

Equipping Landowners with Forestry Management Best Practices



“Branching Out”

Celebrating Alabama’s Progress

Certified Public Manager ® Program

CPM Solutions Alabama 2026



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Introduction

Alabama's forests and wooded lands are among the state's most valuable natural resources and represent one of its greatest environmental and economic assets. These forests are among the most biodiverse and productive in the United States, supporting a wide range of industries, providing critical wildlife habitat, and offering abundant recreational opportunities for residents and visitors alike.

Alabama ranks among the most heavily forested states in the nation. The state contains approximately 23 million acres of forestland, ranking third nationally among the contiguous United States in total commercial timberland acreage. Forests cover approximately 71 percent of Alabama's land area, placing the state fifth nationally in the percentage of land classified as forested (Alabama Forestry Commission, 2025). This extensive forest resource forms the foundation of a thriving forest economy and supports numerous ecosystem services that benefit all Alabamians.

Approximately 94 percent of Alabama's timberland is privately owned, one of the highest percentages in the country. As a result, private landowners play a critical role in determining the future health, productivity, and sustainability of Alabama's forests. Forestry is Alabama's largest manufacturing industry, contributing more than \$36 billion annually to the state's economy through timber production, forest products manufacturing, and related activities (Forest Workforce Training Institute, 2025). According to the latest IMPLAN study commissioned by the Forest Workforce Training Institute, the combined economic contribution of forestry, agriculture, and related green industries totals approximately \$77.3 billion annually and supports more than 273,000 jobs—representing nearly 10 percent of Alabama's workforce.

Beyond their economic significance, Alabama's forests provide essential environmental benefits. According to the Alabama Forestry Commission, forests improve and protect water quality by filtering pollutants, reducing erosion, and safeguarding watersheds. They improve air quality by absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen, store carbon that helps mitigate climate change impacts, protect soil health, reduce flooding risks, and provide habitat for a diverse array of wildlife species.

Alabama's forests also contribute significantly to the state's quality of life. They provide opportunities for hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, birdwatching, and other outdoor recreational activities while enhancing scenic beauty and promoting public health and community well-being through access to green spaces.

The Alabama Forestry Commission emphasizes that Alabama's forests deliver four overarching benefits: abundant timber resources, healthy wildlife habitat, clean air and water, and a strong economy. These benefits depend on sustainable forest stewardship and active management practices that ensure forests remain healthy, productive, and resilient for future generations.

As ownership of forestland changes and is passed down over time, the transfer of knowledge regarding sustainable forest management becomes increasingly important. New landowners often acquire forest property with limited experience or understanding of the responsibilities associated with long-term stewardship. Ensuring that these landowners receive information and guidance on Forest Best Management Practices (BMPs) is essential to protecting Alabama's forest resources and maintaining the economic, environmental, and social benefits they provide. These practices also ensure the landowner receives maximum value and return on investments while realizing the full potential in all aspects of their property. This project examines the importance of effectively transferring Forest BMPs to new landowners as a strategy for sustaining Alabama's forests for generations to come.

Sustainable Forest Management and Land Transfer/Landowner Responsibility

Sustainable forest management is essential to maintaining the long-term health, productivity, and resilience of Alabama's forest resources. Forests provide significant ecological, economic, and social benefits, but these benefits can only be sustained through active and informed stewardship by landowners.

One of the most critical aspects of sustainable management is protecting forests from wildfire. Preventative forest management practices, including forest awareness, fuel reduction, and the use of prescribed burning where appropriate, play a key role in reducing wildfire risk. When properly planned and implemented, prescribed burns can help reduce hazardous fuel loads, improve wildlife habitat, and promote overall forest health (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, 2025; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2021).

In addition to wildfire prevention, maintaining forest health requires landowners to actively protect their property from insects, diseases, and invasive species. Early identification and proper management of these threats are essential to preventing long-term damage that can reduce timber value, weaken forest stands, and negatively impact ecological balance (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, 2024, 2025).

Sustainable timber production is an important component of responsible forest management. Landowners that wish to harvest timber must ensure that harvesting practices are conducted in a manner that protects surrounding wooded areas, maintains soil stability, and preserves the quality of nearby waterways. Proper harvesting techniques and adherence to best management practices help ensure that forest resources remain productive and environmentally sound for future generations.

For new landowners or landowners acquiring forested land through family generational transfer, developing a clear vision for their property is a critical first step in each feature of effective forest stewardship. Each landowner should define their objectives and what their intended desire for the land is—whether they include timber production, hunting, recreation, wildlife habitat improvement, or personal enjoyment—and translate those goals into a structured management plan. Because forest ecosystems are complex and site-specific, consultation with a registered forester is strongly recommended. A professional forester can provide valuable insight into forest conditions, help evaluate management options, and assist in developing a long-term plan aligned with the landowner’s goals (Alabama Forestry Commission, n.d.; University of New Hampshire Extension, n.d.).

On-site consultations with Alabama Forestry Commission professionals are particularly valuable for new landowners, as they provide practical, property-specific guidance and support the implementation of sustainable management strategies. Through informed planning and the application of Forest BMPs, landowners can ensure their forests remain healthy, productive, and resilient for generations to come.

Purpose and Scope of the Project

For the reasons previously discussed, this project seeks to provide research-based recommendations for strengthening forestry management education among Alabama landowners

who are new to owning, inheriting, or acquiring forested properties. As forest ownership continues to change across the state, ensuring that new landowners possess the knowledge, resources, and support necessary to practice sustainable forest stewardship has become increasingly important. This project will examine current knowledge gaps, attitudes, and motivations that influence landowner stewardship practices and decision-making. It will explore the challenges faced by new forest landowners and identify opportunities to develop accessible, engaging, and practical educational resources that encourage the adoption of Forest BMPs.

In addition, this report will present key statistics regarding Alabama's forest resources and highlight successful outreach strategies, educational programs, and landowner engagement initiatives implemented by other states to address similar challenges. By evaluating these approaches, the project aims to identify effective methods for increasing awareness, participation, and implementation of sustainable forest management practices among Alabama's current and future forest landowners.

The findings of this project will culminate in a series of research-based recommendations and actionable strategies for consideration by the Alabama Forestry Commission. These recommendations are intended to support future strategic planning efforts focused on improving outreach, education, and technical assistance for new landowners. Ultimately, this project seeks to help foster a legacy of sustainable forest stewardship that preserves the economic, environmental, and social benefits of Alabama's forests for generations to come.

Alabama Forestry Commission

The Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC) serves as the state's lead agency for protecting, managing, and promoting Alabama's forest resources. The agency's mission is to ensure the long-term health, productivity, and sustainability of Alabama's forests while balancing the economic, environmental, and social benefits they provide. In addition to supporting Alabama's timber industry, the AFC works to protect forests from threats such as wildfires, insects, diseases, and invasive species while promoting responsible stewardship practices that preserve forest resources for future generations (Alabama Forestry Commission, n.d.).

Because the majority of Alabama's forestland is privately owned, the AFC plays a critical role in supporting private landowners through technical assistance, education, and conservation programs. Agency foresters work directly with landowners to evaluate their properties, develop management recommendations, and identify practices that align with individual ownership goals. Whether a landowner's objectives involve timber production, wildlife habitat enhancement, recreation, conservation, or family legacy planning, the AFC provides guidance designed to promote both landowner success and sustainable forest management. The agency also assists landowners with reforestation efforts, prescribed burning, forest health concerns, water quality protection, and implementation of forestry best management practices.

Education and outreach are central components of the AFC's mission. The agency offers workshops, field demonstrations, stewardship education programs, and one-on-one consultations that help landowners make informed management decisions. Educational efforts cover topics such as forest management, reforestation, prescribed fire, wildlife habitat improvement, forest health, and wildfire prevention. Through its Outreach Program, the AFC also works to increase awareness of available forestry services, conservation programs, and cost-share opportunities, particularly among underserved and limited-resource landowners.

In addition to serving private landowners, the AFC promotes forestry education through youth programs, community outreach initiatives, public awareness campaigns, and partnerships with educational organizations such as Project Learning Tree. The agency also provides publications, technical guides, online resources, and educational materials that support lifelong learning and encourage responsible stewardship of Alabama's forest resources. Through these combined efforts, the AFC serves as a valuable resource for landowners and communities while supporting the long-term sustainability of Alabama's forests (Alabama Forestry Commission, n.d.).

Educational Needs/Challenges Faced by Landowners

Studies of Alabama family forest owners have found that many landowners lack written management plans, do not regularly use professional forestry assistance, and desire additional information regarding forest management practices (Schelhas & Zabawa, 2005). Unlike multi-generational landowners who may have experience managing timberland, many new landowners inherit or purchase property without receiving historical records, management plans, or guidance

regarding previous land use activities. As a result, one of the most significant educational needs is helping landowners understand the history, condition, and management potential of their property. In addition to AFC's registered foresters, resources such as Google Earth Pro, the Alabama Maps aerial photography index, and the United States Department of Agriculture's Web Soil Survey can help landowners evaluate property characteristics, identify management opportunities, and make informed decisions regarding future land use.

Studies indicate that private forest landowners in Alabama and the broader Southeastern U.S. generally value forest health and wildfire mitigation but often lack technical knowledge and hands-on experience with prescribed burning. Landowners recognize fire's ecological benefits, yet cite concerns over liability, smoke management, and lack of professional assistance as major barriers to implementation (Haines et al., 2001; Kobziar et al., 2019; Shrestha et al., 2021).

Specific regional and state research findings highlight several important trends in private forest landowner perspectives regarding forest management and stewardship. Studies conducted throughout Alabama and the broader southeastern United States indicate that landowner participation in active forest management is influenced by knowledge, access to technical assistance, perceived benefits, and trust in forestry professionals (Kilgore et al., 2007; McCaffrey et al., 2013).

- **Prescribed Burning:** While the Alabama Prescribed Burning Act defines burning as a protected property right, studies show many non-industrial private landowners possess limited practical knowledge of fire implementation. However, there is strong demand for educational programs and co-op assistance, such as the Tall Timbers Private Lands Prescribed Fire Project, which helps owners navigate burn planning and risk management (Haines et al., 2001; Shrestha et al., 2021; Crandall et al., 2024)
- **Forest Management & Health:** Landowners primarily manage their properties for wildlife habitat and timber production but often struggle to identify and mitigate threats from invasive species, insects, and disease. Studies reveal knowledge of existing biomass utilization programs is very low, even though many express high interests in learning more about them (Joshi et al., 2009). Greater awareness of harvesting opportunities and emerging wood-product markets could also help landowners better

understand how timber can be utilized while supporting the health, productivity, and long-term management of their forested properties.

- **Wildfire Mitigation:** Studies of southern forest landowners have found that outreach and educational efforts play a critical role in encouraging wildfire mitigation activities. Landowners who receive information, technical assistance, and ongoing engagement from forestry professionals are more likely to implement practices such as firebreak construction, fuel reduction, and prescribed burning. These findings suggest that expanding outreach programs can improve landowner participation in wildfire risk reduction and strengthen the overall resilience of Alabama's privately owned forests (Crandall et al., 2024; Gan et al., 2009; Gan et al., 2015).
- **Trust & Acceptance:** Acceptance of active forest management treatments (such as mechanical thinning and prescribed fire) is heavily correlated with a landowner's trust in forestry agency professionals and the perceived clarity of the information they receive (McCaffrey et al., 2013; Burns et al., 2023). Trust, understanding of management objectives, and perceived benefits have been identified as key factors influencing public support for prescribed fire and other active forest management practices.

The challenges identified above highlight the need for educational programs that not only provide information but also effectively engage landowners in the learning process. Even when resources and technical assistance are available, participation may remain limited if landowners are unaware of those opportunities, encounter barriers to involvement, or do not receive information through their preferred communication channels. Understanding how landowners learn, what motivates participation, and what obstacles discourage engagement is therefore essential to developing outreach strategies that lead to increased awareness, knowledge retention, and implementation of Forest Best Management Practices.

Landowner Learning Preferences and Barriers to Engagement

Understanding how forest landowners prefer to receive information and what factors influence their participation is critical to developing effective outreach and education programs. Data from the National Woodland Owner Survey indicate that family forest owners vary considerably in

ownership objectives, parcel size, demographics, and management interests, reinforcing the importance of tailoring outreach and educational programs to specific landowner audiences (Butler, 2021). As a result, successful engagement strategies must be tailored to meet the needs of different landowner segments while addressing common barriers that discourage participation in forestry programs and educational opportunities.

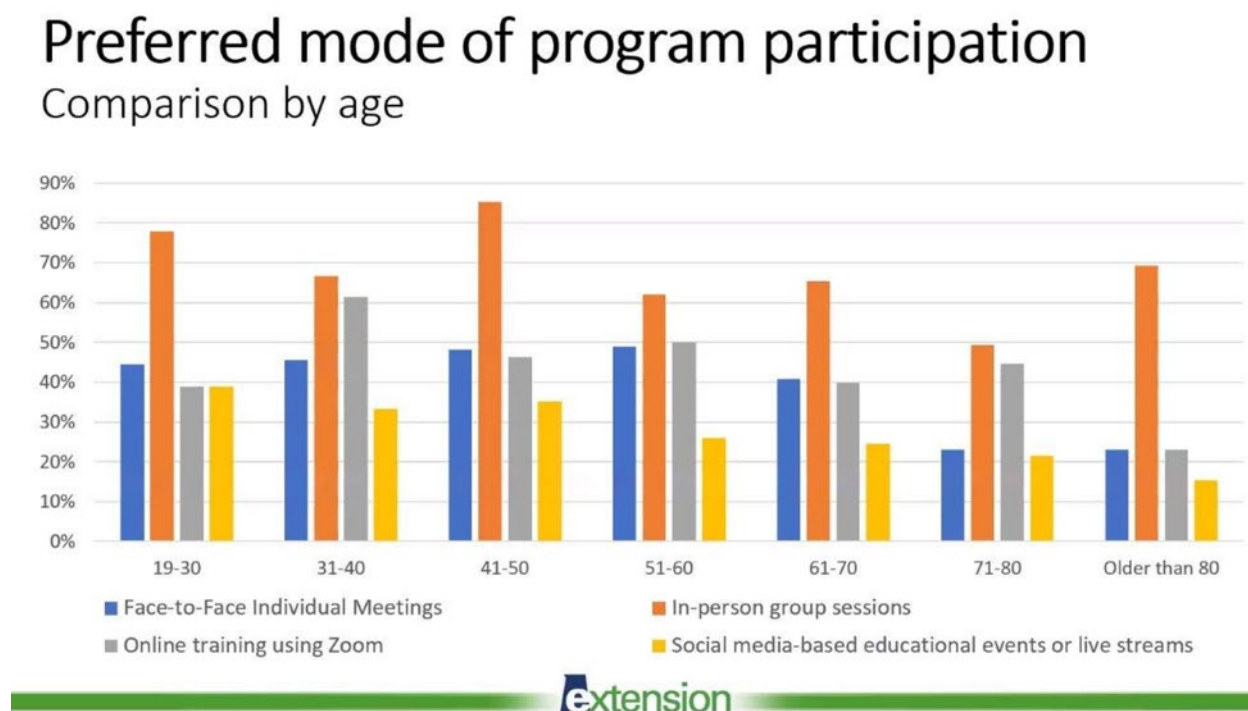
Several barriers consistently affect landowner engagement. These include limited knowledge of forest management practices, concerns about management costs, lack of time, difficulty navigating available resources, and, in some cases, distrust of government agencies or unfamiliar organizations. New and inheriting landowners may be particularly vulnerable to these challenges because they often have limited experience managing forestland and may be unaware of the technical assistance, educational programs, and financial resources available to them. Studies examining private forest landowner assistance programs have found that technical assistance, forest stewardship planning, direct interaction with forestry professionals, and cost-share programs are associated with increased participation in active forest management and conservation activities (U.S. Forest Service, n.d.). Researchers have consistently identified personalized assistance and one-on-one engagement with foresters as particularly effective tools for helping landowners overcome knowledge and financial barriers to sustainable forest stewardship (Butler, 2021; Jarrett, 2008; McCaffrey & Olsen, 2012; Regmi et al., 2024; Schelhas & Zabawa, 2005).

Building trust emerged as one of the most important factors influencing landowner engagement. Research indicates that landowners are more likely to participate in forest management programs when they receive direct communication and personalized support from forestry professionals. One-on-one conversations, site visits, and ongoing relationships with local foresters help establish credibility while creating opportunities for landowners to ask questions and receive recommendations tailored to their specific objectives (Schelhas & Zabawa, 2005). These repeated interactions are especially important because they build relationships which foster trust in the messenger and significantly influence willingness to adopt recommended practices. In addition, transparency, responsiveness, and consistent communication are widely recognized as essential components of effective outreach efforts, particularly when engaging landowners who may be unfamiliar with forestry agencies or programs. Effective engagement strategies also

emphasize respect for landowner objectives while clearly communicating available programs, technical assistance, and cost-share resources that support voluntary participation in forest stewardship (Butler, 2021; U.S. Forest Service, n.d; Jarrett, 2008; McCaffrey & Olsen, 2012).

Research indicates that landowners prefer a variety of educational delivery methods depending on age and experience level. While digital communication has become increasingly important, stakeholder data (Alabama Cooperative Extension Office) revealed that individuals between the ages of 25 and 45 preferred in-person group learning opportunities more than any other educational format. Online training opportunities ranked second, followed closely by individual face-to-face meetings. Social media-based educational events and live-streamed learning opportunities ranked lowest among preferred learning methods.

Figure 1. Preferred Program Participation Methods by Age Group



These findings suggest that although social media is an effective tool for increasing awareness and directing landowners to available resources, it should not serve as the primary educational delivery method. Instead, successful outreach strategies should combine in-person workshops, field tours, group learning opportunities, and virtual training options. This blended approach

allows agencies to leverage digital tools for promotion while providing tailored interactive learning experiences most preferred by landowners.

Another important factor influencing participation is the perceived value of forest management activities. Landowners are often motivated by practical outcomes, including increased timber revenue, improved wildlife habitat, enhanced recreational opportunities, reduced wildfire risk, and long-term property management. Research shows that showcasing local success stories and demonstrating both economic and environmental benefits can encourage greater participation in forestry programs. Similarly, financial incentives such as cost-share programs, conservation funding opportunities, and tax benefits have proven effective in promoting sustainable forest management practices and reducing barriers associated with implementation costs (Kilgore et al., 2007; Song et al., 2014).

Peer-to-peer learning also presents an opportunity to strengthen landowner engagement. Organizations such as the Forest Landowners Association and the Forest Landowners Foundation provide resources that connect landowners with real-world experiences and success stories from other forest owners. Programs such as the Meet the Landowners initiative can help new and younger landowners learn from experienced peers, fostering informal mentorship opportunities and increasing confidence in management decision-making.

Collectively, these findings suggest that the most effective outreach strategies combine personalized assistance, hands-on learning opportunities, multiple communication channels, peer learning, and financial incentives. Understanding these preferences and barriers provides a foundation for evaluating successful practices in other states and developing recommendations that can strengthen the AFC's efforts to engage current and future generations of forest landowners.

Implemented Programs and Strategies in Other States

Florida

Florida's most notable strength is its proactive approach to identifying and engaging new forest landowners. Unlike many states that rely primarily on landowners to seek assistance, the Florida Forest Service actively utilizes county Property Appraiser records to identify individuals who

own or acquire forested properties. This system allows forestry personnel to establish early contact with landowners and introduce available educational resources, technical assistance, and financial incentive programs. According to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS, 2025), approximately 71 percent of new private landowners are reached through a combination of direct outreach, educational programming, and financial assistance opportunities.

Florida further strengthens engagement through a statewide network of County Foresters who provide personalized technical assistance. These foresters conduct site visits, help landowners establish management objectives, identify forest health concerns, develop management recommendations, and connect participants with stewardship and cost-share programs (Florida Forest Service, 2025). This one-on-one approach helps build trust while demonstrating the practical benefits of active forest management.

Another key strength of Florida's outreach model is its extensive network of partnerships. The Florida Forest Service collaborates closely with the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Extension, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Florida Tree Farm Program, and other conservation organizations to deliver educational programming and increase awareness of available resources (Florida Forest Service, 2025; UF/IFAS Extension, 2025). These partnerships expand the agency's outreach capacity and ensure that landowners receive consistent, research-based information from multiple trusted sources.

Florida also effectively uses financial incentives to encourage participation in forest management activities. Programs such as Florida's Future Forests Program, the RESTORE Landowner Incentive Program, and the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program help reduce financial barriers associated with reforestation, forest health improvements, and long-term stewardship practices (Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, 2025). By combining proactive landowner identification, personalized technical assistance, strategic partnerships, and financial incentives, Florida has developed a comprehensive outreach system that successfully engages both new and existing forest landowners (Florida Forest Service, 2025).

Georgia

Georgia's most effective landowner engagement strategy is its emphasis on personalized technical assistance delivered through local foresters and the Forest Stewardship Program. The Georgia Forestry Commission's Forest Stewardship Program serves as the foundation for landowner engagement across the state. Through this program, landowners receive individualized technical assistance from local foresters who help assess property conditions and develop comprehensive management plans tailored to specific objectives such as timber production, wildlife habitat enhancement, recreation, water quality protection, and long-term forest stewardship (Georgia Forestry Commission, 2025). This one-on-one assistance is especially effective because it builds trust between landowners and forestry professionals while translating technical forestry concepts into practical, site-specific recommendations (Kilgore et al., 2015).

A key component of this approach is the emphasis on management planning. Stewardship plans serve as actionable roadmaps that guide landowners in making informed decisions over time rather than relying on one-time consultations. This planning framework is reinforced through Georgia's "Learn, Plan, Act" model, which encourages landowners to first understand their forest resources, then develop a structured management plan, and finally implement recommended practices with professional support (Georgia Forestry Commission, 2025). This sequential approach strengthens landowner follow-through and increases the likelihood of sustained forest management activities (Kilgore et al., 2015).

Georgia also reinforces engagement through applied learning opportunities such as "Learn & Burn" programs, which provide hands-on experience with prescribed fire and other forest management techniques. These field-based demonstrations allow landowners to observe best practices in real-world conditions, increasing both confidence and willingness to adopt active management strategies on their own properties (Georgia Forestry Commission, 2025).

While partnerships with other agencies play a supporting role in expanding outreach, they are not the primary driver of engagement. The Georgia Forestry Commission works alongside the University of Georgia Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, the Georgia Forestry Association, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to enhance educational outreach

and connect landowners with financial and technical resources (Georgia Forestry Commission, 2025). These collaborations broaden access to expertise and funding opportunities, but they primarily reinforce the core system of individualized technical assistance and stewardship planning.

Oregon

Oregon demonstrates a highly collaborative and education-centered approach to engaging private forest landowners that offers several promising practices, particularly in the area of scalable and accessible learning. A defining feature of this system is the Partnership for Forestry Education, a statewide collaboration that connects state agencies, federal agencies, universities, nonprofit organizations, industry groups, and landowner associations into a coordinated outreach network. This structure allows landowners to receive consistent, research-based information through multiple trusted entities rather than relying on a single point of contact. Key contributors include the Oregon Department of Forestry, Oregon State University Extension Service, the USDA Forest Service, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Oregon Small Woodlands Association, and the Oregon Tree Farm System (Partnership for Forestry Education, 2025). While these partnerships are important, their primary value lies in supporting a unified education and outreach system rather than serving as the central engagement mechanism.

Oregon's most prominent strength is its emphasis on forestry education through flexible, multi-format delivery systems. The Tree School program, led by Oregon State University Extension Service, is a cornerstone of landowner engagement and provides structured workshops, field demonstrations, and networking opportunities focused on topics such as reforestation, forest health, wildfire preparedness, wildlife habitat, and sustainable forest management (Oregon State University Extension Service, 2025). This program plays a critical role in building landowner knowledge and confidence, particularly among new and transitioning landowners.

A key extension of this model is Tree School Online, which significantly expands access to forestry education through webinars, virtual workshops, and on-demand learning resources (Oregon State University Extension Service, 2025). This digital learning component is especially important in Oregon's approach, as it allows landowners to engage with forestry education

regardless of geographic location, time constraints, or experience level. The accessibility of online learning makes it particularly effective for younger and newly acquired landowners who may prefer flexible and self-paced education formats. This strong investment in digital education distinguishes Oregon from many other states and represents one of its most transferable strengths.

Oregon also supports landowners through stewardship foresters who provide free, individualized technical assistance. These professionals assist with forest management planning, reforestation strategies, wildfire preparedness, and access to financial assistance programs (Oregon Department of Forestry, 2025). This one-on-one support ensures that education is translated into practical, site-specific action, bridging the gap between learning and implementation. Research has consistently shown that landowners who receive professional forestry assistance are more likely to develop management plans and implement active stewardship practices (Kilgore et al., 2015).

South Carolina

South Carolina offers several effective approaches to engaging private forest landowners that provide valuable insights, particularly through its emphasis on individualized planning and repeated in-person contact. A central strength of the South Carolina Forestry Commission is its Forest Stewardship Program, which delivers free, customized Forest Stewardship Plans to landowners. These plans are tailored to individual property goals and typically address timber production, wildlife habitat enhancement, recreation, water quality protection, and long-term forest management (South Carolina Forestry Commission, 2025). The stewardship planning process is not limited to a one-time document; it is reinforced through on-site visits, ongoing technical assistance, and direct guidance from professional foresters. Research has demonstrated that personalized forestry assistance and continued interaction with professionals are among the strongest predictors of landowner participation and implementation of forest management practices (Kilgore et al., 2015).

South Carolina further strengthens engagement through its emphasis on hands-on learning experiences that translate plans into practice. Programs such as Learn & Burn workshops, prescribed fire training, field tours, and demonstration events allow landowners to observe and

participate in active forest management techniques. These experiential opportunities are particularly effective because they move beyond theory and increase landowner confidence in implementing practices on their own properties (South Carolina Forestry Commission, 2025). Research on prescribed fire adoption has similarly found that education, technical assistance, and direct experience can reduce perceived risks and increase willingness among private landowners to use prescribed burning as a management tool (Haines et al., 2001; Shrestha et al., 2021).

Cost-share participation is another important component of South Carolina's engagement framework. Stewardship plans often serve as a pathway for landowners to access financial assistance programs that support practices such as reforestation, prescribed burning, wildlife habitat improvement, and erosion control. Connecting management planning with financial incentives reduces implementation barriers and increases the likelihood that recommended practices are carried out on the ground (South Carolina Forestry Commission, 2025; Kilgore et al., 2007).

While South Carolina also utilizes partnerships with organizations such as Clemson Cooperative Extension, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, these collaborations function primarily as support mechanisms that enhance service delivery rather than define the core engagement strategy (South Carolina Forestry Commission, 2025). Similarly, digital communication and social media are used to promote programs and opportunities; however, research indicates that direct relationships with forestry professionals, trust-building, and personalized technical assistance remain among the most influential factors affecting landowner participation (McCaffrey et al., 2013; Kilgore et al., 2015).

Comparison to Alabama

The review of Florida, Georgia, Oregon, and South Carolina revealed several common characteristics associated with successful landowner engagement. Across all four states, technical assistance, stewardship planning, educational workshops, and strong partnerships with other organizations serve as the foundation of outreach efforts. However, the states differ in the extent to which they utilize coordinated partnerships, digital education platforms, landowner identification systems, and targeted outreach to younger and newly acquired landowners. These

differences provide valuable insight into opportunities for strengthening Alabama's existing programs.

Similarities Across All States

<i>Common Theme</i>	<i>Evidence</i>
<i>Technical assistance</i>	All states provide foresters or resource professionals to assist landowners
<i>Extension partnerships</i>	Universities play major roles
<i>Workshops and field days</i>	Present in all states
<i>Stewardship planning</i>	Core service in each state
<i>Youth education</i>	Common priority

Major Differences

Topic	Oregon	Georgia	Florida	South Carolina	Alabama
Formal statewide partnership	High	Moderate	High	Moderate	Lower
Online education	Extensive	Strong	Moderate	Limited	Limited
Landowner databases	Coordinated	Growing statewide database effort	Varies	Limited	Limited
Focus on younger/new landowners	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Limited	Emerging
Digital engagement	High	Moderate-High	Moderate	Moderate	Emerging

Recommendations for the Alabama Forestry Commission

The research identified four areas where Alabama has the greatest opportunity to strengthen landowner engagement: expanding strategic partnerships, increasing awareness of financial assistance programs, modernizing educational outreach through digital learning and targeted communication, and implementing a new landowner outreach initiative. These recommendations draw directly from successful practices observed in Florida, Georgia, Oregon, and South Carolina.

1. Strengthen Strategic Partnerships Through a Statewide Forestry Education Coalition

One of the most successful practices observed among the states studied was the use of collaborative partnerships to expand outreach capacity and provide landowners with access to a broad range of expertise. Oregon's Partnership for Forestry Education serves as a particularly strong model by bringing together state agencies, universities, federal partners, nonprofit organizations, industry groups, and landowner associations to coordinate educational programming and outreach efforts. Similarly, Florida and South Carolina have developed extensive partnerships that allow multiple organizations to share resources, expertise, and communication channels.

The AFC should consider establishing a statewide Forestry Education Partnership that includes organizations such as the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, Auburn University School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences, Alabama A&M University, USDA Forest Service, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Alabama Tree Farm Program, Alabama Forestry Association, conservation organizations, and forest industry representatives. Such a partnership would allow agencies to coordinate educational events, share outreach materials, identify underserved landowner groups, and reduce duplication of effort.

A formal partnership structure would also provide opportunities to combine expertise in forestry, wildlife management, conservation planning, and landowner assistance. By creating a unified network of trusted organizations, Alabama could significantly increase its ability to reach landowners through multiple channels while providing consistent and comprehensive information.

Implementation Strategy

Implementation of this recommendation should be led by the Alabama Forestry Commission's Outreach Program in collaboration with the Forest Management Division. As an initial step, the AFC should convene representatives from the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, Auburn University School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences, Alabama A&M University, USDA Forest Service, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Alabama Forestry Association, Alabama Tree Farm Program, conservation organizations, and industry stakeholders to establish partnership goals and define roles and responsibilities. The coalition should meet regularly to coordinate educational programming, share outreach materials, identify underserved landowner populations, and eliminate duplication of efforts. Success should be measured through the number of participating organizations, jointly sponsored educational events, landowner participation rates, and increases in referrals between partner organizations. By creating a coordinated statewide network, the AFC can expand its reach while ensuring that landowners receive consistent, research-based information from multiple trusted sources.

2. Expand Financial Incentives and Cost-Share Program Awareness

Research from Florida and South Carolina demonstrates that financial assistance programs are among the strongest motivators for landowner participation in forestry management activities. Many landowners, particularly younger individuals and first-time forest owners, may be interested in managing their property but are discouraged by the costs associated with reforestation, forest improvement practices, prescribed burning, invasive species control, and wildlife habitat enhancement.

While Alabama already participates in several federal and state assistance programs, outreach efforts could place greater emphasis on increasing awareness of available opportunities and simplifying the process of connecting landowners with financial resources. The AFC could work with partners such as USDA-NRCS, the Alabama Forestry Foundation, and conservation organizations to create a centralized resource guide that clearly explains available cost-share programs, eligibility requirements, application deadlines, and potential benefits.

Additionally, Alabama could consider developing more visible success stories that showcase how financial assistance has helped landowners achieve their management objectives. Highlighting

real-world examples may encourage participation by demonstrating tangible outcomes and reducing uncertainty among prospective applicants. Increased promotion of cost-share opportunities through workshops, field days, digital platforms, and partner organizations could help remove financial barriers and encourage greater involvement in active forest management.

Implementation Strategy

Implementation of this recommendation should be coordinated by the Alabama Forestry Commission's Forest Management Division in partnership with USDA-NRCS, the Alabama Forestry Foundation, and other conservation organizations. The first step should be the development of a centralized digital and print resource guide that clearly explains available cost-share programs, eligibility requirements, application procedures, and potential benefits. This guide should be distributed through AFC offices, Extension offices, partner organizations, educational workshops, and online platforms. Outreach efforts should also include landowner success stories that demonstrate how financial assistance programs have helped achieve management objectives and improve forest stewardship outcomes. Success should be measured through increased distribution of educational materials, growth in landowner inquiries regarding assistance programs, increased participation in cost-share opportunities, and greater implementation of recommended forestry practices on private lands.

3. Expand Digital Education and Social Media Engagement

One of the most significant opportunities for Alabama lies in expanding digital education and strengthening its social media presence. Oregon has demonstrated particular success in reaching younger and geographically dispersed landowners through online learning platforms, webinars, virtual workshops, recorded educational content, and digital resource libraries. These tools allow landowners to access information at their convenience and accommodate individuals who may be unable to attend in-person events.

The AFC should consider developing a centralized online learning hub that provides educational resources tailored to new, inheriting, and absentee landowners. This platform could include recorded webinars, instructional videos, downloadable publications, management planning guides, frequently asked questions, and interactive decision-making tools. Content could address

topics such as timber management, forest health, wildlife habitat improvement, prescribed fire, estate planning, and available financial assistance programs.

Social media should also play a larger role in Alabama's outreach strategy. Rather than using social media primarily for announcements and event promotion, the Commission could adopt a more educational approach that provides regular, engaging content designed to build relationships with landowners. Examples include short forestry tips, landowner success stories, before-and-after project demonstrations, videos highlighting best management practices, educational infographics, and question-and-answer sessions with forestry professionals.

Facebook remains an important platform for reaching many current landowners; however, expanding content on YouTube, Instagram, and other emerging platforms would help engage younger audiences who increasingly rely on digital media for information. Consistent posting schedules, audience engagement metrics, and coordinated messaging with partner organizations could further enhance outreach effectiveness.

A stronger digital presence would not replace traditional face-to-face interactions but would complement existing outreach efforts by creating additional opportunities for education and engagement. By meeting landowners where they already consume information, Alabama can build stronger connections, increase awareness of available resources, and encourage long-term participation in forest stewardship programs.

During a stakeholder meeting with the AFC, our team proactively shared recommendations for expanding the agency's digital outreach efforts through paid social media advertising. Specifically, we recommended utilizing targeted advertisements on social media platforms and YouTube to increase awareness among younger, newly acquired, and inheriting forest landowners. To support implementation, our team provided step-by-step guidance on creating and managing advertisements as a state agency, including information on platform requirements, audience targeting capabilities, estimated advertising costs, and budgeting considerations.

Targeted digital advertising presents an opportunity for the AFC to reach landowners who may be unfamiliar with available forestry resources and assistance programs. Unlike traditional outreach methods, social media and YouTube advertisements can be directed toward specific geographic areas, age groups, and audiences with interests related to land ownership,

conservation, forestry, and natural resources. These advertisements could highlight topics such as forest stewardship planning, cost-share opportunities, wildfire preparedness, wildlife habitat management, and educational programs while also directing landowners to local Forestry Commission representatives and online resources. By strategically utilizing paid digital outreach, the agency can expand its visibility, improve awareness of available services, and connect with landowners who may not otherwise engage with traditional forestry education programs.

Implementation Strategy

Implementation of this recommendation should be led by the Alabama Forestry Commission's Communications and Outreach staff. The AFC should begin by developing a centralized online learning hub that houses educational videos, recorded webinars, downloadable publications, management planning resources, and interactive tools designed specifically for new, inheriting, and absentee landowners. Social media efforts should expand beyond event promotion to include regular educational content, landowner success stories, forestry management tips, and interactive question-and-answer opportunities with forestry professionals. The primary goal of this initiative is to move landowners beyond awareness and toward active engagement with AFC services and programs. Success should be evaluated through website traffic, webinar participation, social media engagement metrics, downloads of educational materials, requests for technical assistance, and increases in the number of landowners developing stewardship plans or participating in educational programs.

4. Implement a New Landowner Outreach Initiative

The AFC should consider implementing a proactive New Landowner Outreach Initiative by partnering with land realty companies, title companies, attorneys, surveyors, and closing agents to distribute a standardized AFC informational flyer at the time of property transfer. The flyer could include a QR code linking landowners to AFC resources, stewardship programs, cost-share opportunities, online learning tools, social media platforms, and local forestry contacts.

Research by Brett J. Butler et al. (2007) found that landowners who exhibit high interest but low engagement in forest management are especially receptive to outreach and educational efforts. Because many new forest landowners acquire property without a strong understanding of forestry resources or management options, the period immediately following property acquisition

represents a valuable opportunity for engagement. Distributing Alabama Forestry Commission information during the property transfer process would help reach landowners at a critical decision-making stage, increasing awareness of available programs and encouraging active forest stewardship.

This initiative would also create a systematic method for introducing landowners to available services and building long-term relationships with forestry professionals. Similar to Florida's efforts to identify and contact new landowners, this approach would help Alabama establish early communication with forest owners while increasing awareness of educational opportunities, technical assistance, prescribed fire programs, wildlife management resources, and financial incentive programs. By engaging landowners at the beginning of their ownership journey, the AFC can encourage informed decision-making, promote sustainable forest management practices, and strengthen long-term stewardship of Alabama's forest resources.

Implementation Strategy

Implementation of this initiative should be coordinated through the Alabama Forestry Commission's Outreach Program in partnership with real estate professionals, title companies, attorneys, surveyors, and closing agents. As an initial step, the AFC should develop a standardized "Welcome to Forest Ownership" information packet containing forestry resources, contact information of local foresters, information about stewardship planning and cost-share opportunities, and a QR code linking landowners to online educational resources. The program should initially be piloted in selected counties with high rates of forestland ownership transfers before expanding statewide. The objective is to establish contact with landowners during the earliest stages of ownership, when they are most likely to be making decisions about the future management of their property. Program success should be measured through the number of packets distributed, QR code scans, website visits generated through the initiative, requests for forestry assistance, and increases in participation in stewardship planning and educational programs. By engaging landowners early, the AFC can build lasting relationships that encourage informed decision-making and long-term forest stewardship.

Implementation Roadmap

Recommendation	Lead Agency	First Action	Timeline	Success Measure
Forestry Education Partnership	AFC Outreach Program	Convene partner meeting	6 months	Number of partner organizations and joint events
Cost-Share Awareness Campaign	AFC Forest Management Division	Create resource guide	6 months	Increase in program inquiries and applications
Digital Education Expansion	AFC Communications Office	Launch online learning hub	12 months	Website traffic and webinar participation
New Landowner Initiative	AFC Outreach Program	Develop welcome packet and pilot program	12 months	Number of new landowners engaged

Success should be measured not only by the number of landowners reached, but also by evidence of behavioral change, including increased requests for technical assistance, development of stewardship plans, participation in educational programs, enrollment in cost-share opportunities, and implementation of Forest Best Management Practices on privately owned lands.

Conclusion

Alabama's forests are among the state's most valuable natural and economic resources, and the future health of those forests will depend largely on the decisions made by private landowners. As ownership continues to shift to younger, inheriting, and first-time forest landowners, the AFC faces both a challenge and an opportunity to strengthen its outreach and educational efforts.

The research conducted for this CPM Solutions Alabama project revealed that successful landowner engagement is built upon several key principles: personalized technical assistance, strong partnerships, accessible educational opportunities, financial incentives, and consistent communication. While Alabama already offers many valuable programs and services, the experiences of Florida, Georgia, Oregon, and South Carolina demonstrate additional opportunities to expand outreach and better connect with emerging generations of forest owners.

By investing in innovative outreach strategies today, Alabama can better equip the next generation of landowners with the knowledge, resources, and support necessary to sustainably manage the state's forest resources for decades to come.

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