

# Florida's Forest Stewardship Program: An Opportunity to Manage Your Land for Now and the Future<sup>1</sup>

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This publication introduces interested landowners and members of the public to the **Forest Stewardship Program**, a federal program that is managed by the USDA Forest Service, which provides funding to state forest services, including the Florida Forest Service, to implement the program. Stewardship is the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care. The goals of the Forest Stewardship Program are to encourage nonindustrial private forest landowners to manage for multiple natural resources (e.g., timber, wildlife, recreation, ecosystem services), increase public awareness of the importance and value of Florida's forestlands to the economy and environment, and improve cooperation among natural resource agencies and organizations to meet Florida's forest resource conservation and management needs and opportunities.

The program is designed to help landowners manage their forest land for a variety of forest and natural resource objectives. In Florida, nearly 63% of the forest land (around 10.75 million acres) is owned by private individuals and families (USDA Forest Service 2020). The size of individual holdings ranges from a single acre to thousands of acres. They are managed for a variety of reasons to include:

- Generating income from commodities such as timber, pine straw, palmetto berries, and hunt leases

- Providing habitat for wildlife
- Grazing for cattle and other livestock
- Recreation—hunting, fishing, horseback riding, hiking, bird watching
- Supporting a sustainable environment—groundwater recharge, clean air, carbon sequestration

## Who is eligible to participate?

Any private forest landowner in Florida with a minimum of 10 acres and an interest in using the stewardship principles can participate in the Florida Forest Stewardship Program. In cases where the ownership is less than 10 acres, it is possible to join with neighbors to combine holdings to meet acreage requirements.

## What the Florida Forest Stewardship Program Can Do for You

The Forest Stewardship Program is based upon the strategy of multiple-use land management. Once enrolled in the program, the forest landowner will meet with a team of resource professionals to review their management goals and objectives. With the help of these professionals, a landowner can develop a 10-year management plan designed

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to increase their forestland's value for any combination of objectives including timber production, wildlife habitat, hunting leases, recreation, aesthetics, livestock grazing, and soil and water conservation. Each plan is tailored to meet the landowner's priorities while maintaining the ecological diversity of the forest.



Figure 1. Forest Stewards are landowners who are managing their land according to a written plan for long-term environmental, economic, and social benefits.

Credits: Cathy Hardin, Florida Forest Service

## Forest Stewardship Program Benefits to Landowners

The Forest Stewardship Program encourages landowners to manage their land in a sustainable manner that provides multiple-resource benefits. Landowners who manage their land according to the multiple-resource principal deserve recognition for leading the community in good forest stewardship. Landowners who have completed some of the practices in their plan can be certified as forest stewards and be rewarded with a plaque and a sign to post on their land (Figures 1 and 2)

Benefits of being involved in the Forest Stewardship Program include:

- invitations to farm tours, workshops, and other educational events offered by the University of Florida and other partners,
- connection to a growing network of landowners, foresters, Extension and natural resource professionals,

- documented evidence of active forest management for greenbelt ad valorem tax assessment,
- a management plan to help with qualification for cost-share assistance,
- increased long-term productivity of the land,
- increased economic opportunities and diversification of the timberland investment portfolio,
- public recognition as a leader in wise natural resource management,
- integrated technical assistance from natural resource agencies,
- improved skills in forestland management,
- the satisfaction of contributing positively to the nation's environmental health and economic well-being, and
- improved public perception of private landowners as true forest stewards.

The good example set by forest stewards will demonstrate the benefits of multiple-resource management to the public; and other landowners will be encouraged to practice forest stewardship.

Candidates for forest stewardship are private forest landowners who:

- do not, at present, actively manage their land but would like assistance in developing a management plan according to the stewardship concept,
- are engaged in single-resource management of their land, such as timber production, and are interested in increasing income opportunities by diversifying their activities, or
- are currently managing their land for multiple resources and deserve recognition.

## History and Organization of the Forest Stewardship Program

The Forest Stewardship Program was developed and initiated in the early 1990s by the National Association of State Foresters and funded by the USDA Forest Service. Each state operates its own tailor-made program to meet specific needs of landowners and their forests. In Florida, five agencies and organizations work together to implement the program: the Florida Forest Service (FFS), the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Cooperative Extension Service (UF/IFAS CES), the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS),

and the Florida Sustainable Forestry Initiative Implementation Committee. Private natural resource consultants also participate in program operation.

## How to Enroll in the Program

Interested landowners can contact their local county forester office of the Florida Forest Service (please see the contact information listed at the end of this publication) and ask to have a forest stewardship plan prepared for their property. The forester will answer any additional questions about the program and ask the landowner to complete a Forest Stewardship Program application. Once the application is completed and returned to the Florida Forest Service, a meeting will be scheduled between the landowner and the appropriate resource professionals to begin developing a plan. The landowner will be enrolled in the program when he or she signs the approved forest stewardship plan, thereby agreeing to implement the plan as time and resources allow.

For more information about what is in a management plan see: <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/FR126>

For details and an application for the Forest Service's Forest Stewardship Program see: <https://www.fdacs.gov/Forest-Wildfire/For-Landowners/Programs-for-Landowners/Forest-Stewardship-Program>

To find out more about how to become a forest steward and connect to available resources, contact:

- your Florida Forest Service county forester, directory online at <https://www.fdacs.gov/Forest-Wildfire/Our-Forests/Florida-Forest-Service-Office-Locations/County-Foresters>,
- Florida Forest Service conservation programs manager in Tallahassee, (850) 545-6194
- or the UF/IFAS School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatics Sciences Extension program manager, (352) 846-2375.

## Reference

USDA Forest Service. 2020. Forests of Florida, 2017. Resource Update FS-255. Asheville, NC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 2p. <https://doi.org/10.2737/FS-RU-255>

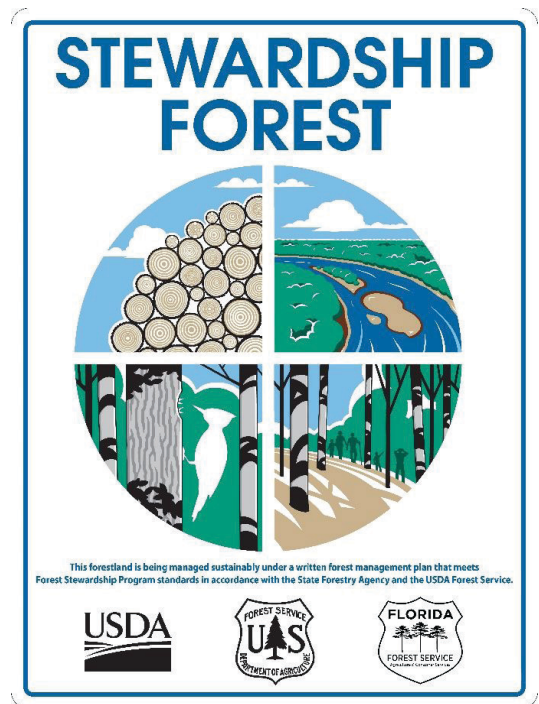


Figure 2. Landowners who have followed the recommendations in their forest stewardship plan and who have practiced good forest management can post the Stewardship Forest sign on their property. Credits: USDA Forest Service