



MISSISSIPPI

Forest and Woodland Certification Outreach for Mississippi Farms

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Project Introduction

Expended Amount: \$28,560

Many farms and other rural properties in Mississippi contain unmanaged woodlands that, in their current state, are unable to fully realize their economic and environmental potential. This project presented woodland certification (e.g., American Tree Farm System, Sustainable Forestry Initiative, Forest Stewardship Council) as a management tool landowners can use to increase income potential as well as mitigate production, marketing, financial and environmental risks. Farmers have multiple mechanisms for mitigating risks, but woodland management and certification may be overlooked as options. This is unfortunate given certification's growing importance to the wood products industry and increasing significance to emerging environmental services markets (e.g., carbon sequestration).

Project Participants

Utilizing Mississippi Farm Bureau membership lists, this project targeted active farmers and ranchers with uncertified woodlots; however, it was also relevant to non-farm forest landowners, owners desiring to reforest their property and extension agents (many of whom are unaware of woodland certification). The need for certified forests is growing as markets expand to include biomass and ecosystem products, and consumers increasingly demand to know the source of their purchases. In addition, evaluations revealed marketing timber, best management practices and thinning – all aspects of certification – were critically needed educational topics. Finally, producer demand is reflected in conversations with landowners and professionals suggesting interest has increased as forest products companies have implemented procurement policies emphasizing certification. Importantly, Mississippi State University Forestry Extension has observed limited ability of face-to-face programs about

woodland certification to reach a broader audience, including farmers, ranchers and absentee forest landowners. A face-to-face approach does not adequately satisfy as a response mechanism for ongoing emails, phone calls and other communications regarding certification, as face-to-face programs are not always available.

Project Area

Project activities took place across Mississippi. The web guide can be accessed and used across the Southeast. Webinars and interactive video were broadcast statewide. Face-to-face workshops involving mapping and management planning took place in Harrison, Montgomery and Madison Counties.

Project Outcomes

In total, 208 individuals participated in the programs. Of the 198 who completed pre- and post-evaluations, 71 classified themselves as woodland owners, 32 were farmer/ranchers and 95 classified themselves as "other" (including Extension agents). Overall, the webinars were most highly attended, particularly by absentee landowners. Participants indicated they owned and managed 36,006 acres. Ninety-seven percent of participants rated the programs as very useful. In response to a question asking if the workshop will help earn more money from managing woodland resources, 92 answered positively and estimated an aggregate total savings and/or income of \$3,479,225.

An index assessing change in knowledge for certification and its benefits indicated the following increases in knowledge: 55% about woodland certification systems, 54% about resources for practicing sustainable forestry, 49% related to water resources management, 54% related to using certification to improve forest health, and 53% about markets for certified forest products. In response to a question asking if the participant intended to implement

SRME306FR

Best Management Practices, 56% responded affirmatively. In response to a question asking if the participants intended to contact a forester about certification, 56% responded affirmatively. A follow-up survey conducted about eight months after the programs indicated nearly 90% had contacted a professional forester about conducting a timber cruise, 33% had started but not completed a timber cruise, 3% had completed a timber cruise, 66% said they talked with a forester about completing the forest management plan they started in the workshops, 100% had talked with a forester about timber sales, and 50% had talked to a forester about certification. During the programs, participants learned that management planning and certification could lead to other financial and technical assistance opportunities. A final significant outcome is that the project provided the basis for a funded educational program addressing woodland management strategies for climate change/extreme weather adaptation. Product developed by this project: Web Guide – “Woodland Certification in Mississippi,” <http://woodlandcert.msucare.com>

Outputs of this project included Internet webinars, interactive video and face-to-face workshops; however, this project's primary output was an on-line web guide about integrated forest-farm management, agricultural risks and woodland certification. The web guide was designed to bring together many aspects of sustainable woodland management and certification in one clearinghouse of information. Because certification information frequently changes, the web guide will be updated periodically similar to other Extension publications. A final important behavioral OUTCOME was participants initiating woodland stewardship planning and/or certification processes. We will build on these materials to provide future live webinars and regular programming opportunities for producers.

Quotes

“Until I watched this webinar I was concerned that forest certification would be used as another state taxation. My concerns were alleviated and I am very interested in the next steps toward certifying my trees.”

John Brown, farmer and forest owner, Lowndes County, MS (from webinar evaluation, 2/21/14)

“We want to look into growing non-traditional forest products. We also want to add recreation goals to our management plan.”

Judith and Mac Snyder, Winona, MS (3/27/14)

“How do you plan to use the information presented today? I will implement best management practices and submit my application for certification.”

Susan Wilson, Winona, MS (3/27/14)

“Thank you for the webinar. This really made me think about [my land] in a different way.”

Mike Anderson (webinar, 2/26/14)

“The programs really had an impact on me and my family. We contacted a forester immediately after the workshop.”

Jeremy Adams (follow-up survey, 11/1/14)

Project Success Story

Several months after attending a workshop on woodland certification and management planning, project personnel interviewed Mr. Wilson who owns a small cattle operation and 87 acres of hardwood and pine timber in north-west Mississippi. The land has been in the family for generations and is very special to him. However, like many landowners in the area, he is concerned that the sprawl of metro Memphis may jeopardize the land staying with the family. Only one of his three children shows an interest in managing the family land. Mr. Wilson attended an SRMEC-sponsored woodland certification workshop. He thought certification might open new doors of opportunity for him and his heirs by providing a better way of marketing his woodland resources for timber and hunting and were a way he and his son could prioritize their objectives. Mr. Wilson learned about various certification programs as well as the purpose and components of a management plan. Certification and management planning helped alleviate estate planning and succession concerns by placing the landowner's objectives in writing. Certification is a free market enterprise that is increasingly demanded by the forest industry.

He learned that recreation lessees would help care for his resources, even helping to apply periodic prescribed burns and creating food plots. This type of management would fit well into his overall land and timber management objectives. On his evaluation form, Mr. Wilson commented: “This was like one stop shopping for an introduction to forest management.” He was pleased to learn of a web guide sponsored by SRMEC and produced by the Mississippi State University Extension Service.

By the conclusion of the project, Mr. Wilson had hired a professional forester to cruise and value his timber. Along with a wildlife biologist, the forester will help Mr. Wilson and his son develop a comprehensive forest management plan in coordination with the American Tree Farm System requirements. The plan will then be submitted with an application packet to be certified as both a Stewardship Forest and Tree Farm.

***Sandra Martini, H. L. Goodwin and Ronald L. Rainey**, Grant Coordinator and Co-Directors, respectively, of the Southern Risk Management Education Center, serve as editors of this report series. To learn more about risk management education programs and resources, visit the Southern Center web site (<http://srmec.uark.edu>) or the Extension Risk Management Education Program link (www.extensionrme.org).

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