growth as a crucial goal. The primary reason: Enrollment requires owners work with their district foresters to implement a management plan for their woodlands.

"Forest owners often cite access to forestry information as a limiting factor in their ability and willingness to undertake forest conservation projects on their land," officials wrote in the 2015-2019 plan.

## 'Not just about you'

The obvious solution: More funding and more foresters are needed to fill the gaps. Not anticipating such an influx, some organizations are turning to social media or field day workshops to inform landowners of the resources available.

Among them, DNR's foresters and CFW program top the list. Forest owners also can contact a consulting forester or the Indiana Forest and Woodland Owners Association. Other programs include those at the [Natural Resource Conservation Service](#) as well as The Nature Conservancy's [Forest Bank](#), which helps manage forests for owners over 30-year periods.

At bare minimum, experts encourage owners to pick up the phone and ring the "[Call Before You Cut](#)" hotline.

"The consequences of bad forest management for the forest and Hoosiers are widespread and long term," Shaver said. "Which is why focusing on private forest lands

and making sure they are managed properly and stay as healthy as possible is beyond important for Indiana right now."

The health of Indiana's forests is intrinsically tied to the health of its people. Nicknamed by one forester as the "earth's lungs," private woodlands provide clean air, clean water and wildlife habitat, among other numerous benefits.



**Jeff Stant of the Indiana Forest Alliance and scientist Leslie Bishop hike a section of Yellowwood forest on Aug. 23, 2017. (Photo: Matthew Tully)**

As a landowner himself, Woodling doesn't have the perfect solution for how to reach his fellow owners. They should want to pay attention, he said, whether to learn how to get the greatest return on their investment or to prevent regulation of private forests by managing their lands voluntarily.

Still, he hopes one other reason will motivate Hoosiers to step up and rescue Indiana's forests from their bleak future.

"There is a responsibility that comes with owning land, especially forestland, and a lot of people don't understand that," Woodling said. "Understand that by your actions, you will affect not just your property and yourself, but society and the environment outside your boundaries."

"It might be your private forest," he said "but it's not just about you."

*Call IndyStar reporter Sarah Bowman at (317) 444-6129. Follow her on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#): @IndyStarSarah. IndyStar's environmental reporting project is made possible through the generous support of the nonprofit Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust.*