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Urban National Landowner Survey: Houston 2019

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Abstract

The Urban National Landowner Survey (UNLS) is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Forest Service, Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program and has the mission of providing information about the ownership, objectives, management, and future plans of people who own trees in urban areas. This report summarizes data collected from private, residential landowners in Houston, TX, from 2019 (n = 209). While normally collected over 5 years, implementation was intensified in Houston to complete data collection in 1 year. Private, residential landowners in Houston believe that trees in their neighborhoods provide multiple benefits, including improving air and water quality, aesthetics, human health, and public health. There is concern about storm-damaged trees causing property damage, and most private, residential owners have taken some action to prevent this, especially by pruning branches. Almost all private, residential owners have at least one tree on their property, and most have a yard; a driveway; and a patio, porch, or deck. The most common concerns about trees are damage to property from roots and branches, and trees or branches breaking and causing power outages. Most private, residential owners in Houston are unfamiliar with programs that help with tree care, and more owners are familiar with private tree and landscape professionals than with governmental or extension agents. Private, residential ownerships are largely owner-occupied, single-family homes, although rental properties and multi-family and row homes are also an important part of the city.

Keywords: urban landowners, residential land management, urban forestry, yard care, urban wood, UNLS

Cover photo: Rainbow over downtown skyline in Houston, Texas, USA. Licensed photo by TTstudio/Adobe Stock.

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Urban National Landowner Survey: Houston 2019

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

The Urban National Landowner Survey (UNLS) is a component of the National Woodland Owner Survey (NWOS) program implemented by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Forest Service's Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program. This report summarizes the results of the UNLS conducted in Houston, TX, in 2019. The focus is specifically on the families, individuals, companies, and other private entities that own residential properties within the city limits of Houston. The Houston survey was funded in part by the Texas A&M Forest Service. The intent of this survey is to provide information about who owns the trees and green spaces across Houston, why they own them, what they have done with them in the past, and what they plan to do with them in the future, with a focus on trees, their maintenance, and their interactions with storms.

The NWOS currently has three components: base (or rural forests), large corporate forests, and urban. Additional components (e.g., surveys of owners/managers of forests within Tribal reservation boundaries and of U.S. territories) are planned. Following a brief description of the survey process, basic summaries are presented. Full sets of summary tables can be accessed in the appendices. Detailed methods for the implementation of the UNLS along with an assessment of data quality are included in "Urban National Landowner Survey: Methods and Data Quality, 2018" (Butler et al. 2025). The UNLS methods are adapted from the base NWOS (Butler and Caputo 2021, 2022). Similar research was conducted in Baltimore, MD, in 2018 (Locke et al. 2025). Additional information, including results from the UNLS and other NWOS components, is available on the NWOS website: https://research.fs.usda.gov/programs/nwos.

METHODS

As with the broader FIA program, the authorization and general guidance for the NWOS and UNLS comes from the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Research Act of 1978 (Forest and Rangeland Act 1978) and the Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act of 1998 (AREERA 1998). The methods are approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) (OMB Approval Number: 0596-0078) in accordance with the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA 1980). The UNLS in Houston was implemented by Texas A&M Forest Service and the Family Forest Research Center (www.familyforestresearchcenter.org), a joint venture between the Northern Research Station of the U.S. Forest Service and the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass) Department of Environmental Conservation. This work received approval through the UMass Internal Review Board protocols (UMass IRB approval no. 684).

Survey methods and questionnaire content were based on existing scientific literature with pretesting and pilot testing used to validate the survey instrument prior to implementation (Butler et al. 2025). The final version of the Houston 2019 questionnaire can be accessed in Appendix 1 and contains a set of questions based on the needs of Texas A&M Forest Service. The Houston survey sent to residents after 2019 has been slightly modified from this original survey.

The Houston UNLS sample (i.e., the list of landowners who were contacted) was generated using an area-based random sampling method that follows the same basic methodology used for the FIA plot-based forest inventory (Bechtold and Patterson 2005) and the base NWOS (Butler and Caputo 2022). A set of random points were generated throughout the City of Houston, set within an intensified version of the hex grid used by the Urban FIA program (UFIA). Based on property tax records, a U.S. Postal Service database, and high-resolution aerial photography, each point was classified in terms of ownership class, residential property status, and land cover, respectively, with private, residential, urban (i.e., not forested) ownerships being asked to participate in the survey.

Potential respondents were contacted using the Tailored Designed Method (Dillman et al. 2014), as was done with the other NWOS components. This involved up to four waves of contacts for each potential respondent: a prenotice postcard, a first questionnaire packet, a reminder/thank you postcard, and a second questionnaire packet (Appendix 2). For the 2019 Houston UNLS, there were a total of 1,965 ownerships in the sample. Of these initial sampled ownerships, 464 had no or insufficient contact information, 1,284 did not respond, 8 returned partial responses, and 209 were good returns with the survey filled out sufficiently, for a cooperation rate of 13.9 percent.

Nonresponse bias was assessed by conducting phone interviews with those who did not respond to the request to participate in the UNLS. A total of 25 nonresponse phone interviews were conducted with individuals in the population, from 330 total phone call contacts. Fisher's exact and Mann-Whitney U tests were used to compare phone to mail respondents for categorical and continuous variables, respectively. Of the ten questions included in the phone interviews, the only significant (p-value < 0.05) difference between mail and phone respondents was fewer phone respondents identifying as white (84 percent vs 43 percent). Identification with other races, ethnicity, age, number of trees on the property, type of residence, and whether the respondent resides at the property were not significantly different between mail and phone respondents.

The data from completed questionnaires were verified in terms of range checks (e.g., values being within predefined bounds) and logic checks (e.g., responses being consistent

across questions), resulting in 0.27 percent of the records being updated (out of 88,825 total records). Where answer options included "Other, please specify," the text fields were manually inspected and corrected if the text was inconsistent with other responses, resulting in updating 0.09 percent of questions. In addition, quality control checks were performed on a randomly selected 5 percent of the questionnaires, which showed an error rate of 0.002 percent. Missing values were imputed using multiple imputation by chained equations. The same logic checks were conducted on imputed data, and 0.08 percent of records were updated (Butler and Caputo 2022, van Buuren and Groothuis-Oudshoorn 2011). All cleaned and verified data were uploaded to a secure database (Caputo et al. 2020) and weighting, imputation, and data estimates were conducted using the NWOS R package (Butler and Caputo 2019).

Population-level estimates were generated for totals and proportions in terms of ownerships for all questions asked on the Houston UNLS questionnaire. Mean and median numbers of ownerships were calculated for continuous variables (e.g., size of holding, primary decision maker's age). To account for the inclusion probabilities that come from the FIA area-based sample design, weights were used for all population-level estimates, and bootstrapping was used to quantify the reliability of the estimates (Butler and Caputo 2021).

The core products from the 2019 Houston UNLS are the tables of population-level estimates presented in this report (Appendix 3 and 4). Links to these products as well as other UNLS results, including results for Baltimore (Locke et al. 2025) and related materials, are also available via the NWOS website (https://research.fs.usda.gov/programs/nwos).

RESULTS

Results are presented based on the sections in the survey instrument (Appendix 1). For reference, all survey implementation materials are shown in Appendix 2. Selected findings from each section are presented in the text. A list of all summary tables for Houston and a link to access the tables online are available in Appendix 3. Due to stakeholder interest, separate summaries are also provided for selected variables for the western and eastern parts of the city of Houston, defined by Interstate Highway I-45 north of the city center and State Highway 288 south of the city center (Appendix 4).

Benefits of Trees

Owners in Houston believe that trees in their neighborhoods provide multiple benefits. When asked about a variety of ecosystem services that trees provide, 88 percent of respondents think it is important or very important that trees have the potential benefit of improved air quality. Eighty-four and 81 percent think it is important or very important that trees reduce flooding and help control storm water, respectively. About three quarters of Houston landowners think it is important or very important that trees reduce noise and improve water quality (Fig. 1).

Ninety-six percent of Houston's private, residential ownerships agree that trees improve the look of the property, and 88 percent believe their trees are healthy and attractive. Ninety-five percent agree that their trees provide shade and cooling, while 84 percent agree that their trees contribute to energy savings for their homes (Fig. 2). Additionally, 84 percent of private, residential ownerships agree that trees improve human health, and 78 percent agree that privately owned trees provide public health benefits (Fig. 3).

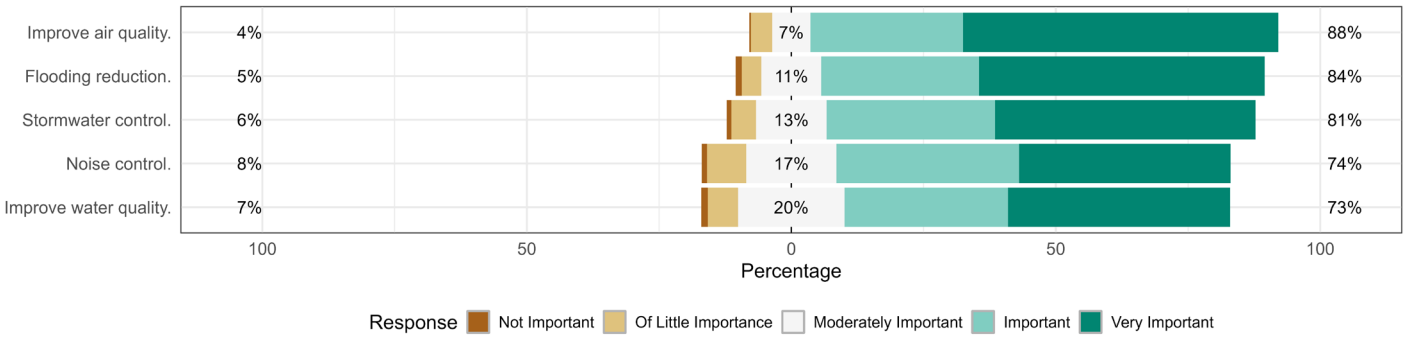

Figure 1.—Estimated potential benefits of trees for private, residential ownerships, Houston, 2019. Percentages on the left indicate the sum of those who responded not important and of little importance, the center percentages indicate those who responded moderately important, and the percentages on the right indicate the sum of those who responded important and very important.

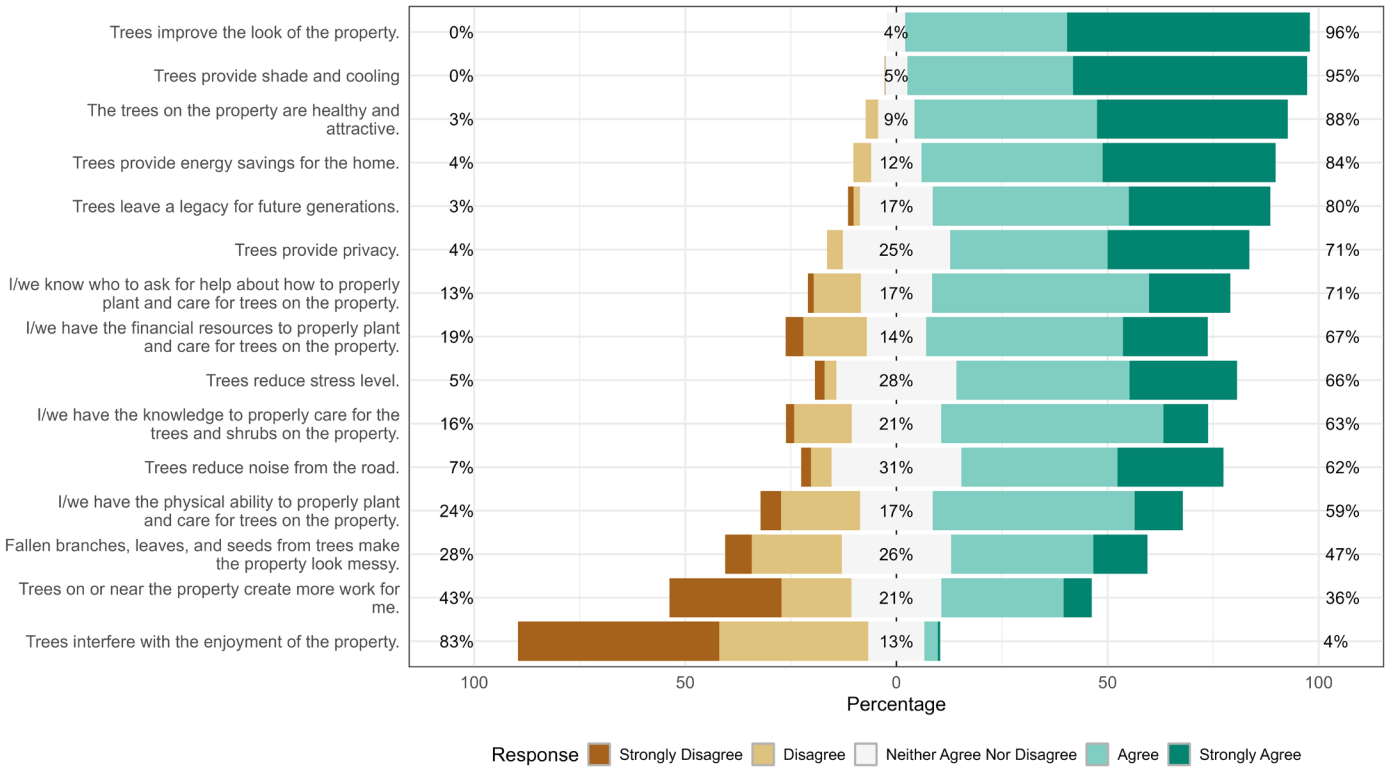

Figure 2.—Estimated percentage of private, residential ownerships by level of agreement on specific benefits provided by trees on their property, Houston, 2019. Percentages on the left indicate the sum of those who strongly disagree or disagree, the center percentages indicate the estimate of those who neither agree or disagree, and the percentages on the right indicate the sum of those who agree and strongly agree.

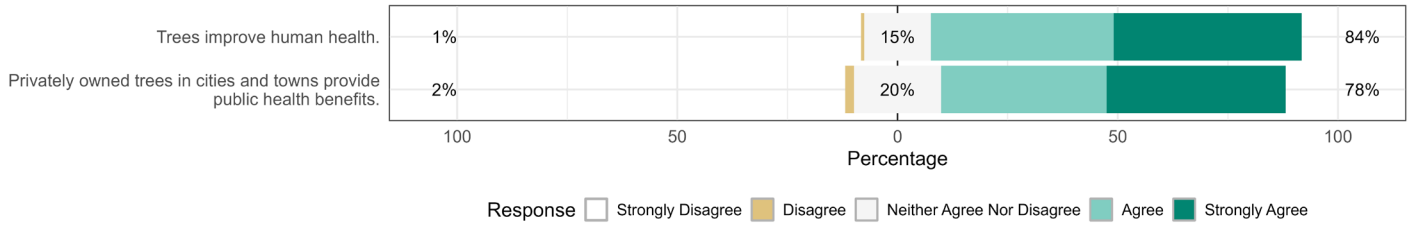

Figure 3.—Estimated percentages of private, residential ownerships by level of agreement on statements about trees, Houston, 2019. Percentages on the left indicate the sum of those who strongly disagree or disagree (no one strongly disagreed), the center percentages indicate the estimate of those who neither agree or disagree, and the percentages on the right indicate the sum of those who agree and strongly agree.

Trees and Storms

When asked about how storms impact trees, 92 percent of ownerships agree or strongly agree that storm-damaged trees pose a threat to people and property. Houston's private, residential ownerships also agree that cared for trees are more storm resistant (83 percent), that trees need maintenance to become more storm resistant (78 percent), and that people can influence how resistant trees are to storms (77 percent). However, when asked if storms were likely to destroy trees on the property in the next 5 years, respondents were nearly split between agreement, disagreement, and ambivalence (Fig. 4).

When asked which actions they had taken in the past 5 years to reduce potential damage from storms to their trees, 79 percent of ownerships said they pruned trees to prevent falling on structures, while 72 percent pruned branches that extended over roofs (Fig. 5A). The percentage of ownerships planning actions in the future to reduce potential storm damage is similar to how many have conducted those actions in the past (Fig. 5B).

Concerns for Property

When asked how concerned they are on a variety of topics related to their property, 54 percent of owners stated that they are concerned or greatly concerned about tree roots interfering with foundations or septic systems, and 50 percent are concerned or greatly concerned about trees and/or branches damaging their property. More than half of owners are not concerned about trees creating a fire hazard, trees attracting pests, requiring a lot of water, irritating allergies, or blocking scenic views (Fig. 6).

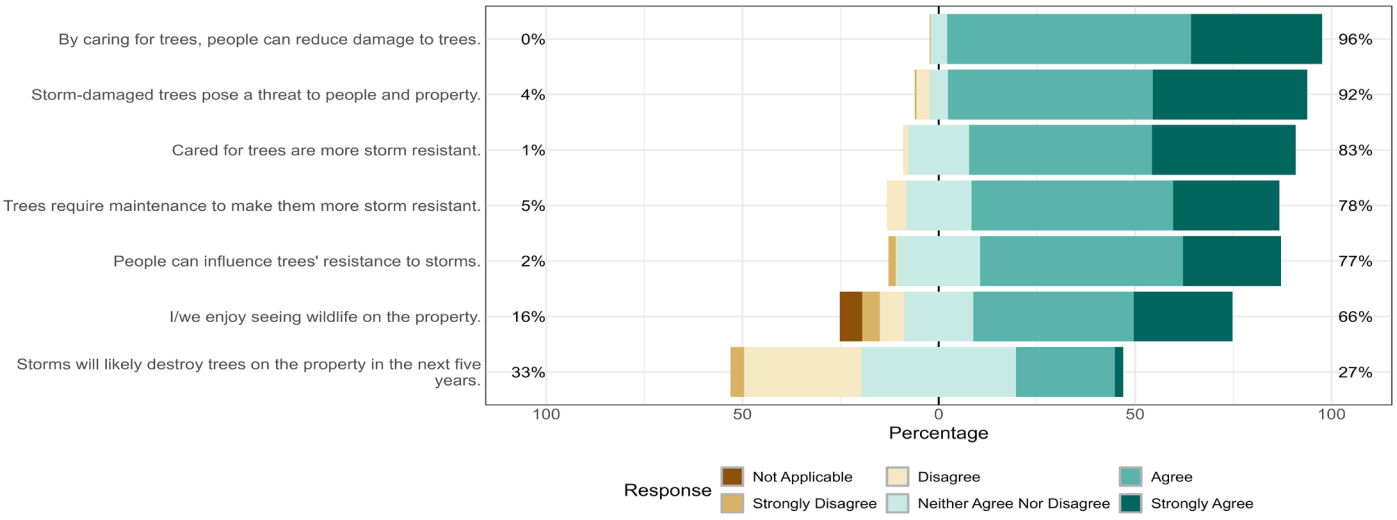

Figure 4.—Estimated percentages of private, residential ownerships by levels of agreement with storm impacts on trees. Houston, 2019. Percentages on the left indicate the sum of those who strongly disagree, disagree, or where the question was not applicable. The percentages on the right indicate the sum of those who agree or strongly agree.

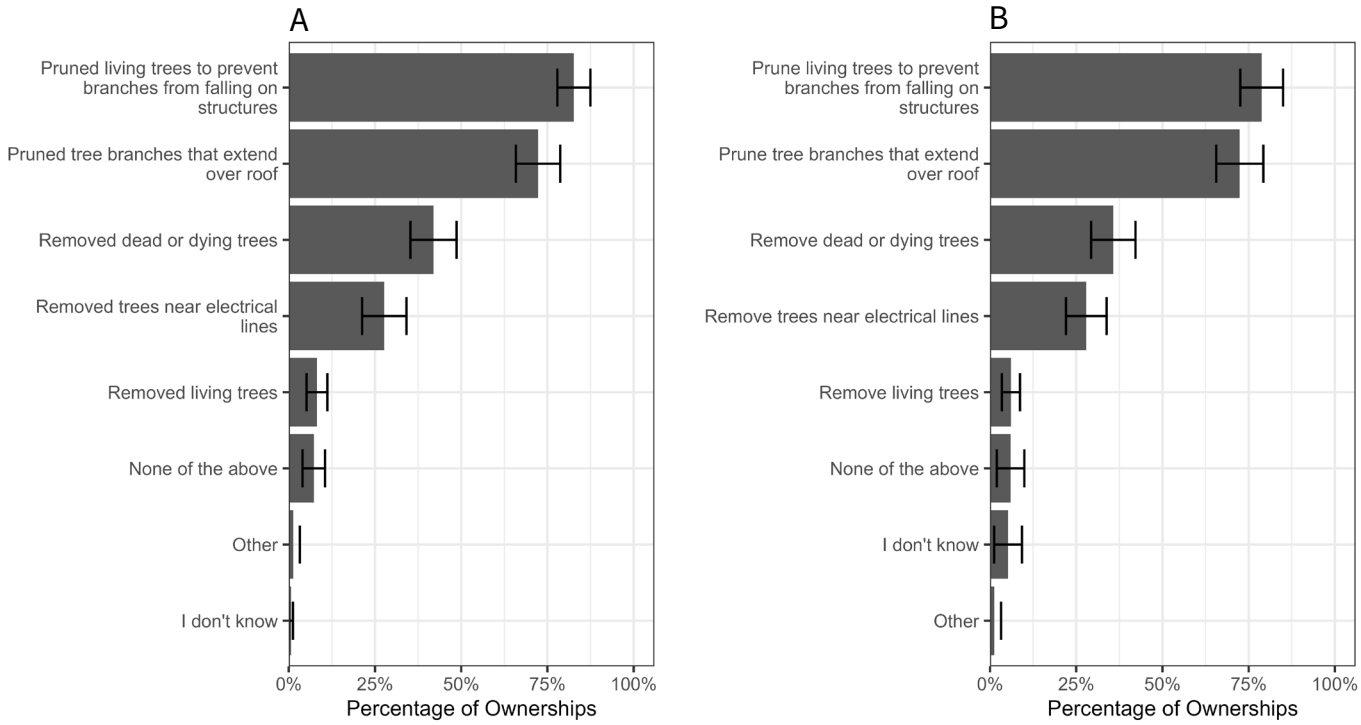

Figure 5.—Estimated percentage of private, residential ownerships who have taken action in the past 5 years (A) or intend to take action within the next 5 years (B) to reduce potential storm damage to trees on their property, Houston, 2019. Error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals. Respondents could select more than one item, so percentages do not sum to 100 percent.

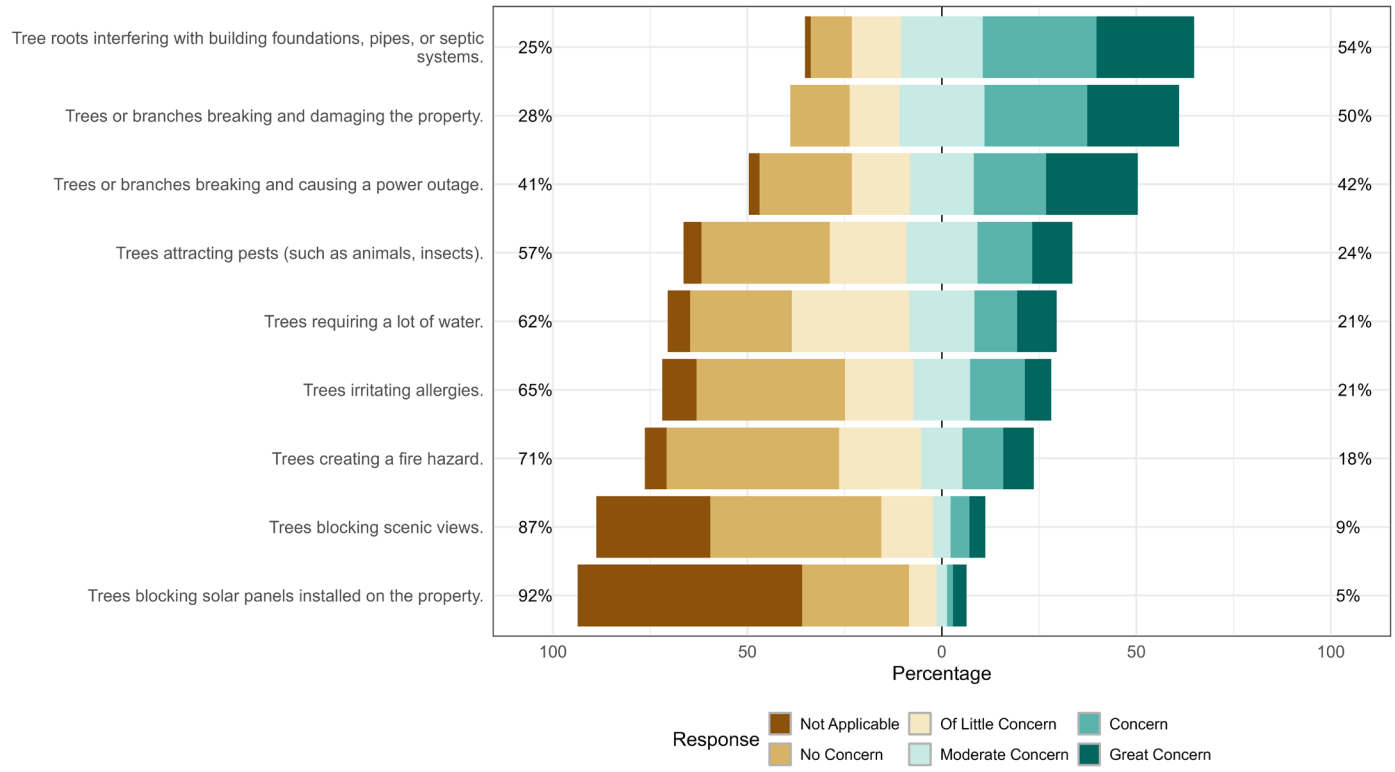

Figure 6.—Estimated percentage of private, residential ownerships and their level of concern for different aspects of trees on their property, Houston, 2019. Percentages on the left indicate the sum of those who have no concern, of little concern, or where the question was not applicable. The percentages on the right indicate the sum of those who have concern or great concern.

Landscape Management and Use

Watering trees or plants was the most commonly reported activity conducted on the properties (88 percent) in the previous year. More than half of ownerships conducted chemical control of weeds or insects, had cookouts or parties, and/or gardened in the last year (Fig. 7a). Among a list of landscape maintenance practices in the past 5 years, the most common activities were pruning trees (65 percent) and planting shrubs, flowers, and ornamentals (64 percent). An estimated 28 percent of owners removed trees in the last 5 years, while slightly more planted trees (31 percent) (Fig. 7b).

The most common answers to "Who, if anyone, performs the tree work on this property?" are landscaping/tree care professionals (65 percent) and the owner themselves (42 percent). Owners' familiarity with programs to help plant or care for trees is low (87 percent are not familiar or only slightly familiar), and only 2 percent of owners have used programs of this type in the past 5 years (Fig. 8).

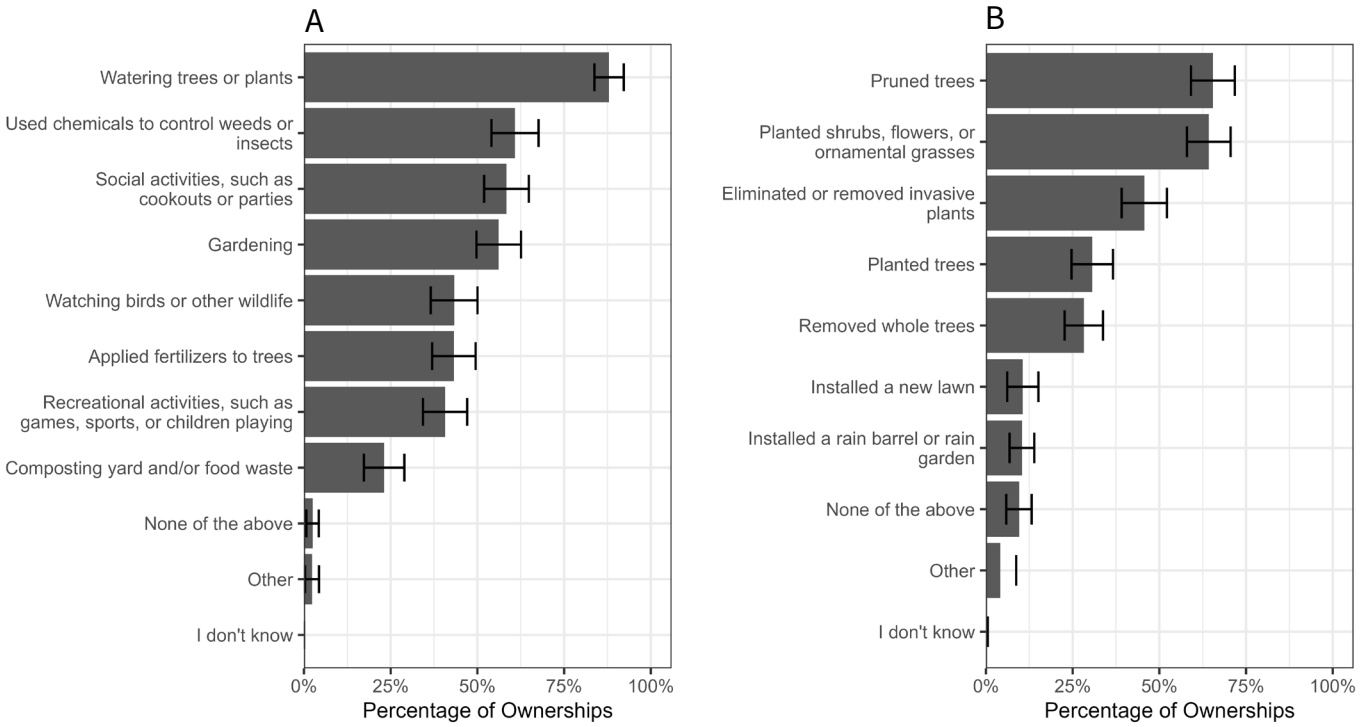

Figure 7.—Estimated percentages of private, residential ownerships by activities that have occurred in the last year (A) and those occurring in the past 5 years (B). Error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals, Houston, 2019. Respondents could select more than one item, so percentages do not sum to 100 percent.

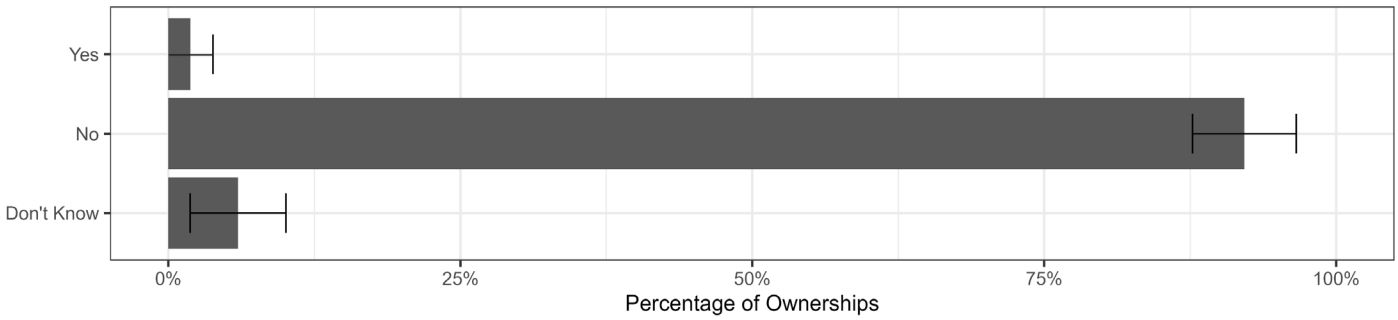

Figure 8.—Estimated percentages of private, residential ownerships that have used a tree-care program in the past 5 years, Houston, 2019. Error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Owners are largely unfamiliar with different landscaping services (e.g., contractors, tree care professionals, landscape designers) and even less familiar with services provided by government agencies, such as local government tree care professionals, master gardeners programs, extension agents, and educators (Fig. 9). Moreover, when it comes to information sources for caring for or planting trees, trust in government and government-affiliates is generally low (25 percent for extension agents or educators, 7 percent for other state employees, and 5 percent for local government employees), while landscaping and tree care professionals are the most trusted (82 percent). Forty-two percent of ownerships report receiving advice over the last 5 years for landscape maintenance. When it comes to receiving new information about the care of trees/grass/shrubs in the future, just over half (55 percent) of ownerships report they prefer written materials, followed by talking to someone in person (46 percent), or from the internet or social media (43 percent).

Neighborhood Characteristics and Civics

Eighty-four percent of Houston ownerships agree or strongly agree that the quality and number of trees in their neighborhoods are good or very good. Three quarters (76 percent) think the safety and security of their neighborhoods are good or very good. Three quarters (75 percent) of Houston's private, residential ownerships agree that people in their neighborhoods are willing to help one another, and 73 percent agree that people in the neighborhood can be trusted. However, 39 percent of respondents agree that trespassing/vandalism is of concern, and 20 percent agree that vacant properties are of concern (Fig. 10).

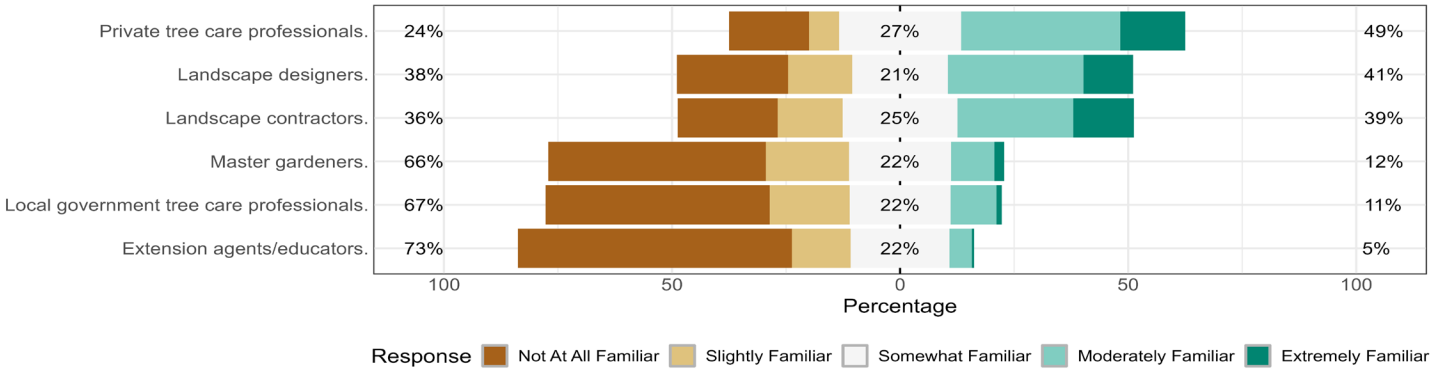

Figure 9.—Estimated percentage of private, residential ownerships by their familiarity with different landscaping and tree care professional services, Houston, 2019. Percentages on the left indicate the sum of those who are not at all familiar or slightly familiar, the center percentages indicate the estimate of those who are somewhat familiar, and the percentages on the right indicate the sum of those who are moderately or extremely familiar.

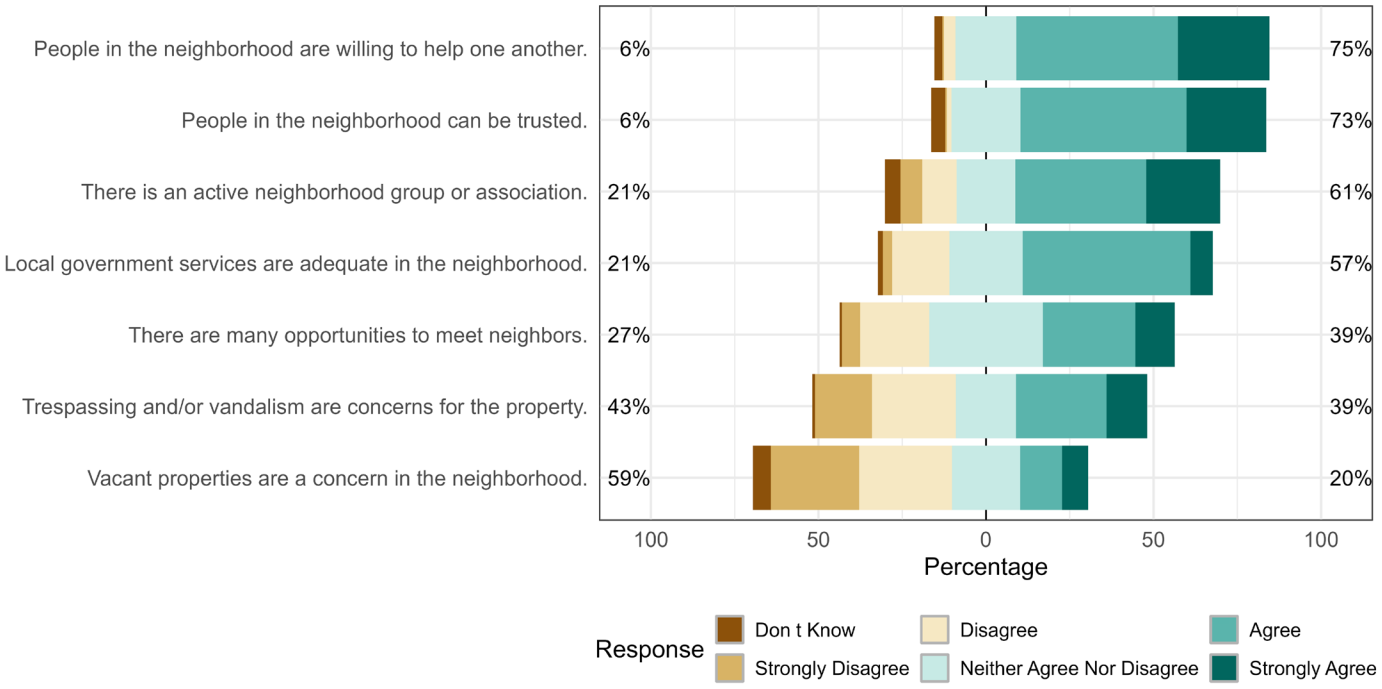

Figure 10.—Estimated percentage of private, residential ownerships by level of agreement with neighborhood characteristics, Houston, 2019. Percentages on the left indicate the sum of those who strongly disagree, disagree, or don't know. The percentages on the right indicate the sum of those who agree or strongly agree.

Demographics

Survey results indicate that private, residential ownerships in Houston are estimated to be 90 percent single-family homes, 7 percent duplex/town or row homes, and less than 1 percent apartment buildings, with the remainder categorized as "other." The properties are primarily occupied by owners rather than renters. The gender of the primary decision maker of these ownerships is nearly equally split between men and women (53 percent identify as male). The majority of primary decision makers report having higher education, with 37 percent having bachelor's degrees and an additional 37 percent having advanced degrees. An estimated 81 percent of ownerships identify as white, and 14 percent identify as Black or African American.

CONCLUSIONS

Most private, residential ownerships in Houston agree that the trees in their neighborhoods provide multiple benefits, that the quality and number of trees in their neighborhoods are good, and that their neighborhoods are safe and trustworthy. While the outlook is good for the majority of ownerships, it is important to note that substantial percentages of owners have negative views of the current state of their neighborhoods and their natural environments. There is low awareness of programs to support urban tree planting and care, as well as low awareness of public and nonprofit urban tree professionals. Many owners have conducted tree or garden care, including planting, pruning, watering, or using chemicals, and many have pruned or managed specifically to reduce storm damage to and from trees. The most common concerns are damage from tree roots and branches. Overall, most Houston property owners have a positive perception of their urban trees and are actively managing or caring for their trees, shrubs, and gardens.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We express our sincere gratitude to the landowners who took the time to complete the survey—thank you! Additional thanks to Aaron Stottlemyer and the Texas A&M Forest Service for their guidance and support in survey implementation and funding. Thanks also go to the employees of the Family Forest Research Center who made this survey happen and to the Forest Inventory and Analysis staff members who helped facilitate it.

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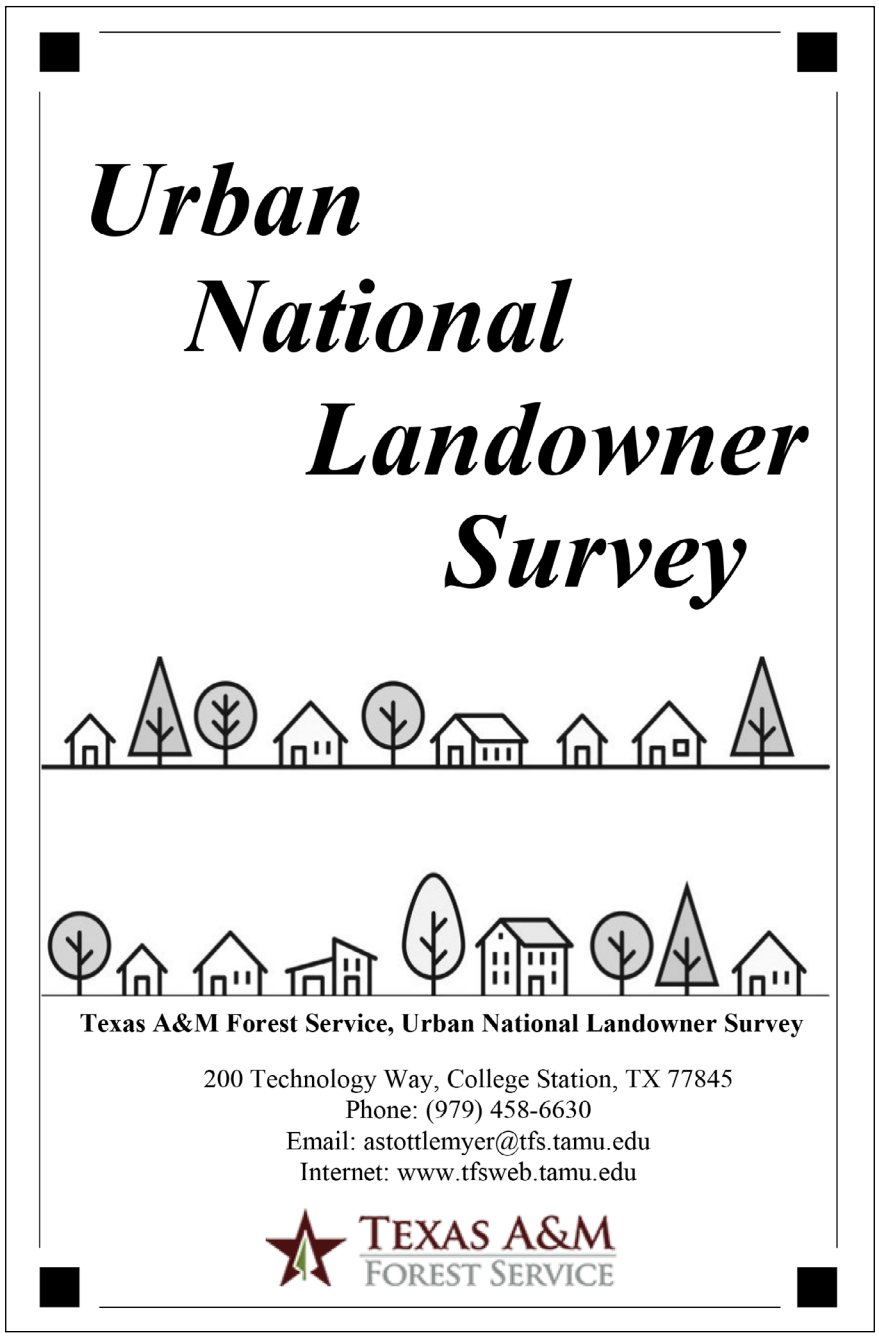
APPENDIX 1

Survey Instrument for Urban National Landowner Survey: Houston, 2019

The survey instrument booklet used for the Urban National Landowner Survey: Houston, 2019 is available online and can be accessed from the link found on the Treesearch landing page at https://doi.org/10.2737/NRS-GTR-240. Annotations, in red text, correspond to the variable names as included in the metadata in the National Woodland Owner Database (NWOS-DB) (Caputo et al. 2020).



APPENDIX 2

Materials Mailed to Landowners

Prenotice Postcard (Front)

URBAN NATIONAL LANDOWNER SURVEY
TEXAS A&M FOREST SERVICE
200 TECHNOLOGY DRIVE
COLLEGE STATION, TX 77845

OFFICIAL BUSINESS

Prenotice Postcard (Back)

TEXAS A&M FOREST SERVICE

Dear Landowner:

Within the next few days you should receive a questionnaire in the mail from the Urban National Landowner Survey. You are one of only a few landowners in your city who will receive it. The questionnaire is designed to give you an opportunity to let policy makers, land managers, and public and private service providers better understand your concerns.

We invite you to participate in the survey by completing the questionnaire when it arrives. Your participation is voluntary. All responses will be held in strict confidentiality.

If you have any questions regarding the survey, please call us at 1-979-458-6630, write us at Texas A&M Forest Service, 200 Technology Way, College Station, TX 77845, or visit our website at www.tfsweb.tamu.edu.

Aaron D. Stottlemyer, Survey Director

Cover letter with First Questionnaire Packet

TEXAS A&M FOREST SERVICE

Dear Landowner:

We invite you to participate in the Urban National Landowner Survey conducted by the Texas A&M Forest Service. Your participation will help policy makers, land managers, and public and private service providers better understand and address the needs and concerns of America's private landowners.

No matter how much land you own, we are interested in hearing from you! We are contacting only a few owners in your city. Because of the limited number of owners contacted, your answers are especially important. You were identified as a landowner from public ownership records. This survey is conducted once every 5 years to understand new topics and changes over time. If you responded during the last cycle, we ask that you respond again.

This is an official Texas A&M Forest Service survey, but your participation is voluntary. Your answers will be confidential and will be combined with others. The results will only be used to determine patterns and trends. Completing the questionnaire takes, on average, 25 minutes.

If you do not currently own property in this city, please return the questionnaire using the postage-paid return envelope and write on the cover "No Property Owned."

If you would like to receive a copy of the results from this survey, write your name and address on the back of the return envelope.

We greatly appreciate your valuable assistance. If you have any questions please call us at 1-979-458-6630, visit our website at www.tfsweb.tamu.edu, or write us at Texas A&M Forest Service, 200 Technology Way, College Station, TX 77845.

Aaron D Stottlemyer, Survey Director

Reminder/Thank You Postcard (Front)

URBAN NATIONAL LANDOWNER SURVEY
TEXAS A&M FOREST SERVICE
200 TECHNOLOGY WAY
COLLEGE STATION, TX 77845

OFFICIAL BUSINESS

Reminder/Thank You Postcard (Back)

TEXAS A&M FOREST SERVICE

Dear Landowner:

About a week ago, a questionnaire was mailed to you asking about property that you own. You were one of a small number of people randomly selected from public property ownership records.

If you have already completed and returned the questionnaire, please accept our sincere thanks. If not, we ask that you please do so today.

Although your participation is voluntary, we are especially grateful for your help because it is only by hearing from people like you that we can better understand the perspectives of you and your fellow landowners.

If you did not receive a questionnaire, or if it was misplaced, please call us at 1-979-458-6630 and we will send you another one.

Aaron D Stottlemyer, Survey Director

Cover Letter for Second Questionnaire Packet

Dear Landowner:

Several weeks ago we sent you a questionnaire inviting you to participate in the Urban National Landowner Survey. You may have intended to complete the questionnaire, but perhaps you misplaced it or simply forgot about it. If you have already returned the completed questionnaire, we apologize for contacting you again, sincerely thank you for your participation, and ask that you disregard this mailing.

However, if you have not returned your questionnaire, we ask you to consider doing so now. For your convenience we have enclosed another copy of the questionnaire and postage-paid return envelope. On average, the survey takes 25 minutes to complete.

Your participation is voluntary, but because of the limited number of landowners in your city asked to participate in the survey, your answers are especially important. This survey is conducted once every 5 years. If you responded during the last cycle, we ask that you respond again.

Your responses will be kept strictly confidential and will be combined with the responses of others. The results will be used by policy makers, land managers, and public and private service providers to better understand and address issues that are important to property owners like yourself.

If you do not currently own the property, please return the questionnaire using the postage-paid return envelope and write on the cover "No Property Owned."

If you have questions regarding the survey, please call us at 1-979-458-6630, visit our website at www.tfsweb.tamu.edu, or write us at Texas A&M Forest Service, 200 Technology Way, College Station, TX 77845.

Aaron D. Stottlemyer, Survey Director

APPENDIX 3

List of Summary Tables

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Table W-HOUS-31A (2019).—Estimated number of residential ownerships by agreement/disagreement about whether their communities should invest more in tree plantings and tree care, West Houston, 2019.

Table W-HOUS-31B (2019).—Estimated number of residential ownerships by agreement/disagreement about having trees in a neighborhood making it a better place to live, West Houston, 2019.

Table W-HOUS-31C (2019).—Estimated number of residential ownerships by agreement/disagreement about having diverse trees in their neighborhood being important to them, West Houston, 2019.

Table W-HOUS-31D (2019).—Estimated number of residential ownerships by agreement/disagreement about whether the health and condition of trees in their neighborhood should be considered when new buildings are constructed or street improvements are made, West Houston, 2019.

Table W-HOUS-33A (2019).—Estimated number of residential ownerships by familiarity with groups of residents who volunteer their time to help maintain public green spaces, West Houston, 2019.

Table W-HOUS-33B (2019).—Estimated number of residential ownerships by participation in groups of residents who volunteer their time to help maintain public green spaces, West Houston, 2019.

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