



by Tom Martin

Anyone who has ever put together a puzzle has had this experience: You're in the home stretch, and you reach for the last piece you need to finally finish, only it's not there. You look everywhere, stewing in frustration as you think about what could have happened to it: "Maybe it got lost. Did I vacuum it up?" Regardless of the cause, your puzzle can never be complete, and all the time you spent working on the rest of it feels like it's been for naught. Now imagine that a third of the pieces are gone.

That's what will happen to the puzzle of protecting critical forestland if we don't make family-owned woodlands part of the conservation conversation. More than a third of U.S. forests are owned by individuals and families—a larger share than the federal government or various companies own. As we work to protect both the environment and rural economies, family-owned forests are hugely important yet too often overlooked.

Having grown up surrounded by my family's woodlands in Wisconsin, I have seen firsthand how the woods give us so much more than peaceful beauty. They protect against climate change; they provide habitat for plants and animals; they help maintain clean, fresh water and provide oxygen to keep us alive; and they aid our economy by supporting jobs and producing materials that we all use every day.

The fact is that these precious lands are under tremendous pressure, and their sustainability is severely threatened. The American Forest Foundation (AFF) is releasing groundbreaking research conducted in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and the Family Forest Research Center to quantify the threats that family-owned forests face and why we need to empower family forest owners to protect the many benefits forests provide to our environment and economy. In our campaign "Vanishing Pieces of the Puzzle," AFF will showcase five of these benefits over the next five months and highlight what will happen if we don't act now.

Water: Protecting family-owned forests is essential to maintaining healthy, clean water. The most cost-effective way to protect water quality is to protect and manage the forests that currently exist while simultaneously restoring land to the natural filters we call trees.

Wood: Family forests contain a tremendous supply of wood—for building materials, paper and other products—that can be regenerated continuously through replanting and regrowth. For example, there is enough sawtimber in American family forests today to build 37 million houses. Additionally there is an even larger supply of fiber that can provide other valu-

able forest products like wood for energy or fiber for paper products, as well as jobs throughout the country. Threats from development to natural disasters and other issues such as landowners who are uninterested in harvesting their timber have the potential to remove more than 855 billion board feet of sawtimber alone from the available supply—more than 75 percent of the total supply. Engaging private landowners in conservation and stewardship and ensuring strong markets for their products will help strengthen rural communities and local forestry operations as they continue to grow this renewable resource.

Wildlife: In most landscapes, family forests are an essential piece of the puzzle. Engaging family forest owners in conservation activities is the only way to accomplish large landscape goals like conserving critical habitat. Family forests provide thousands upon thousands of acres of high-quality wildlife habitat, yet events such as fragmentation and insect infestation and disease have the potential to destroy 33.3 million acres of core habitat, an area larger than South Carolina. By empowering woodland owners to protect these forests, they can continue to provide wildlife with food, shelter and a place to call home.

Recreation: Family forest owners are the largest forest ownership group and currently provide tremendous recreation opportunities. Currently, 34 million acres of family-owned forests are available to the public for recreational use. However, threats such as natural disasters and development mean we stand to lose up to 6.5 million acres, an area just larger than the state of Maryland.

Carbon: Family forests continuously capture and store a tremendous amount of carbon—but with numerous threats piling up, it's not a sure thing. As much as 2.6 billion tons of carbon currently stored in family forests—the equivalent of emissions from more than 2 billion cars—could be impacted by threats like development. By investing in stewardship and conservation, and promoting forest markets, we can protect our carbon capture and storage now and into the future.

Tackling big issues like forest conservation and economic growth require addressing every piece of the forest puzzle. It simply cannot be done without engaging America's 22 million family forest owners.

Tom Martin is president and CEO of the American Forest Foundation. This article originally appeared as a blog post in the February online edition of the Huffington Post.