Forests are Important, so Let's Keep Forests as Forests

This 2026 position statement of Michigan Society of American Foresters will expire at the end of 2030 unless reviewed, revised and extended by board vote.

SOCIETY OF AMERICAN FORESTERS
MICHIGAN

Michigan Society of American Foresters. The mission of the Society of American Foresters is to advance sustainable management of forest resources through science, education, and technology, promoting professional excellence while ensuring the continued health, integrity, and use of forests to benefit society in perpetuity (eForester.org). Society of American Foresters is the largest and oldest professional society for foresters in the United States. Society of American Foresters was founded in 1900 and represents 9,000 foresters nationally. There are over 400 foresters in the Michigan chapter of Society of American Foresters (MichiganSAF.org).

Purpose. To promote the importance of forests and land use that keeps forests as forests.

Scope. This position statement helps foresters in Michigan articulate the importance of forests to policy makers and inform private and public landowners when making land use decisions.

Position. Michigan Society of American Foresters is *for* keeping forests as forests. Land use change that replaces a forest with non-forest land reduces ecological, cultural and economic benefits provided by forests. Michigan's foresters manage well and protect 20.1 million acres of forest for cultural, ecological and economic values. Siting agriculture, housing, industry and energy development on Michigan's 16 million acres of non-forest land reduces deforestation.

Michigan Society of American Foresters acknowledges that people need homes, food, energy and jobs. However, we must exercise wisdom in land use planning and restraint in economic development to protect natural ecosystems that are essential to all life on this planet.

Issue. The primary causes of deforestation in Michigan over the past two hundred years include growth of human population and expansion of agriculture and urban land use. In 1805, there were less than 5,000 non-indigenous people living in the Michigan territory (Citizens Research Council). Michigan's population grew to 2.4 million people by 1900 and to 10 million people by 2000. Michigan's agricultural lands grew from almost nothing in 1800 to 13 million acres in 1900 (Dept. of Commerce, 1920) and then contracted over the last century to 10.3 million acres in 2000 (USGS, 2011). Michigan has about 4 million acres of urban land today (USGS, 2011).

Agriculture and urban development still contribute to land use change today. Michigan lost 46,119 acres of forests to non-forest land use and gained 48,188 acres of forests from other land use in 2020 for what we call "net-zero deforestation" (USFS, 2021). There are new contributors to deforestation (industrial solar, data centers, etc.) that may increase the loss of forest land in Michigan. Gain of forest land from other land use appears to be slowing in Michigan (Pugh et al, 2023). There is a time lag between forest measurements and the availability of data and analysis to quantify land use change occurring now or to estimate trends for the near future.

Background. Forests are commonly defined as land greater than 1 acre with more than 10% of its surface covered by trees that grow at least 15 feet tall at maturity (USFS). Forests cover 20.1 million acres or 56% of Michigan's land area in 2025. About 7.7 million acres or 38% are public forests managed by local, state and federal government agencies. The other 12.4 million acres or 62% are private forests owned by individuals, families, corporations and nonprofit organizations.

Forests provide important cultural, ecological and economic benefits. Michigan's recreation economy, with much occurring in forests, is valued at $14 billion providing 118,000 jobs in 2023 (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2023). Michigan's forest products industry provided 80,000 jobs and $26 billion in economic output in 2022 (Michigan DNR, Forest Resources). Forests are essential habitat for thousands of species including many of the 407 species listed by the State of Michigan as threatened or endangered (Michigan DNR, Wildlife). Forests provide clean air and clean water. Economic analysis cannot fully value ecological and cultural services, so we consider them "public goods" where prices are too low or just don't exist.

Without prices, markets cannot adequately value forests for their inherent worth or many ecological, cultural and economic benefits. Forests are often treated by developers, policy makers and landowners as cheap "undeveloped" land where trees are just in the way of "higher economic use." Deforestation reflects the limitations of our economic, political and cultural systems. Legal designation by policy makers and sustainable management by foresters can protect forests from deforestation so Michigan is able to maintain or even increase its 20.1 million acres of forests. Future generations require that we protect and manage forests well today.

Considerations for Forest and Land Use Policy

- The "public trust doctrine" considers public forests to be protected from conversion to other land use (deforestation) or sale to private corporations for development.
- Public funds can incentivize proper management and protection of private forests for the public goods they produce and avoid subsidies that cause deforestation of private forests.
- Local zoning ordinances can protect private forests from fragmentation and deforestation from industrial solar, data centers, housing and other economic development.
- Public subsidies for housing, data centers, industrial solar and other construction can site development in non-forest urban areas and not sprawl outside cities into rural forests.
- If permanent conservation easements receive an automatic reduction in property taxes, then more private forests may be protected from fragmentation and land use change.
- State property tax reduction programs can be designed to incentivize sustainable forest management and limit fragmentation or deforestation of private forests.
- Agricultural subsidy programs influence land-use decisions and may affect whether agricultural production intensifies existing farmland or expands into forested areas.
- Public investment in USFS Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) provides essential data and analysis for foresters and policy makers to understand the condition of public and private forests and to monitor land use change.

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Glossary

Clearcut. A clearcut is removing mature trees in a forest for the purpose of establishing a new cohort of trees on the same site. This is a silvicultural practice most appropriate for tree species like aspen that require full sunlight for establishment. A clearcut is not land use change.

Conservation Easement. A conservation easement is a voluntary, legal agreement that permanently limits some specific uses of the land to protect its ecological values. Source: National Conservation Easement Database.

Deforestation. Deforestation is removing all trees from a forest and converting the bare land into another land use like agriculture or urban use.

Forest. Land spanning more than 1.2 acres (0.5 ha) with trees higher than 16.4 feet (5 m) and a canopy cover of more than 10 percent, or trees able to reach these thresholds in situ. It does not include land that is predominantly under agricultural or urban land use. Source: United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO).

Forest Certification. Forest certification is a means for evaluating and confirming the quality of forest management against defined standards and tracking and labeling forest products through the entire supply chain to assure consumers of responsibly managed sources.

Land Cover. Land cover describes the vegetation, exposed land surfaces, water and artificial structures covering the land surface at a given time. Source: USDA Forest Service.

Land Use. Land use describes the social and economic intent for which land is used, as well as the ecological potential of the land in some cases. Source: USDA Forest Service.

Land Use Change. Land use change is converting the land use of a parcel of land to another land use. For example, removing all trees from land to establish a farm or construct a building is land use change.

Sustainable Forest Management. Sustainable forest management is the stewardship and use of forests and forest lands in a way, and at a rate, that maintains their biodiversity, productivity, regeneration capacity, vitality and their potential to fulfil, now and in the future, relevant ecological, economic and social functions, at local, national, and global levels, and that does not cause damage to other ecosystems. Source: UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO).