

Why We Should Care About Kentucky Forests.

By Billy Thomas

Kentucky is 47 percent forested. Whether or not we live in or near a forest, they impact our lives every day. Unfortunately, Kentucky's forests are currently facing a wide variety of unparalleled threats.

Without our forests, Kentucky would be a drastically changed place — and not for the better. Clean water and air, fish and wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, wood products, solitude, biodiversity, income, and a sense of place are just some of the many unique contributions our forests provide us as individuals and as a society.

Our forests provide many ecosystem services. Forests trap sediments and pollutants by filtering and absorbing them before they reach our waters. They help slow erosion and limit flooding. Trees store carbon, which is an important factor in the control of greenhouse gases. The biodiversity of Kentucky depends in large part on the habitat our forests provide either directly or indirectly. Threats to forest health can have a devastating impact on the ecosystem.

Our forests have a significant impact on the state's economy. During 2001, an estimated \$1.5 billion was spent on fishing, hunting, and wildlife watching in Kentucky. Also, more than 37,500 jobs are directly tied to the forest industry in Kentucky, and these jobs produce many wood products that we use every day. It is estimated that the Kentucky forest industry's impact on the state's economy was more than \$7 billion in 2003. These figures do not

include the income paid to landowners when they harvest timber. It is easy to see why our forests are so important to the state's economy.

Recreational and tourism opportunities would be greatly reduced without our forests. Hiking, camping, boating, and many other outdoor activities would not be nearly as enjoyable without our forests. Our forests are an important part of what makes Kentucky the wonderful state it is.

Now consider that there are an estimated 423,000 private woodland owners in Kentucky controlling almost 80 percent of the forests. These private forests provide many benefits to their landowners and to society as a whole. Our forests are renewable, and with sustainable management, they can meet our needs today and in the future. In Kentucky, private woodland owners control the sustainable management and destiny of the forests, and they deserve our appreciation and support. The forest health challenges we are facing are significant and cannot be addressed by any individual or single organization. Working together to identify the challenges and developing solutions to meet them is our best hope for promoting healthy forests for today and for generations to come.

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