

NEWS

USDA AND ENDOWMENT EXPAND WORK WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN FOREST OWNERS

Partnership with NRCS and the U.S. Forest Service will advance forest management and land retention

U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, Greenville, S.C.

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New community-based networks in Georgia and Arkansas have been funded through the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention (SFLR) program, an effort to promote forest health and productivity while stemming the loss of African American-owned rural land.

The SFLR program, a partnership of the U. S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities (Endowment), the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service), currently funds projects in the Carolinas and Alabama. Proposals were sought from lead organizations working with networks of public and private organizations that support forest landowners in multi-county regions with significant African American forest ownership in rural Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, western Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

The partnership will invest more than \$4 million over the next four years to restore and secure ownership of threatened African American-owned forestland in the southern U. S. and enhance family wealth by increasing forest landowner income and land asset value through sustainable forestry. Loss of historic African American family land is all-too-common in the region where past discrimination and economic factors have diminished the value and productivity of African American-owned forests. The project will introduce new forestry technologies, create trusted, comprehensive and replicable systems of landowner outreach and support, and develop income streams by connecting forest owners to traditional and emerging forest products markets.

“The involuntary loss of African American family forests and farmland over the past century has been a tragedy for those families and a loss to the economies of rural communities across the southeastern United States,” said Carlton Owen, the Endowment’s President and CEO. “Working with NRCS, the Forest Service and our many state and local partners we are breaking historic barriers of distrust and delivering quality forestry services while helping families resolve the threat of heirs’ property to intergenerational land ownership.”

The SFLR program completed a two-year pilot program in 2015 by supporting sustainable forestry and land tenure programs in three multi-county regions: Coastal South Carolina, led by the Center for Heirs Property Preservation; Western Alabama, led by the Limited Resource Landowner Education and Action Network and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives; and Northeastern North Carolina, led by the Roanoke Electric Cooperative. Each of the existing projects will continue to build on the success of the pilots after serving more than 200 families with direct forestry and land tenure support.

Projects led by the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (UAPB) and McIntosh SEED in Darien, Georgia, will each receive direct grants totaling \$425,000 over three years and significant technical and program support from NRCS, Forest Service field staff, the Georgia and Arkansas forestry commissions, the Georgia Heirs' Property Law Center, the William H. Bowen School of Law and numerous private and public agencies to address forestry and land tenure services.

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The **U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities** (the Endowment) is a not-for-profit public charity working collaboratively with partners in the public and private sectors to advance systemic, transformative, and sustainable change for the health and vitality of the nation's working forests and forest-reliant communities – www.usendowment.org

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The Arkansas project is led by the **University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff**, an 1890 land grant institution and a Historical Black College and University. UAPB has operated a Cooperative Extension Program since 1972 and in 1987, UAPB began a Small Farms Program (SFP), which provides support to landowners. Through SFLR, UAPB will build on its SFP experience, networks, and relationships to expand into forestry and legal work in seven counties in southwest Arkansas: Columbia, Hempstead, Howard, Little River, Nevada, Ouachita and Union Counties. Organizations participating in the UAPB landowner support network will include NRCS, USDA StrikeForce, Arkansas Forestry Commission, Silas H. Hunt Community Development Corporation, Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts, Southwest Research and Extension Center, Arkansas Forestry Association, Arkansas Fish and Game Commission, Arkansas Land and Community Development Corporation, University of Arkansas Little Rock Bowen Legal Clinic and Arkansas Legal Services.

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The Georgia project is led by **McIntosh SEED**, in Darien, Georgia. McIntosh SEED is a regional organization working in the coastal region of Georgia and in several areas in the Deep South (Alabama and Mississippi) to strengthen low-wealth families and improve underserved and low-wealth rural communities through asset-based economic development, education reform, empowerment, environmental preservation and land-based opportunities. McIntosh SEED's SFLR work will focus on four coastal Georgia counties: Ben Hill, Liberty, McIntosh, and Wayne. Organizations participating in the McIntosh SEED landowner support network will include: Georgia Heirs Property Law Center, Georgia Forestry Commission, NRCS, Farm Services Agency, US Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Wildlife Federation and the Conservation Fund.