

Sustainability and forestry

IF YOU'VE WATCHED a certain Dr. Seuss movie, chances are you harbor more than one misconception about the health and well-being of forests in the United States. But be careful what you believe! Let's take a look at the softwood lumber facts, straight from the USDA.

Maine. Well-known as the most forested state, Maine contains an estimated 17.6 million acres of forestland that covers 89% of the state, according to the most recent USDA data from 2016. This total overall acreage hasn't grown or shrunk much at all since 2011. What's interesting? Between 2012-2016, lumber mills in Maine produced a whopping total of 3.41 billion bd. ft. of lumber. The overall percentage of forested land hasn't changed, and the forest and lumber industries are growing.

Halfway across the country in Minnesota, the state's 17.7 million acres of forest land (covering approximately 35% of the state) increased by 1.7%—that's 755,000 acres—from 2012 to 2017. The forest in Minnesota is growing, while during the same time lumber mills across the state cranked out 702 million bd. ft. of lumber.

Heading down south deep into the nation's wood basket, Georgia—the third largest softwood lumber producing state in the U.S.—has seen its forest land remain relatively constant (as of 2016 USDA data). Georgia's forest area totaled 24.6 million acres, with areas of large-diameter forest stands increasing. During the 2015-2016 time

frame, mills in Georgia produced 5.01 billion bd. ft. total.

As an FYI, if we translate these production numbers into real market figures: For a 2,000-sq. ft. home, approximately 16,000 bd. ft. of lumber is used.

What's the takeaway? Forested land in the U.S. is increasing or maintaining, while the lumber industry is still going strong. What's the secret? Strong replanting programs and well-managed forests. Up in Maine, the state's Healthy Forest Program works to find ways to increase active forest management in partnership with family forest owners. Georgia's Conservation Reserve Program (combined with other efforts) is responsible for the growth of large-diameter stands, which now make up 41.2% of the forestry land in the state. And following a decline, Minnesota's healthy forest land has been increasing steadily since the 1970s.

Just for fun, let's dig deeper and see what trees are the most popular in each of the three states. In Minnesota, the forests are mostly aspen/birch and spruce/fir, with oak/hickory coming in a distance third. Two primary groups constitute Maine forest land: maple/beech/birch and spruce/fir. A close third? The white/red/jack pine group. In Georgia, it's all loblolly pine, all the time, followed by slash pine and then sweetgum.

A few of our favorite most-asked questions:

Are forests shrinking? No. On average, the forest industry plants 2.5-3 trees annually for each one harvested. In fact, there are more forests in the U.S. today than there were when Thomas Jefferson drank tea at Monticello.

Will we ever run out of wood? Not in this lifetime, or that of our children, or even their children's children. Wood is naturally renewable: it's not a finite product, and it's not even close to disappearing. It is the only renewable building material.

Bottom line: our forests are growing, expanding and healthy—which is good news to those of us who live among them. So go ahead and print those emails; we'll grow even more trees.

— Jeff Easterling is president of Northeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association. Reach him at info@nelma.org.



THIS USDA FOREST SERVICE image shows the growth of forest land throughout the U.S.