

News Release

*USDA Forest Service Southern Region
1720 Peachtree Street N.W.
Atlanta, Ga. 30367
(404) 347-7226*

For Immediate Release

**Contact: John Greis (404) 347-7223
or Angela Coleman, (404) 347-7226**

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Federal Agencies Team Up to Gauge Sustainability of South's Forest Resources

ATLANTA, GA-- As the demand for Southern forest products and amenities continues to mount, leaders from federal and state agencies across the Southeast have launched a joint study aimed at measuring whether the South's forests can continue to meet growing resource demands for the long term.

Calling it a study to evaluate the status of southern forests, officials from the USDA Forest Service, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the Tennessee Valley Authority and individual state forestry agencies have initiated a two-year examination of the southern landscape. It will provide public land overseers and private landowners a firm foundation of information they will need to make decisions on how to address pressures facing the South's forests. The USDA

Forest Service is leading the endeavor. The project officially got under way in March. It is expected to conclude by 2001.

"Now is the right time to undertake this study," said Forest Service Specialist John Greis, team leader. "With the heightened demands on southern forest resources, there are perceptions that their sustainability is at risk. In this study, we want to evaluate that perception and determine what the forest conditions really are."

"Sustainability is a very critical issue for both public and private lands in the South," said Elizabeth Estill, Regional Forester for the USDA Forest Service Southern Region. "The South has become the major supplier of forest resources for much of this country. We want to find out if these lands will be able to maintain that role. With this joint effort, we have the technical expertise to undertake such a comprehensive task. This will give us a great bench mark of information that will help all of us in future decision making, be it on private or federal land."

"The information gained from this sustainability study should provide a sound technical basis for improved protection of water quality and other sensitive natural resources," said Regional Administrator John H. Hankinson Jr., Environmental Protection Agency.

"Southern forests provide essential habitat and food for a large percentage of the region's native wildlife resources," said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Regional Director Sam Hamilton. "It is important the public and private forest managers work cooperatively to ensure future generations can enjoy the same forest amenities--both wood products and biological diversity--that we do today."

The Southern Research Station of the Forest Service will also lend direct support to the effort. "Sustainability and productivity of the forestry resources in the South are fundamental to the mission of the Southern Research Station," said Director Peter Roussopoulos. "We look forward to providing data and analytical tools to support this effort. We also expect the assessment will help determine research needs of the future."

For the study, the term sustainability is defined as the ability to manage private and public forests to meet the needs of the public today, without compromising the future generations' ability to meet their own needs, Greis said.

The comprehensive study will scrutinize sustainability, productivity and overall ecological diversity of natural resources on forested landscapes. It will include a look at the full array of forest products and service demands, as well as the current and probable supply of resources. The study will, for example, scrutinize harvesting trends for a variety of products, including sawtimber, pulp and paper. It will also examine the rate of conversion of forests to other land uses. The ecological diversity portion of the project includes a look at biological organisms and their habitats.

Specialists will conduct the study in two phases or tiers. The first will evaluate resources region wide. The second will focus on one or more smaller areas where sustainability either appears to be in question or demands further attention. These smaller evaluations could be a state, multi-county, or ecological region.

Agency leaders add, however, the study will not make judgements or decisions about future forest uses nor will it recommend mechanisms for managing resource extractions or services.

"Our goal," said Greis, "is to provide the best and most accurate set of data on which leaders, land managers and landowners can base decisions. There is so much conflicting information out there right now. We believe by providing decision makers accurate information, they will be better prepared to manage and protect the forests of this region."

The team also plans to conduct a round of public involvement activities aimed at including citizens, state leaders, local officials and other interested groups input for the study.

"This is a very critical project for forest leaders," said Estill. "I believe this information will provide a solid start in helping us address some of the key issues that will soon be ripe for future decision-making. We will use every available resource to obtain the data--that includes the citizens who live here."

The study area traverses the Southeast. It includes forests in Alabama, Georgia, Arkansas, Kentucky, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, Texas and Oklahoma.

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For further information on the study, please contact: Team Leader John Greis (404) 347-7223. Other Agency Contacts: USDA Forest Service, Angela Coleman (404) 347-7226; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Vickie Boatwright (404) 679-7287; Environmental Protection Agency, Carl Terry (404) 562-8325, Tennessee Valley Authority, Barbara Martocci, (423) 632-8632.