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The contributions of community forests to rural prosperity in the United States

Reem Hajjar^{a,*}, Susan Charnley^{b,c}, Gregory E. Frey^d, Kathleen McGinley^e, John Schelhas^f, Frederick W. Cubbage^g^a Ashley School of Global Development and the Environment, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY USA^b U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station, Portland, OR, USA^c Forest Ecosystems and Society, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR, USA^d U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Southern Research Station, Research Triangle Park, NC, USA^e U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, International Institute of Tropical Forestry, Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, USA^f U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Southern Research Station, Athens, GA, USA^g Department of Forestry and Environmental Resources, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, USA

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ABSTRACT

Community forests (CFs) are a forest ownership and governance approach that enable community members and other key stakeholders to cooperatively manage local forests to produce a range of benefits that align with local community priorities. While well-studied internationally, there is a lack of research that systematically documents how CFs can contribute to rural prosperity in the U.S. amidst ongoing socioeconomic and environmental change. We adapt a framework developed to characterize the contributions of forests to rural prosperity in the international context to investigate the environmental, economic, and social benefits from CFs. In examining 18 in-depth CF case studies, we find that establishing CFs increases access to and control over local forests by local communities, allowing them to manage forests according to local priorities and needs. Economically, many CFs bring in earned income and employment, directly and indirectly, from forest products and services, and support local businesses through tourism and recreation. Social benefits of CFs include access to recreation opportunities, enhancing social relations, and building community identity, security, and empowerment. In extending existing rural prosperity frameworks, we propose that environmental benefits of CFs, including forest protection and restoration and reducing wildfire risk, also play a key role in enhancing rural prosperity. Evidence from these cases suggests that local governance of forests for the production of local benefits using a CF model is a promising approach to enhancing rural prosperity in the U.S.

1. Introduction

Forests globally provide a broad range of social, economic, and ecological benefits. Yet a number of challenges are re-shaping rural forested landscapes, associated communities, and the ensuing societal and environmental benefits derived from forests. In the United States (U.S.), many rural, forest-reliant communities have been negatively affected by loss of forest sector jobs due to reduced timber production on federal lands and divestment from private industrial timberlands; fluctuating timber stumpage prices for private and public landowners; and restructuring, mechanization, and globalization of the forestry sector leading to mill closures and loss of mill jobs (Crandall et al. 2025,

Gosnell & Abrams, 2011; Yang & Mountrakis, 2017; Zhang, 2022). Additionally, rising temperatures, shifting precipitation patterns, increasing frequency and intensity of disturbances such as drought, wildfire, pests, and pathogens, are increasing stresses on forest health and productivity (Case et al., 2021; Ontl et al., 2020). Forest communities in rural areas of the U.S., which may experience high poverty, unemployment, and general vulnerability relative to urban areas and non-metropolitan, non-forest communities, are often disproportionately affected by such economic and climatic changes (EPA 2021; D'Evelyn et al. 2022; Frey et al. 2021).

As rural forest communities in the U.S. adapt to these changes and seek new economic opportunities, the role of forests in contributing to

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: reem.hajjar@cornell.edu (R. Hajjar).<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2026.107509>

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rural prosperity remains critical – by providing forest-based jobs and products, attracting visitors who spend money locally, offering a place to recreate, providing clean water, supporting fish and wildlife habitat, and more. Emerging opportunities include potential for income generation through payments for ecosystem services such as carbon, biodiversity, water quality, and water storage (Cubbage, O’Laughlin, and Peterson 2017), and developing local restoration economies (Formosa and Kelly 2020; Bendor et al. 2015; Nielsen-Pincus and Moseley 2013).

Community forests (CFs) are a forest ownership and governance approach that enable community members and other key stakeholders to cooperatively manage local forests to produce a range of benefits that align with local community priorities. Around the world, they have been shown to improve forest conditions and community incomes, but with variable outcomes across the diversity of CF models in different countries (Hajjar et al., 2021). In the U.S., they occur across public, private, and Tribal land ownerships, and are managed by locally based entities for multiple, community-defined purposes (McGinley et al. 2022; Hajjar et al. 2024). CFs have been established as a potentially promising approach to protecting forests from fragmentation and conversion to non-forest uses, maintaining working forests that support the forest products industry, improving forest management to promote environmental values, and maintaining access to and use of forest resources by community members. These issues are particularly important in many rural areas. However, beyond early work that studied demonstration projects and more recent work examining particular aspects of community forests or specific forests as a single case study, there is a lack of research that systematically investigates the multiple social, economic, and environmental benefits that CFs in the U.S. provide, and how they can contribute to a broader rural prosperity amidst ongoing change.

Based on 18 community forest case studies from across the U.S., here we document the social, economic, and environmental benefits of CFs and discuss their implications for the broader prosperity of local forest communities. In doing so, we examine how local access and control of forests makes CFs unique in their ability to provide some of these benefits, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of CFs as compared to other forest ownership and governance models. Finally, we discuss the role of CFs as a promising approach to rural prosperity in the U.S., and place our findings into the broader context of CFs internationally.

2. Background

2.1. Benefits of community forests globally

Internationally, evidence of effective local-level approaches to natural resource governance by Indigenous and rural communities has grown over the past few decades (Fa et al. 2020; Oldekop et al. 2019; Rasolofson et al. 2015; Gibson, McKean, and Ostrom 2000). Community forests, like similar community-based natural resource governance regimes, are clearly delineated forest areas, in which community members have access to natural resources, are engaged in their governance, and receive indirect and direct benefits from their management (Charnley and Poe 2007; McDermott and Schreckenberg 2009). CF initiatives span a broad range of tenure regimes, institutional arrangements, relationships between communities and higher levels of government, activities, and outcomes that have evolved in line with local contexts, conditions, needs, and goals (Charnley and Poe 2007; Hajjar and Molnar 2016).

Prior studies point to evidence of how CFs can be beneficial for both communities and forests. First, people are more likely to protect forests or other natural resources when they have secure tenure and access, a sense of ownership and control, and are invested in their sustainability and future (Pelletier, Gelinas, and Skutsch 2016; Schlager and Ostrom 1992). Second, broad participation in decisions about development, implementation, and enforcement of rules/institutions can help to ensure equitable access to resources and power (McDermott & Schreckenberg, 2009; Ribot et al., 2006). Third, local employment in

CFs and local control of benefit flows from the forest can lead to monetary and non-monetary contributions to community development and well-being (Hajjar and Molnar 2016; Oldekop et al. 2019).

Many CFs are “working forests” in the sense that communities’ goals include the production and sale of goods and services to generate revenue for the management of the forest and to financially contribute to the community. Profits from these CFs can support the rural economy through development projects (e.g. schools, clinics, roads), job creation associated with the production of forest products, or by direct cash payments to community members (Frey et al., 2019; Hajjar, Kozak, & Innes, 2012). “Working” CFs typically have economic objectives other than profit maximization, such as providing jobs or amenities to the local population (Engbring and Hajjar 2022; Antinori and Bray 2005).

While a portion of the international literature has examined CFs’ contributions to income, employment, and poverty reduction, there have been increasing calls to account for their contributions to a *broader* rural prosperity – a multi-dimensional concept of human well-being that encompasses notions of human ability to flourish, now and into the future (Macqueen et al. 2020; Miller and Hajjar 2020). Macqueen et al. (2020) show how locally controlled forest enterprises contribute to sustained environmental and cultural heritage, material wealth and health, affirmative social relationships, justice and security, personal and reproductive fulfilment, and cognitive identity and purpose. Similarly, Miller and Hajjar (2020) call for consideration of forests’ contributions not just to material and economic living standards, but also to economic equity, health and education, social relations, security and safety, governance, subjective well-being, culture and spirituality, and freedom of choice and action. Yet, the contributions of CFs to income and employment, and broader rural prosperity, are largely unstudied in the U.S. context (Davis et al. 2020).

2.2. Community forests in the U.S.

There are many ways that community forests in the U.S. have been defined and described. Frey et al.’s (2024) review notes that scholars converge on the following defining characteristics: a forest that is owned by an organization on behalf of the community (most often a local/Tribal government or a community organization); the community has secure access to the forest and its benefits; the community is meaningfully involved in governance and management decisions; and the forest is protected from conversion to other land uses. While U.S. CFs have existed in diverse forms for centuries (Baker and Kusel 2003), they have increased substantially in number since 2010, coinciding with increased federal, state, and NGO support for community acquisition of nearby forestlands (Hajjar et al., 2024; McGinley et al., 2022).

Previous case study work of CF demonstration projects in the U.S. found that communities engaged in community-based forestry organizations seeking a number of economic, environmental, and social benefits (Danks 2009; Christoffersen et al. 2008). From improving management by incorporating local and traditional knowledge and adaptive management (Mausel, Waupochick Jr., and Pecore 2017; Fernandez-Gimenez, Ballard, and Sturtevant 2008; Ballard, Fernandez-Gimenez, and Sturtevant 2008), to improving engagement and participation through deliberate governance processes (Belsky and Barton 2018), CFs have looked to creative strategies for enhancing local benefits from forests. Scholars have asserted the potential for CFs to contribute to community development and poverty alleviation (Glasmeier and Farrigan 2005; Stoian, Donovan, and Pooler 2009) and rural wealth creation (Lyman, Grimm, and Evans 2014). Others have focused on the challenges that CFs face in producing equitable opportunities for both participation and distribution of benefits (McDermott, Mahanty, & Schreckenberg, 2013; McDermott & Schreckenberg, 2009).

More recently, a survey found that CFs are actively managed for a number of locally-defined goals and benefits: while recreation and environmental services were priority management goals for most CFs, timber production occurred on more than two-thirds of them, an

important source of income for many communities (Hajjar et al., 2024). The *Trust for Public Lands* (2021) quantified CF's economic benefits in a number of CFs and found substantial revenue to local economies, particularly through production of timber, maple syrup and other forest-based products, and recreation and related tourism.

This study builds on earlier work on the potential of CFs to enhance many of the local benefits listed above, particularly now that many CFs previously studied are over a decade and a half removed from the 'demonstration' phase, and the number of CFs nationally keeps growing. Furthermore, while more recent work has focused on quantifying benefits to local economies (e.g., *Trust for Public Lands* 2021), this study takes a broader approach to the concept of rural prosperity. We adopt the conceptualization of broader prosperity proposed by Miller and Hajjar (2020) that encompasses less tangible benefits of forests such as security, social relations, and freedom of choice and action. To this analytical lens, we add the dimension of forest environmental benefits as a component of rural prosperity, stemming from our accumulated experience working in rural forest communities in the U.S. and our observations of how ecological factors shape rural wellbeing and livelihoods. With the resulting modified framework facilitating analysis of case studies from around the country, this study thus fills a major gap in the literature on how community forests, as a relatively new and understudied form of forest ownership and governance in the U.S., contribute to rural prosperity.

3. Methods

We selected 18 CFs for detailed case studies and on-site interviews from a list of 98 CFs located in the U.S. (Fig. 1; Hajjar et al. 2024). We

purposely selected the cases to capture variations in geography (western and eastern U.S.), land area (small [$<1,000$ acres], medium [$1,000\text{--}10,000$ acres], and large [$>10,000$ acres]), ownership (state and local government, private non-profit, Tribal and joint ownerships), and timber extraction (whether timber was not harvested, harvested but not as a primary goal of the CF, and harvested as a primary goal). We used the latter three factors as selection criteria across geographies as these could determine what benefits can potentially be produced from the forest (size, whether timber is harvested) and how decisions are made about those benefits (ownership). All selected cases were in existence for at least three years at the time of the research. See Table 1 for a list of cases.

For each case study, we contacted the owning/managing organization to seek consent to include the CF as a case for this research. No contacted CFs opted out. In each case study, we collected data through a combination of document review, site visits, and semi-structured interviews. Interviewees, identified through publicly available information and a "chain" sampling approach (Patton 2015), included where possible personnel from the owning/managing organization, local stakeholder groups involved in the management or use of the CF (e.g. recreation and environmental groups, local businesses), elected local officials, and other participants involved in or familiar with the CF in the associated communities. Participants were asked to recommend additional potential interviewees, including by asking them to recommend people from the community who may have differing opinions from them about the CF, or those who are less engaged in the CF (despite having high awareness of it). The number of interviewees per case varied depending on availability of participants, and when information saturation was achieved for topics of interest (Merriam and Tisdell 2015),

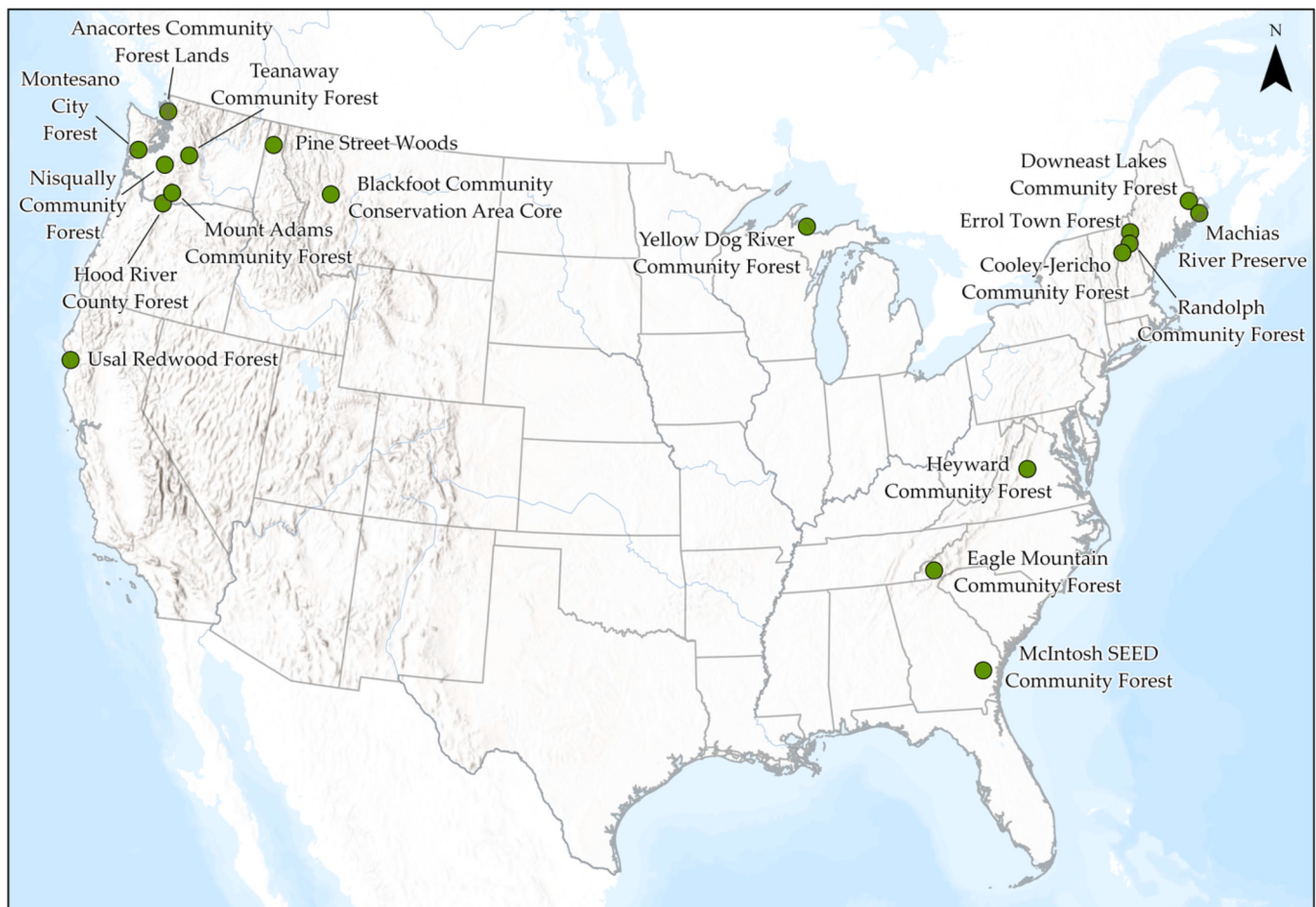


Fig. 1. Map showing 18 case study community forests (credit: Liam Resener).

Table 1

Select information on case studies, which were selected to capture variation in their characteristics.

Name	State	Area (acres), 2024	Year first land acquired	Owner Type	Timber goal**
Anacortes Community Forest Lands	Washington	2,950	1919	City government	No timber
Blackfoot Community Conservation Area Core	Montana	5,609	2008	Non-profit	Yes primary
Cooley-Jericho Community Forest	New Hampshire	843	2013	Non-profit	Yes primary
Downeast Lakes Community Forest	Maine	57,703	2005	Non-profit	Not primary
Eagle Mountain Community Forest	North Carolina	138	2012	Tribe	No timber
Errol Town Forest/Thirteen Mile Woods	New Hampshire	7,108	2005	Town government	Yes primary
Heyward Community Forest	Virginia	142	2018	City government	No timber
Hood River County Forest	Oregon	31,177	1945*	County government	Yes primary
Machias River Preserve	Maine	913	2012	Non-profit	No timber
McIntosh SEED Community Forest	Georgia	1,149	2015	Non-profit	Not primary
Montesano City Forest	Washington	5,500	1931	City government	Yes primary
Mt. Adams Community Forest	Washington	1,805	2011	Non-profit	Yes primary
Nisqually Community Forest	Washington	5,501	2016	Non-profit and Tribe	Yes primary
Pine Street Woods	Idaho	180	2019	Non-profit	Not primary
Randolph Community Forest	New Hampshire	11,247	2001	Town government	Yes primary
Teanaway Community Forest	Washington	50,272	2013	State	Not primary
Usal Redwood Forest	California	49,576	2007	Limited liability corp.	Yes primary
Yellow Dog River Community Forest	Michigan	688	2016	Non-profit	Not primary

* Land acquired in 1920 s and 1930 s; formally designated as a county forest in 1945.

** Respondents in a survey (Hajjar et al. 2024) were asked if they harvested timber, and if timber was one of their top four management goals. Those that harvested timber but did not list it as a top four goal, are listed as timber “not primary”.

and ranged from 3 to 23. The total number of interviewees was 200. We conducted interviews from August 2022-May 2023, with follow up interviews taking place in 2024 and 2025 for validation. Research methods were approved by the Institutional Review Boards at Oregon State University (2020–0507) and North Carolina State University (16837).

Interviews covered a range of topics, including the history and goals of the CF, its governance structure and modes of community engagement, whom they defined as the ‘community’ for their CF and who was left out, forest management practices, financial approach, what distinguishes the CF from other forest ownership and management models (including those of its neighbors), opportunities and challenges for their CF, and advantages and disadvantages of the CF model. We also presented interviewees with a list of social, cultural, economic, and environmental benefits that a CF could potentially provide, and asked them to comment on whether they believed their CF provided that benefit. If yes, we asked them to describe the benefit, its (qualitative) magnitude and importance for the community, and who primarily benefitted from it (within the community, the community as a whole, and/or others outside of the community). Financial managers of the CFs were asked additional questions regarding the CF’s financing, and income and expenditures, including volunteer labor and in-kind contributions.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. We created descriptive and detailed case-study reports from interview data and available documentation, and shared them with our main contacts from each CF for member checking and participant validation (Merriam and Tisdell 2015). We conducted qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts. Using Dedoose’s intercoder reliability function, we conducted two rounds of qualitative reliability checks amongst the research team. For each round, we discussed similarities and differences in our coding patterns until we came to consensus on code meanings and application. We used an *a priori* hierarchical coding structure related to relevant themes derived from the literature on benefits and contributions to rural prosperity (see Table 2). Additional rounds of open coding resulted in the emergent themes related to *access and control* as a principal difference between CFs and other forest ownerships, discussed below.

While our case study methods allowed us to delve deeply into the mechanics of a diverse set of CFs across the nation, and to document information about their contributions to their communities and beyond, there are three key limitations of our study. First, benefits and contributions were not quantitatively measured; the data presented here are derived from interviewee perceptions of benefits arising from the CF and

Table 2

Coding/analytical framework for qualifying benefits of CFs. Several codes derived from the literature were used in the first-round coding and analysis.

Benefits	Relevant inclusions from Miller and Hajjar’s “broader prosperity”	Additions from preliminary/previous work in the U.S. context
Environmental		• Protection from conversion to non-forest land uses • Wildfire risk reduction • Water quantity and quality • Habitat/fish & wildlife Conservation/biodiversity • Carbon sequestration/storage
Economic	• <i>Material living standards</i> (access to food, fiber, fuel) • <i>Economic living standards</i> (income, employment, wealth and savings) • <i>Economic equity</i> (fairness in participation and distribution of costs or benefits)	• Support local businesses • Maintain as a working forest
Social	• <i>Health</i> (physical and mental) • <i>Education</i> (formal or informal) • <i>Social relations</i> (interactions between individuals or groups, collective action, conflict, trust) • <i>Security and safety</i> (tenure security, resilience and adaptive capacity, vulnerability) • <i>Culture and spirituality</i> (cultural values, sense of place, identity and heritage, spiritual or religious beliefs, values) • <i>Governance-related</i> (including participation, control, accountability, justice) • <i>Freedom of choice and action</i> (ability to pursue what you value doing and being)	• Recreation • Scenic value

the relative importance they placed on those benefits. Interview data were triangulated with multiple interviewees and across stakeholder groups, as well as with documentation such as forest management plans

and reports produced by the owners/managers or third parties involved with them, where possible. This shortcoming stemmed from the incredibly diverse array of types of benefits cited by stakeholders, the lack of systematic measurement and monitoring of CF benefits by their owners/managers, and the fact that independent measurement of CF benefits by our research team was outside the scope of this study.

Second, while we selected a diversity of relevant stakeholders and community members to interview for each case, we cannot explicitly extrapolate their views to the whole community, or definitively state that our list of benefits is exhaustive, experienced by all in the community, or of equal importance for all. Last, while our purposive selection of cases captured considerable variation in CF ownership models,

sizes, and geographies, our non-random selection precludes us from extrapolating to the broader population of all CFs in the U.S. Although we did not set out to study only highly functioning CFs that have produced numerous benefits, our sample contained mostly very successful cases. Nevertheless, all CFs in our sample faced challenges in achieving their desired goals, as outlined in Results, with a couple struggling more than others. We cannot speak to outcomes linked to struggling, failed, or less active CFs.



Fig. 2. Perceived benefits of community forests. Segment size of the outer ring corresponds to the number of community forests where each benefit was mentioned. See Supplementary Information for more details.

4. Results

4.1. The benefits of CFs

Interviewees spoke to many environmental, social, and economic benefits, summarized in Fig. 2 and more detailed by case in the [Supplementary Material](#). Below we present examples of key benefits organized broadly by the themes listed in Table 2, as well as emergent themes on access and control and how they make CFs a unique governance model among forest ownerships in the U.S.

4.1.1. Environmental benefits

Environmental benefits were discussed universally across all case CFs, regardless of ownership type, size of forest, or whether timber was harvested. Several interviewees elaborated on how their CFs were managed for multiple environmental values (confirmed by available forest management plans). Some of the environmental benefits they mentioned were aspirational, or anticipated given changes in their management approaches compared to previous ownerships, even if they were not yet being experienced or documented.

Protecting and enhancing water quality and quantity through watershed protection is an explicit goal of several CFs, outlined in mission statements and management plans, and stated in interviews. Doing so was a key driver for originally establishing some of the CFs in our sample (e.g. Anacortes, Errol, Teanaway, Machias River Preserve, Yellow Dog River), whether through prevention of conversion of watersheds and riparian areas to non-forest, or through active management strategies. Examples of management actions taken on CFs to advance this goal include changing forest management practices to enhance water quantity and quality through forest thinning and encouraging growth of bigger trees, thereby supporting recovery of threatened fish populations (Nisqually CF); road decommissioning or improvement to reduce runoff and sedimentation of streams (Usal, Teanaway); improvements in management practices for skid trails, log landings, and stream crossings (Cooley-Jericho, Errol, Randolph); and stream restoration projects to improve aquatic habitat for fish and other aquatic life (Nisqually, Randolph, Usal, Teanaway, Yellow Dog). Such projects can entail adding logjams or wood installations to help address erosion, create more complex aquatic habitat, and cool and slow the flow of water.

Management plans for Errol, Randolph, Usal, Downeast Lakes, Nisqually, and Mt. Adams included extending the age of trees at commercial harvest relative to the previous landowners and state forest practice act requirements. This allowed for trees to grow older and increase their carbon stocks. They also use selective harvest and uneven-aged management silvicultural techniques to enhance biodiversity and wildlife habitat. Many CFs manage for a diversity of forest types and species. Anacortes CF lands are protected through a conservation easement or land transfer agreements that prevent harvest of any sort to protect wildlife. Errol and Randolph enhanced connectivity to other protected lands, with biodiversity and wildlife habitat protection and enhancement a key component of their management approaches. Four CFs in the West (Mt. Adams, Usal, Blackfoot Community Conservation Area (BCCA) Core, Teanaway) manage their forest to reduce wildfire risk through restoration treatments (thinning, reducing fuel loads, prescribed burns) or creating shaded fuel breaks.

We asked interviewees what the most likely alternative trajectory of the forestland they purchased would have been had it not been acquired as a CF. In ten of the CFs, interviewees asserted that all or part of the forest would have been eventually lost to development – creeping city boundaries, or sold off for subdivisions or trophy homes. While these alternative, counterfactual trajectories cannot be verified, interviewees in many of these cases were able to point to portions of the original tract that had already been sold and developed before acquisition for the community forest, other concrete plans for development, or development on nearby land, which made such arguments compelling. For CFs

that were formerly owned by private corporate forest owners (vertically integrated timber companies, timberland investment management organizations, real estate investment trusts), a likely alternative trajectory was purchase by another private corporate owner practicing intensive timber harvest relative to the CF approach, with fewer environmental benefits: “... there's a difference between timber management and forest management and I think that that's the difference between RFFI [owner of Usal] and some of the industrial forest managers. Forest management includes timber management but it's also all the non-timber values...” (Usal, CM5). For an interviewee from Errol,

The concept of local ownership of a community forest was quite attractive to people here who wanted to preserve the character of the land and make sure that sustainable forestry was practiced so that local loggers would have an opportunity to continue working and to be sure that, for people who wanted to hunt, there would be game in the woods and that the streams and ponds were clean and that there would be fish in the streams (Errol, M1).

In many interviewees' views, without the local control that the CF entailed, many of the above environmental goals would not have been achieved.

4.1.2. Economic benefits

Almost all CFs provide enhancements to material living standards through the ability to access and harvest nearby resources for non-commercial purposes, including hunting, fishing, gathering of non-timber forest products (NTFPs, which include mushrooms, berries, decorative products, and culturally important plants and first foods), and in several cases, firewood and timber for local uses. CFs also contribute to economic living standards among some community members (income, employment, enhancing local businesses) in several cases.

While income and employment benefits were universally reported across the cases, the CFs with working forests on large acreages provide more of these economic benefits. Financial protocols from, or public documents produced by, Hood River, Montesano, Errol, and Randolph (all publicly owned) showed that they produced substantial revenue from their timber assets, and indicate the revenue is used to fund both forest management and contribute to county or city budgets. Other CFs (e.g. Cooley-Jericho, Teanaway) hope to increase timber revenue in the future as their timber stocks replenish following intensive harvesting by previous owners. Timber-related jobs are specifically targeted to local contractors in the case of the Nisqually, Errol, Usal, Mt. Adams, and Randolph CFs. These and other CFs also employ local labor in seasonal and restoration work, and sell logs from thinning and restoration to local mills.

Four government-owned CFs (Hood River, Errol, Downeast Lakes, and Randolph) reported strong tourism and recreation-based economies, with visitors supporting local businesses, creating jobs and diversifying economies. Other CFs (e.g. Yellow Dog, Anacortes, BCCA Core, Cooley-Jericho, Errol, Randolph) reported growing benefits to the local tourism/recreation economy:

The economy of the North country is based on tourism and while forestry is still important, tourism may be even more important now. And people are coming in from all over... many for snowmobiling and ATV'ing... [all-terrain vehicle] and they come with money that's important to local businesses here in town and the local businesses are benefitting, beyond the winter snowmobile visitors, because they're coming in the summer and fall for the ATV'ing and of course for the fishing and just the beauty of the 13 Mile Woods (Errol, OR1).

Benefits from CF recreation tourism also can extend to neighboring communities, like in Gorham, a neighboring town of the Randolph CF, where a local hardware store had expanded its offerings to include sporting and outdoor gear, catering to a variety of Randolph's recreational users and the growing outdoor recreation economy. An

interviewee at Heyward noted that their community forest contributed to a larger ecosystem of outdoor recreation around Charlottesville, North Carolina, that was making the area a mountain biking destination and helping local businesses with increased tourism.

Some CFs allow commercial harvest of select NTFFPs, such as maple tapping (Randolph) and bough harvesting (Nisqually), providing additional income for the CF through licensing or harvest payments and contributing to local businesses and job creation. Three CFs (Usal, Nisqually, Downeast Lakes) also sell carbon credits, with others scoping the potential to do the same as a way to enhance budgets in a way that supports their long-term forest management goals. At least two CFs (Hood River, Pine St. Woods) spoke of their CF's contributions to a high quality of life locally, helping to attract companies and individuals to the area.

4.1.3. Social/cultural benefits

Recreation is a highly prized benefit in almost all cases (but the Usal, Nisqually, and McIntosh SEED had limited or restricted access for recreation, mostly until infrastructure is put in place or they gain greater capacity to manage recreation use). For most, a key benefit was ease of access to CF trails given its proximity to the community. Many (Montesano, Anacortes, Heyward, Hood River, Pine St. Woods, Randolph, Yellow Dog) have extensive trail networks for hiking and mountain biking. Several of these CFs also allow hunting and fishing, and some allow camping and some forms of motorized recreation (e.g. motorbiking, snowmobiling). Particularly for the smaller CFs, social and cultural benefits were highlighted as the most important.

Several interviewees spoke of the mental and physical wellbeing benefits that come with recreation on the CF.

I would say the top one is going to be the health benefits ... you can bike, you can hike. It's also the mental health. There are some places where you're gonna go out there and lose phone service and you can just be alone for a little bit of that, not being surrounded by concrete and, just being out in nature helps with that (Anacortes, OR2).

CFs like Pine St. Woods, Anacortes, Machias River, Yellow Dog, Heyward, and Downeast Lakes prioritize recreation and environmental education to get the community out into the woods, fostering a sense of place and connection with land and nature. In Heyward, Hood River, and Downeast Lakes, interviewees spoke of a sense of place that came from their towns becoming major recreation destinations.

Almost all CFs have some form of educational activities that take place there, such as direct connections with local schools that do field visits, adult education opportunities relating to forests and forestry, and outreach and awareness raising programs. McIntosh SEED's primary goal is to educate the African American community about the land and timber assets they have, and use the CF as a demonstration site for forestry and outreach programs. Several CFs also conduct research on their forests, including through links to universities (Machias River Preserve, Randolph, Usal), setting up permanent vegetation transects for monitoring forest conditions (Randolph), and natural resource experiments (Eagle Mountain, Nisqually).

Others spoke of the heritage and identity values that come with preserving access to inter-generational or ancestral hunting and fishing spots: "We're buying it to provide for some hunting access, but also for gathering and traditional access to the landscape" (Nisqually, OR1). In Eagle Mountain, the CF protects cultural resources linked to Cherokee sense of place, and religious and spiritual relationships. The Usal and Teanaway are working intentionally with Tribes to allow for cultural and subsistence activities. Interviewees from Cooley-Jericho, Errol and Randolph spoke to their CFs contributing to sense of place through protected access for customary uses (fishing, hunting, trapping): "There's a genuine pride with the people in town for what's been done here. You know, we've preserved some of the things that used to go on here a long time ago, and we made the land available for everyone to use and to enjoy and you know, be part of what the history was like here"

(Errol, OR1). Yellow Dog River has long been a favored fishing destination even before the community forest existed, and its establishment allows this benefit to be sustained. Interviewees from Mt. Adams, Randolph, and Errol spoke of their CF helping to maintain the rural character of their communities, and, for Mt. Adams, their identity as a timber town.

Public safety and security of forest tenure also featured as a CF benefit in some cases. Regarding safety, in wildfire-prone ecosystems such as BCCA Core and Mt. Adams, interviewees spoke of the CF's management actions to help reduce the threat of intense wildfires spreading to their communities. On tenure security, for Eagle Mountain, the CF represented a return of land to the Cherokee and supported Tribal sovereignty: "Right now, I think the mission that we are under is just get as much land back and ownership as we can" (Eagle Mountain, M1). Another Eagle Mountain interviewee saw the CF "as a piece of land that was historically inhabited and utilized by Tribal members and [the CF] allow[ed] them to have access to that again" (M2). One Nisqually Tribal representative said of the Nisqually CF (jointly owned by the Tribe and the Nisqually Community Forest non-profit organization since 2016, and owned by private corporate timber companies for over a century before that), "We see an embracing of that ownership, and so, not only here at the Tribal reservation, but the upper-watershed communities will feel a sense of ownership of those lands and will help steward those lands as well and have access to lands that many folks haven't been on in a long time since they went to private ownership" (OR1). For McIntosh SEED, a driving goal of the CF is to create a safe space for African Americans to learn about forestry and forest ownership:

First of all, ownership and control. So it goes back to, again, that access to nature, and nature of that size. To have a tract of that size where you can be in nature, not on someone else's controlled property, but access to unlimited space... controlled and owned by people of color. And I think that brings about more of an ownership, and more of seeing themselves as how they can retain land of their own in their family. (McIntosh SEED, M5)

Interviewees from many CFs spoke about enhancement of social relationships in the community due to the CF. In Hood River and Montesano, interviewees discussed relationship building and maintenance between stakeholders as they find a balance between recreation and timber harvesting. Pine St. Woods, Yellow Dog, Anacortes, Cooley-Jericho, and Heyward pointed to enhanced partnerships among different stakeholders in their communities, including with environmental NGOs, school groups, local naturalist groups, recreational organizations (e.g., biking or running clubs), local businesses, and various volunteer groups. Pine St. Woods and Usal have built working partnerships with nearby Tribes. In all these cases, CFs served as a catalyst to bring stakeholders together to talk about forests and their management. An interviewee from Cooley-Jericho said, "The fact that four towns all work together to do this. The community cohesion and sense of place and partnerships and relationships from this effort is really unique" (Cooley-Jericho, M1).

In the BCCA Core and Anacortes, interviewees spoke of community cohesion and the bringing together of neighbors across political divides to talk about common goals related to the CFs:

You can find some of the furthest right people and the furthest left people and they might be able to go for a walk together on some of our trails and talk about the woods and maybe that's the one topic [they can agree on]. We need that. Yeah. We have to find one topic right now. The divisiveness is so brutal on every front ... I think these woods do a really good job of bringing the community together. (Anacortes, M1)

A key feature of the CF cases studied is the participatory nature of their governance structures and processes. Modalities for public participation, community engagement, and accessibility to forest decision-making varied across the cases and ownership types, and broad

and active community participation was rarely consistent over time. However, for many interviewees across several CFs, their ability to contribute to decision-making around their forests fostered a sense of empowerment and control: “It brings decision making into the local community and gives local people control over the destiny of their surroundings” (Downeast Lakes, M3); “I think that the value of people feeling like their opinions are heard and then how that plays out in them feeling like stewards of a property could be very worthwhile” (Anacortes, OR1); “The biggest thing for a town with a community forest is they have control over what happens on their forest land. And sure, easements can prohibit a lot of things, but how the forest is managed and what for is determined locally and here that’s become a real benefit, financially and otherwise, for the town of Errol” (Errol, M2). This was a source of pride and also contributed to sense of place. While empowerment was stated to be more prevalent as a benefit in government-owned and Tribal CFs, all attested to these governance features playing a principal role in making CFs a unique forest ownership and management model, discussed next.

4.2. Access and control: What makes CFs unique and advantageous compared to other forest ownerships

A defining characteristic of the CFs we have studied, and one that distinguishes them from other types of forest ownership in the U.S., is that CFs allow for *access* to and *control* of the forest by local community members, enabling communities to prioritize local forest management goals through deliberative processes. This, in turn, pushes decision-makers to manage the CF in a way that reflects local needs and desires, and primarily benefits the local community. Examples include extending the age of trees at commercial harvest for biodiversity and carbon benefits, prioritizing local contractors for forest work, and providing access to the recreational and traditional uses valued by community members. In most cases, participants stated that local control over management to prioritize environmental, economic, and social benefits to their communities is what makes CFs unique compared to other forest ownership and management models:

The biggest thing that is talked about and appreciated around here with community forests is local control. You're not gonna get that with a state forest and you're not gonna get that with national forest lands. Community forests give the community local control whether it's local control of saving a special place or it's local control of contributing to the forest products economy or because the private landowners are doing poor management or by creating recreational space. Through locally controlled community forests a town is in charge of its destiny, ... actively participating in its future (Randolph, OR1).

Several case studies showed that *physical access to forests* and their benefits were paramount reasons for creating a CF. Many spoke of accessibility for recreation and other uses, both in terms of proximity to the community but also in terms of secure, long-term access that might not be assured if the forest were in private hands where access rules may change or forests may be converted to other uses. Prior to becoming CFs, a persistent concern for some CFs (e.g. Errol, Randolph) was continual ownership turnover of forestlands, with increasingly distant decision-makers and diminishing access to these lands. For Pine St. Woods, access went beyond proximity to include educational and recreational programming that focused on and subsidized bringing low-income school children into the forest, and ensuring accessibility of trails for those with mobility challenges. Along with physical access, for McIntosh SEED, access to forestry education for historically marginalized Black forest landowners was paramount in the creation of the CF. In some cases, physical access to the forest was temporarily restricted while access rules and management plans were taking shape (e.g. Nisqually), or the forests were further away from resident communities, making them more difficult to access (e.g., Usal). However, the overwhelming

majority of cases list access and accessibility as a key defining feature of CFs.

Additionally, *access to decision-makers and decision-making* around the forest featured prominently in framing CFs as a unique form of forest governance. For many CFs, the citizenry felt empowered to be more involved in CF decision-making compared to other land ownerships. For example, the Anacortes CF is owned by the City of Anacortes, which also owns and manages several city parks. But the CF stands out in that its managers intentionally bring the community into decision-making, and residents get more involved in the CF than in city parks: “without that buy-in... it’s still just a city park” (Anacortes, OR3). In the Teanaway CF, owned by the state of Washington and managed by two state agencies, the commitment of the agencies to work closely with a 20-person advisory council (mostly made up of local stakeholders) was in stark contrast to how other state forestlands are managed. This manifested in feelings of more local control over CF decision-making, with the community prioritizing its values and interests, and playing a key role in developing the forest management plans: “You’re managing the land how the local community wants you to manage it, not as some bureaucracy wants you to manage it” (Teanaway, M5). However, others felt that Teanaway veered from the definition of a CF because strong non-local interests were involved in its creation, too many non-local interests have a say in decision-making (being a state-owned public forest), and two state agencies are the ultimate decision-makers. One case, Machias River Preserve, demonstrated that, as broader community engagement in decision-making waned in the years after its establishment, interviewees no longer thought of their forest as a CF. They also did not think it was managed all that differently from other properties also owned by the Downeast Coastal Conservancy and not labeled as CFs. However, stakeholders did still value and appreciate the fact that the property was owned by a locally based organization, with approachable decision-makers within the community – another key feature of CFs.

While governance structures varied widely with different CF ownership models (private, public, or Tribal), all had some means of weaving community voice into management decisions – through local advisory boards, community committees, elected representatives, or more informal and social means of gathering input from community members. Some remarked that having personal connections to the decision-makers and forest managers who were fellow community members made those decision-makers more responsive to their community. Others commented that, unlike with state or federal forests with offices in state capitols or faraway cities, having decision-makers’ offices (NGO or town government) physically located in their town made it easier for anyone to stop by and discuss the forest. This contributed to a shared sense of ownership and responsibility over the forest, driving both stewardship and community pride. It also allowed for decision-makers to be more accountable to their residents. A few interviewees expressed that this was more likely to happen with CFs owned by local governments with publicly accountable decision-makers, as NGO-owned CFs could end up pursuing the NGO’s own agenda, although others noted the great lengths that several NGO-owned and run CFs go to in gathering community input and meeting community goals.

This access to decision-makers and decision-making processes generated a sense of *local control* over the forests and forest management priorities among interviewees. For Eagle Mountain, this translated to a sense of freedom and autonomy. It belonged wholly to the Tribe, so they were able to prioritize Tribal values and interests. A manager commented: “[The CF] is also a cultural gateway too ... which provides opportunities for us as managers providing that space so our cultural community can come and, and speak in relationship to what we are planning to do in the future,” later adding “I feel a sense of a little bit more sense of freedom over there because of the way that the Tribe can move as an owner of that property. And I know that we would never go and just abuse the hell outta that property, but I know that there’s, there’s this sense of feeling, right? There’s this sense of we could do this,

that, and [the] other over here pretty easy” (Eagle Mountain, M1). For McIntosh SEED, the CF was a guarantee of control over access – who was included and excluded from the forest – allowing them to create a learning space for an historically marginalized group. In their view, no one could exclude underserved or discriminated-against community members if they owned the land themselves. For some communities facing creeping development, having control over their forests meant being able to retain their rural identity and keep the hunting grounds they grew up on safe from development: “For the Cooley-Jericho, you know, that piece of property had been proposed for second home mansions, and it had been proposed as a wind farm but that’s long been considered an important viewshed, and through that community forest those communities took control of that viewshed and preserved it forever” (Cooley-Jericho, OR1). Others wanted to ensure that working forests remained working forests, keeping the town’s identity as a timber town and contributing to the local economy and forest products industry, while harvesting timber on their terms.

Many found local control essential in being able to manage their forests for the longer-term, more holistically, and for multiple values and services that directly and indirectly benefit the community (e.g. Nisqually). This meant control over what to prioritize in terms of forest management. For example, Mt. Adams CF, in comparison to nearby state and federal lands, is able to manage more nimbly, including practicing adaptive governance and management, and to use prescribed burns to reduce fuel loads more easily than on nearby public lands. For Randolph, the community forest was heralded for providing local control with fewer bureaucratic hurdles. Even for the state-owned Teanaway CF, interviewees highlighted the state’s ability to manage more flexibly, experiment, and engage in adaptive management in a way that it is not able to on other state lands. Local control also allows for the ability to innovate and experiment: for example, the Nisqually CF is experimenting with creating forest clearings for snow retention, and with assisted migration of tree populations for climate change adaptation.

All cases highlighted the importance of several social, economic, and environmental benefits flowing directly to those residing locally, rather than going to non-local investors or others who do not have a direct connection to the land: “The Nisqually Indian community recognizes that they want to invest part of their wealth, if you will, in something that provides a cultural return.... forests generate wealth. When those forests are owned by somebody from somewhere else, that wealth all leaves. Every time we can acquire ownership, we get to keep a part of that wealth and we also get access to those lands.... that brings cultural values, multiple cultural values” (Nisqually, M4). For the Usal, it meant managing a large tract of local forestland themselves, as community members believed it should be managed, rather than seeing their local forests owned and managed by private corporate owners that prioritize timber production to maximize financial returns for national or global shareholders and investors, with little if any local input. To many, this is a distinguishing feature of CFs as compared to state, federal, or private corporate working forest lands, with income and employment stemming from forest management flowing directly to the community.

4.3. CF challenges in achieving rural prosperity

Interviewees also described challenges and some frustrations with the CF model, primarily financial barriers and governance challenges, that in some cases made it difficult for CFs to achieve their full potential.

Financing, both for forestland acquisition to establish or expand a CF, and for maintaining CF operations, was often pointed to as a challenge or worry for CF managers and leaders. The initial purchase of forestlands is often out of reach for communities without federal or state grant program support (how most of the recent CFs were able to acquire forestlands), and/or NGO bridge funding. Even then, they are often only able to purchase land of less value (with less valuable timber stocks, for example), or smaller parcels – leaving them with ‘leftovers’ forests (Anderson et al. 2015) and limiting their revenue generation ability at

least in the short term). Most CFs have diverse income sources, from forest products and services revenue, local government budgets, and donations from community members, as well as grants from federal and state governments for budgetary support (Hajjar et al., 2024). Some cases were heavily reliant on grants for budgetary support (e.g. Pine Street Woods, Yellow Dog) but several have a large enough and productive land base to be self-sufficient from the sale of goods and services (e.g. Hood River, Montesano, Downeast Lakes, Errol, Randolph), or were adequately funded through local government appropriations or endowments (e.g. Machias River Preserve, Anacortes). For many, much of the grant support went to acquisition rather than maintenance costs, and several interviewees expressed concern that, while they had sufficient operating funds, they needed additional grant funding to conduct any improvements on the forest or restoration work. Many relied on volunteer work and partnerships with other organizations for such work. Several CFs noted that lack of revenue resulted in staffing shortages. Others commented that high acquisition costs limited the ability to scale up or scale out the model; this in turn limits the socioeconomic and environmental impacts that CFs can produce.

While the local governance model of CFs was repeatedly praised in interviews as a unique contribution to local wellbeing, interviewees also pointed to challenges associated with this model. In some cases, CF managers spoke of the difficulty of keeping the community engaged beyond the original acquisition process (e.g. Machias River Preserve). Others described difficulties in balancing competing values and potential uses of the forest, often between timber production and recreation opportunities (e.g. Montesano, Hood River). For the state-owned CF, Teanaway, there was a concern about potential for conflicting priorities between the state and community members: it was established by the state legislature and the authorizing legislation laid out what its governance structure and priority forest management goals would be. For city-owned forests, there were some concerns about turnover in key city staffers or elected leadership, the potential for management decisions to get caught up in local politics or personal relationships, and changes in budget appropriations to the CF as city priorities evolve; however, interviewees did not provide examples of these having occurred.

One of the defining features of CF governance – inclusive and participatory decision-making – was also mentioned as a challenge because it slowed down decision-making processes. Interviewees in Montesano described lengthy efforts to accommodate each other’s goals. In other CFs, interviewees noted their local governance process was a forum for debating the issues so that people could be heard and work with the decisionmakers to come up with an approach that tried to address most concerns – a satisfying but time-consuming process. As one interviewee put it, “depending on your perspective, that’s a good thing or a bad thing” (Montesano, OR 2) – taking time to deliberate avoids rash decisions, but public involvement is costly or could prevent swift and needed actions. This was also seen as relative: compared to a private company, CFs were slow to make decisions; but compared to federal or state forests, CFs were quick and responsive.

Others pointed to factors beyond the CF model that created challenges to the CF, such as a declining and aging workforce, and mill closures in the region:

The closure of pulp mills is a concern. [...] You really can’t do good forest management without a nearby market to get rid of low-grade wood. [...] And the workforce is getting quite a bit older and there’s not a lot of young people coming into this kind of work. So finding people to run the logging equipment, the trucks, all the things that are necessary are harder and harder to find (Errol, M2).

5. Discussion and conclusion

CFs globally have shown to provide a number of benefits to local communities (e.g. Gilmour 2016; Fischer et al. 2023; Arts and de Koning

2017; Hajjar et al. 2021). Results from our 18 case-study community forests suggest that community forests in the U.S. also provide numerous social, environmental and economic benefits to their local communities.

5.1. Trends across case studies

While income and employment from forest-related activities were key benefits for some CFs (particularly larger CFs managed as working forests), social benefits were the most prominent across the board. Given their relatively small acreage, and that about one-third of U.S. CFs do not produce timber (Hajjar et al., 2024), there is a risk that CFs could be seen as unproductive and not creating jobs in rural areas as a result. However, this study shows that many bring in earned income and employment from forest products and services, even beyond timber, and indirectly and directly support local businesses. A recent study demonstrated that CFs have had multiplier effects on local economies through timber harvesting, and serve as areas underpinning regional tourism economies that support local businesses (Trust for Public Lands 2021).

Perhaps most noteworthy are the less tangible benefits that contribute to a broader rural prosperity, from access to recreation opportunities, to enhancing social relations, building community identity and empowerment, and more. Healthy forests under various ownership and governance models also provide social, environmental, and economic benefits. However, we suggest that because CFs focus on creating local community benefits as defined by the communities themselves, they are unique in their ability to meet the needs of rural forest communities, and are likely more effective at promoting broader rural prosperity than most other ownerships. This ability is primarily facilitated by a governance model that enhances local control over the resource.

Echoing Hajjar et al.'s survey of U.S. CFs (2024), we found few trends in the types or magnitude of benefits that CFs provide based on geography or ownership type. Working forests in our sample, those that produce and commercialize timber, tended to provide more jobs directly related to forest management and harvesting contracts, but in some cases were more likely to see more conflicts in management priorities between timber harvest and recreation – the latter a key benefit stemming from the forest for many. Benefits such as protection from forest conversion, provision of environmental services, education, and sense of control and empowerment, were found across most if not all cases, regardless of the size, ownership type, status as a working forest, or location. However, several interviewees noted that the size of CFs limits their impacts. Hajjar et al. (2024) found that 87% of CFs in the U.S. were smaller than 5,000 acres (2,023 ha). Interviewees associated with relatively small CFs noted that to increase their contributions to rural prosperity they would need to scale up and acquire more land.

Funding for additional land acquisition and long-term financing for desired management activities were concerns for several of the U.S. cases studied here, threatening CFs' ability to deliver on rural prosperity in the long-term. In response, the CF cases without well-stocked working forests have experimented with various financing strategies, relying on a diversity of revenue streams, partnerships, and volunteers, for at least the medium-term. Financial viability is a consistent challenge of CFs globally (Frey, Charnley, and Makala 2021; Gilmour 2016; Baynes et al. 2015; Humphries et al. 2018). In many countries, community forests operating small-scale enterprises face technical, institutional and financial hurdles to participating in markets that are geared towards industrial or state forestry on large ownerships (Pokorny et al. 2012), with many relying on international and government agency grant funding to start and maintain operations (Frey et al. 2021, Baynes et al., 2015). Ultimately, balancing the need for revenue generation with the multiple other locally defined goals will continue to be a challenge, and trade-offs will need to be openly deliberated by the community to avoid or mitigate undesirable or unanticipated consequences (Engbring and Hajjar 2022).

5.2. Contributions to our understanding of rural prosperity in forest communities

The Miller and Hajjar (2020) framework on forests' contributions to broader prosperity was useful for framing the contributions of U.S. CFs to rural prosperity. Often, the global literature on CFs focuses solely on outcomes such as forest cover change and material benefits to communities (Hajjar et al. 2021; Rasolofson et al. 2017), although researchers are beginning to incorporate more diverse indicators of well-being in their assessments (Santika et al. 2019). The Miller and Hajjar framework allows for a broader view of both material and less tangible benefits that CFs can provide communities. Indeed, evidence from our cases indicates the many ways forests provide a pathway to prosperity in rural communities. Several items from the Miller and Hajjar framework were cited by interviewees in the 18 cases as important benefits from their CFs, particularly material and economic living standards, health, education, social relations, cultural values, and, for a smaller number of them, tenure security. Governance-related benefits (participation, accountability, and justice) and freedom of choice and action were particularly salient amongst our cases in leading to a sense of empowerment and control, and were principal distinguishing features of CFs as compared to other ownership models in the U.S.: local control for local benefits.

A key contribution of our research is that it expands the Miller and Hajjar framework to suggest that environmental benefits, particularly the various ecosystem services that a healthy forest provides (for example, watershed services, biodiversity conservation, and wildfire risk reduction), are a fundamental component of understanding rural prosperity in and beyond the U.S. context. These types of ecosystem services did not feature explicitly in the Miller and Hajjar framework, yet were consistently pointed to by interviewees across cases as principal benefits that CFs provide to their communities. These environmental benefits were then linked by interviewees to local wellbeing: a healthy forest was not only a natural capital asset for local economies; these forests were also valued for their biodiversity and the ecosystem services that mitigate a community's risks to environmental shocks.

Of all the dimensions of prosperity outlined in the Miller and Hajjar framework, we found it most difficult to apply measures of economic equity given our study design. By reallocating power and wealth from corporations, private landholders, and distant governments to local communities, CFs' focus on producing local benefits certainly brought economic benefits to rural communities. However, this study was only able to present a limited understanding of how CFs contribute to economic equity within communities. A separate study (McCaskill et al. forthcoming) examined how two CFs in our sample use different strategies to enhance equity in participation in decision-making and in distribution of benefits. When asked how well they thought the CF governance structure reflected diverse community interests, interviewees across our 18 cases rarely spoke of particular groups being intentionally left out of governance structures or community benefits, or of decision-making roles and benefits being concentrated among a particular faction. However, many interviewees did identify under-represented groups within their CF government structure – both demographic and interest-based – and expressed intentions to more actively recruit their participation. However, without statistically representative samples of the communities, or more targeted recruitment amongst marginalized groups, we were unable to fully assess how CF benefits were distributed within their often-heterogeneous communities. Previous work (McDermott et al. 2013; McDermott & Schreckenberg, 2009) documented the challenges that CFs face in producing equitable opportunities for community members. Further targeted research may help disentangle who in the community is benefiting from CFs and who is left out.

Local access and control were seen as key distinguishing features of U.S. CFs when compared to other forest ownership types, and were seen by interviewees as benefits on their own (freedom of action and control, sense of empowerment, sense of place and identity) and a means to

additional benefits (ability to manage for locally-valued ecological and social outcomes). In the explored cases, access proved to go beyond mere property rights, to having a bundle of powers with the ability to influence decisions – through social relationships, proximity to decision-makers, and participatory governance – and benefit from the forest resource (Ribot and Peluso 2003). This contrasts with many CF cases worldwide, where partial devolution, reappropriation of rights, elite capture, or differential capacities to mobilize knowledge, capital or influence have limited community access to benefits (Charnley and Poe 2007; Ece, Murombedzi, and Ribot 2017; Ribot, Agrawal, and Larson 2006; Gonzales Tovar and Hajjar 2024), with mixed empowerment outcomes (Mawutor and Hajjar 2024; Chomba, Treue, and Sinclair 2015). Instead, interviewees in our cases highlighted the sense of empowerment that comes with the enhanced agency, accountability, and control over their forests. The socio-psychological benefits of the agency and control associated with CFs remain underexplored (Roy and Sengupta 2025), as are the other health benefits that U.S. CFs bring (Tandon et al. 2025).

These findings connect to broader debates in development studies and community-based natural resources management. The multi-dimensional nature of the benefits documented – spanning natural, social, cultural, and produced capitals – is consistent with Bebbington's (1999) asset-based framework for rural livelihoods sustainability. Our results also echo those of an analysis of 50 case studies from 24 countries that show that locally-controlled forestry businesses advance many values that make up rural prosperity (Macqueen et al. 2020). Finally, the centrality of local control and participation in producing prosperity aligns with Ostrom's (1990) design principles for self-governing institutions, while extending them by showing that governance participation and local control themselves constitute valued capabilities for rural development (Sen 1999).

As forested landscapes continue to see multiple climate-related and socioeconomic changes, our cases indicate that the CF model of forest ownership and governance can be an important contributor to rural prosperity, and holds promise for supporting adaptation to change in forest ecosystems and forest communities. Yet, as elsewhere (*ibid*), these U.S. CF cases face challenges, with primarily financial impediments reported by interviewees that in turn limit their size and contributions to rural prosperity. We conclude that the prosperity contributions documented here are contingent upon developing and maintaining the long-term financial capacity of the CFs, and will likely increase if CFs can scale up in size. As such, enabling policies that mobilize financial and technical support could help maintain and expand existing CF successes, and help additional communities acquire their surrounding forestlands. While transferability of any particular findings may be limited given the diverse contexts in which CFs occur across the U.S. and the globe, evidence from these 18 cases indicates that having community access to and control over local forests is a promising approach to enhancing rural prosperity under other governance and resource conditions.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Reem Hajjar: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Susan Charnley:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Gregory E. Frey:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kathleen McGinley:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **John Schelhas:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Frederick W. Cabbage:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2026.107509>.

Data availability

The data that have been used are confidential.

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