

Science You Can Use *Tool*

Picture Perfect: Inventory snapshots provide valuable forest data at a glance

For nearly 100 years, the Forest Service has inventoried America's forest resources to provide a scorecard of forest health, vitality, and sustainability. Born out of the McSweeney-McNary Forest Research Act of 1928, the [Forest Inventory and Analysis Program](#) is nationally coordinated by regional experts and now consists of more than 355,000 survey plots across public and private land.

Data are updated annually and stored in a publicly available [database](#) maintained by the Forest Service. The program is legally required to document its

findings in a report every five years for each State, as well as publish its data annually.

All Over the Map

While the Forest Inventory and Analysis Program's regional units collect relatively similar information, variation in data collection and reporting exists.

"We're a public resource, and as such, we try to serve our constituency," said Christopher Witt, an Ecologist and Forest Inventory and Analysis Analyst for the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Research Station. "What's important to foresters

and land managers in the Rocky Mountains might not be the same for people in New England."

The detailed five-year analytic reports are well-suited for capturing and reporting these regional nuances. But a push for annual reporting—and the growing need to compare information among States and regions—required greater consistency.

"We wanted to become more consistent nationally," said Erin Berryman, a Forester and Forest Inventory and Analysis Analyst with the Rocky Mountain Research Station. "And in a way that reflected the most current data."

One Concept, One Click

Across the country, analysts with the Southern Research Station's Forest Inventory and Analysis Program were having similar conversations. Ted Ridley, an Ecologist with a knack for computer programming, along with colleague Chris Oswalt, a Research Forester, began discussing ways to automate the reporting process.

"An analyst could spend one to six months getting a single State's report pulled together and pushed through the



The Forest Service's Forest Inventory and Analysis Program collects data from more than 355,000 survey plots across the United States and affiliated islands in the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean. Forest Service photo.

system,” Oswalt said. “We knew there had to be a better way.”

In 2019, the duo produced their first series of annual factsheets for the southern States that automatically populated the document with information from the Forest Inventory and Analysis database.

That success sparked a national initiative to develop a standardized annual report format. Analysts from across the country, including Witt and Berryman, joined the effort to determine which information should be included.

“Pulling the information from the databases wasn’t necessarily the hard part,” Witt said. “Getting everyone to agree what went into the report was the real challenge.”

State Snapshots

In summer 2024, the Forest Inventory and Analysis Program launched its “[One-Click State Factsheets](#).” Through an interactive map, users simply select a State to generate a downloadable pdf using the most recent program data.

“The factsheets present some of the most frequently requested data we receive as analysts, such as the amount of land area covered by forests, forest land ownership, most prevalent tree species, most common forest disturbances, and average change in forest volume—comparing forest growth to tree removal or mortality,” Berryman said.

Land managers can now quickly access updated information to see changes or trends in their forests, compare results with other States, and identify emerging issues.

“And it only takes one click of the mouse; it’s as easy as that,” Oswalt said.

Land Manager Considerations

- Land managers can make more timely decisions based on automatically generated reports using the most recent inventory and analysis data.
- Standardized annual reports allow land managers to compare trends across States and regions to understand larger patterns affecting forests and develop coordinated strategies to address them.
- With easy access to timely forest data, land managers can better plan and allocate resources to meet emerging or dominating issues.

Featured Scientists

[Christopher Witt](#) is an Ecologist and Forest Inventory and Analysis Program Analyst for the Rocky Mountain Research Station in Ogden, Utah.

[Erin Berryman](#) is a Forester and Forest Inventory and Analysis Program Analyst for the Rocky Mountain Research Station in Fort Collins, Colorado.

[Ted Ridley](#) is an Ecologist and Forest Inventory and Analysis Program Analyst for the Southern Research Station in Knoxville, Tennessee.

[Chris Oswalt](#) is a Research Forester and Forest Inventory and Analysis Program Analyst for the Southern Research Station in Knoxville, Tennessee.

[Paul Meznarich](#) is the author of this Science You Can Use Tool.

Further Reading

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 2025. [Forests of Colorado, 2021: FIA annual snapshot. Resource Update FS-511](#). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 4 p.

Witt, C.; Pelz, K.A.; Goeking, S.A.; Shaw, J.D.; Bakken, J.L.; Menlove, J.A. 2022. [Nevada's forest resources, 2009-2018. Resour. Bull. RMRS-RB-36](#). Fort Collins, CO: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station. 115 p.



[Rocky Mountain Research Station](#) is part of Forest Service Research and Development. While anchored in the geography of the West, our research is global in scale.

Our science improves lives and landscapes.