

## **Absentee Forest Landowners in Virginia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Nonindustrial private forest landowner demographics have changed in Virginia, with farmer-owned forestland decreasing and "other individuals" forestland ownership increasing. Forestry community leaders are concerned that the percentage of absentee forest landowners has increased and that these landowners may be more difficult to reach with forest management information and assistance than resident forest landowners. To determine the current percentage of absentee forest landowners in Virginia, forest ownership was sampled in six counties. The authors concluded that approximately 16 percent of Virginia's nonindustrial private forest landowners are considered absentee, and previous studies indicate that absentee landowners (as a group) may be more likely than resident landowners to actively seek professional forestry information and assistance.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Nonindustrial private forest landowners (NIPF's) own 77 percent of Virginia's 15.4 million acres of timberland. Stewardship of these lands is critical to the long-term sustainability of Virginia's forest resource. Providing forest management information, education, and assistance to Virginia's NIPF's is key to improving the health and productivity of these timberlands.

Private forest landowner demographics have changed in Virginia. From 1977 to 1992, farmer-owner timberland decreased by 41 percent, while forestland owned by other individuals increased by 28 percent, and timberland owned by corporations that do not manufacture forest products increased by 30 percent (USDA Forest Service, 1992). There has been a growing concern among forestry leaders in Virginia that many of these other individuals may be "absentee" forest landowners who do not reside on or near their forestland and who may be more difficult to reach with forest management information or assistance than the traditional farmer or resident landowner. Unfortunately, USDA Forest Survey data do not identify absentee landowners as a separate group.

Thus, this study was undertaken to determine the current percentage of absentee nonindustrial private forest landowners in Virginia.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Two recent studies provided some information on absentee forest landowners in Virginia. Sandra Hodge (1993) mailed survey questionnaires to 1,206 NIPF's randomly chosen from the tax rolls in six Virginia counties. The primary purpose of this survey questionnaire was to determine the landowner's knowledge of forestry and forest management. Response rate was 52 percent. In the survey, landowners were asked if they lived more than 50 miles from the tract of timberland used to identify them for the survey. Thirty-two percent responded that they did. However,

it should be noted that some of these respondents may have owned additional timberland (multiple-tract owners) not included in the question that may (or may not) have been located within 50 miles of their residence.

Tom Birch (1995), of the USDA Forest Service, surveyed 313 Virginia NIPF's as part of a larger nationwide study. Birch used Forest Survey inventory points to identify sample NIPF landowners across Virginia. Birch mailed questionnaires, followed by personal visits from forestry agency personnel, to landowners who failed to respond initially. In his survey, Birch asked landowners if they resided less than 50 miles from any tract of timberland that they owned. Using this methodology, Birch estimates that 43,500 NIPF landowners, approximately 14.5 percent of Virginia's estimated 300,000 NIPF's, can be classified as absentee. Birch also found that 31 percent of his respondents owned more than one tract of forestland.

Both Hodge and Birch used a definition for absentee landowner as one who lives more than 50 miles from his or her forest ownership. Narrower definitions have been used in previous studies, including: (1) a landowner who does not permanently reside on their tract of forestland ownership, and (2) a landowner who does not reside in the same county in which their forestland is located. Of these three definitions, it could be argued that the 50-mile definition is most appropriate for this study, since an NIPF landowner living more than 50 miles away from his or her timberland may be less likely to be aware of local forestry programs or educational opportunities. Also, a landowner may not reside directly on the property or even in the same county but could still live only a few miles from the tract and not be absent from the local area.

Earlier NIPF landowner studies providing absentee landowner information were conducted in other states. Birch (1978) reported 82 percent of NIPF landowners in the South resided in the same county as their forest ownership. Kingsley and Birch (1978) found that 11 percent of Maryland's NIPF landowners lived more than 50 miles from their timberland. Birch and Powell (1978) found that only 3 percent of Kentucky's NIPF landowners lived more than 50 miles from their forest ownership.

A recent study in Wisconsin provides information that is of particular interest to this study. Morgan and Martin (1995) found that absentee forest landowners, defined as those who did not reside in the same county as their timberland, were twice as likely to respond to a mail offer to provide forest management information as resident owners. In the same study, non-resident landowners were also twice as likely to request direct contact with a professional forester.

#### STUDY METHODS

Forestland ownership data were gathered through a sampling procedure. Six representative Virginia counties were chosen for the sample (Figure 1). Two were in the mountains (Patrick and Rockbridge), two were in the piedmont (Charlotte and Spotsylvania), and two were in the coastal plain (Richmond and Greenville). For each county, a sampling grid was superimposed over the Virginia Department of Transportation county road map. Grid parameters were set to achieve 60-80 sample points per county. After the sample points were marked on the county road map, each point was precisely located on an aerial photograph in the local USDA Consolidated Farm Services (CFS) office. CFS agency personnel had previously delineated ownership boundaries on these aerial photos. Thus, ownership of the

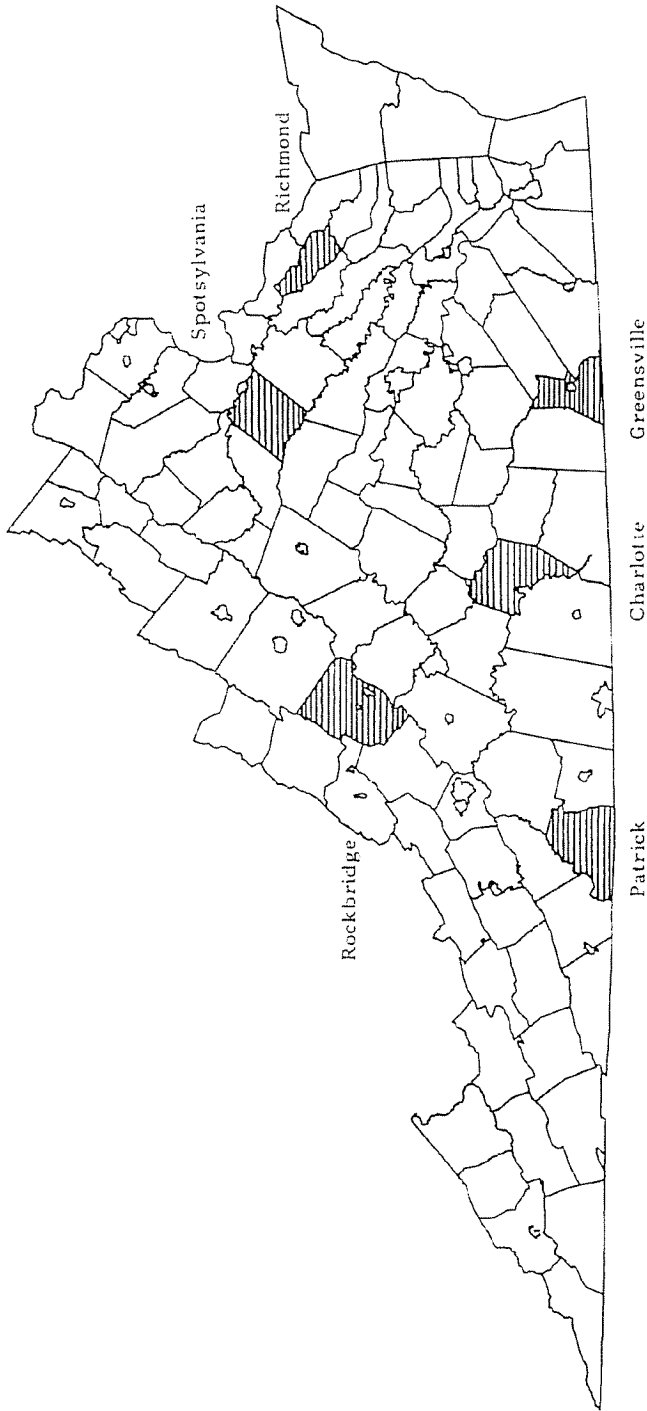


FIGURE 1. Virginia Counties chosen for absentee NIPF landowner sample.

TABLE 1. Percentage of absentee NIPF landowners in six Virginia counties.

County	(n)	% > 50 Miles	% Out of County
Charlotte	54	15	30
Greensville	55	18	24
Patrick	46	20	28
Richmond	65	12	21
Rockbridge	50	14	18
Spotsylvania	60	20	25
All counties	330	16*	25**

\* 95% confidence interval = 12 - 20%  
\*\*95% confidence interval = 21 - 29%

property on which the sample point fell could be determined. If the ownership contained 10 or more acres of forestland, the residence address of the owner was determined from agency records. If the sample point fell on an ownership with less than 10 acres of forestland, or the property owner was other than a nonindustrial private landowner, (for example, a forest industry firm or public agency) the data point was not included in the study. A comparison of the geographic location of the tract with the owner's residence address made it possible to determine whether or not the owner lived more than 50 miles from the timberland or resided in the same county as the timberland he or she owned.

RESULTS

The six-county sampling procedure generated 330 sample points that fell on NIPF landowner tracts. The results can be seen in Table 1. Using the 50-mile definition, 53 landowners, or 16 percent, were determined to be "absentee." Re-defining an absentee landowner as one who does not live in the same county as his or her timberland, the percentage increases to 25 percent. Individual counties ranged from 12 percent absentee in Richmond County to 20 percent in Spotsylvania and Patrick counties.

Examination of the residence addresses of the 53 sample absentee landowners in the study revealed that 32, or 60 percent, lived within the major metropolitan area of Richmond, Washington, DC, Norfolk/Hampton roads, or Tri-Cities (Greensboro, Winston-Salem, High Point).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study (16 percent absentee) are similar to the results of Birch's 1995 landowner survey (14 percent absentee). This is in contrast to Hodge's 1993 study (32 percent absentee). We conclude that the 14-16 percent estimate is supported by stronger data. Our six-county survey methodology was based on 330 randomly chosen sample points and did not depend on a voluntary questionnaire response. Birch's survey methodology, while dependent upon a questionnaire, used a personal

hand-delivery system to assure a near 100 percent response rate. Hodge's study depended on a voluntary response to a complex and lengthy questionnaire and achieved a respectable 52 percent response rate. Her study results may also indicate that absentee NIPF landowners are more likely to respond to a mail survey concerning their forestland than resident NIPF landowners.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Is there an absentee forest landowner problem in Virginia? The results of this study indicate that there is not. While the number of absentee NIPF landowners may have increased during the past two decades, they still account for less than 20 percent of the current total NIPF landowner population. Additionally, other studies indicate that, as a group, they are perhaps more likely than resident NIPF landowners to seek professional forestry information and assistance. Many of the absentee landowners live within the major metropolitan areas of the state. Making them aware of the availability of forestry information and sources of professional assistance through appropriate media sources should result in improved forest stewardship for these lands.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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- Morgan, C.D. and A.J. Martin. 1995. Direct mail—an effective way to educate woodland owners. University of Wisconsin-Madison, Department of Forestry Research Notes No. 280. 4pp. Figure 1. Virginia counties chosen for absentee NIPF landowner sample.

