

# Rural-to-urban migration and the geography of absentee non-industrial private forest ownership: A case from southeast Ohio

Caleb Gallemore<sup>a,\*</sup>, Darla Munroe<sup>b</sup>, Derek van Berkel<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> International Affairs Program, 217 Oeschle Center for Global Education, Lafayette College, 730 N. High Street, Easton, PA 18042, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Geography, The Ohio State University, USA

<sup>c</sup> Center for Geospatial Analytics, North Carolina State University, USA

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## ABSTRACT

There is a growing literature on tropical forests that demonstrates ways in which rural-to-urban migration establishes dynamic connections between forest landscapes and urban areas. In the United States, context, however, studies of the geography of absentee ownership of non-industrial private forest (NIPF) lands focus on urban-to-rural migration for retirement or amenity purposes. Using parcel data sourced from local governments in an 11-county study area in central and southeastern Ohio, along with a range of openly available data, we analyze patterns of absentee ownership of NIPF parcels to determine the characteristics of areas where absentee owners reside. We hypothesize the rural-to-urban migration patterns, particularly of youth, will help explain where absentee NIPF owners of parcels in our study reside. We estimate models for all census tracts in the United States, finding that indicators of migration, creative class employment opportunities, and affluence are strongly associated with finding at least one absentee owner of an NIPF parcel in our study area. Considering these complex connections affecting NIPF parcels in a North American context could support improved forest management education, outreach, and planning efforts.

## 1. Introduction

Absentee landowners are becoming an important part of the future of forests in the United States (US). Individuals and families account for 95% of private forest owners, collectively owning 61% of private forestland (see Fig. 1; Butler, 2008; Butler et al., 2016b; United States Forest Service, 2015). According to the National Woodland Owner Survey (NWOS: 2011 to 2013), approximately 37% of owners of non-industrial private forests (NIPFs) greater than 10 acres across all states surveyed did not have their primary residence on their forest parcel (Butler, Miles, & Hansen, 2018a), a share that increased since the previous survey round in the early 2000s (Butler, Miles, & Hansen, 2018b). These new geographic arrangements pose important questions for management of NIPF land, where landowners are dealing with challenges related to invasive species (Gandhi & Herms, 2010; Poland & McCullough, 2006; Pyšek & Richardson, 2010), climate change (Chmura et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2010; Zhu, Woodall, & Clark, 2012), fire (van Mantgem et al., 2013), development pressures (Drummond & Loveland, 2010; Radeloff et al., 2010), and growing urban-to-rural migration (Plane & Jurjevich, 2009; Rickenbach & Kittredge, 2009; Xu, 2014). To date there is limited understanding of

this segment of forest owners and as Petrzalka, Ma, and Malin (2013, p. 157) put it, absentee landowners remain the “elephant in the room” for US forest policy, despite that their forests are crucial for ecosystem service provisioning (Caputo & Butler, 2017; Petrzalka & Armstrong, 2015). Who are these absentee landowners? will they need to commute large distances to manage their land? what does land inheritance and migration mean for future management?

Identifying ways absentee landownership generates novel geographic connections can support conservation efforts (van Herzele & van Gossum, 2008), even at subnational scales. Given that absentee NIPF owners often reside in urban areas (Feldpausch & Higgenbotham, 2006; Hughes et al., 2005), a geographic approach can help characterize which kinds of cities and which areas within cities are more likely to host owners, allowing for more targeted outreach to and characterization of these individuals. Identifying clusters of absentee owners for community building, for example, could allow extension agencies to target master volunteer and peer-learning programs (Kueper, Sagor, Blinn, & Becker, 2014; Sagor, 2012) more effectively.

Previous research on absentee ownership emphasizes the role of urban-to-rural migration, particularly for second home or pre-retirement ownership, often driven by amenity considerations (Brown,

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [galleemoc@lafayette.edu](mailto:galleemoc@lafayette.edu) (C. Gallemore).

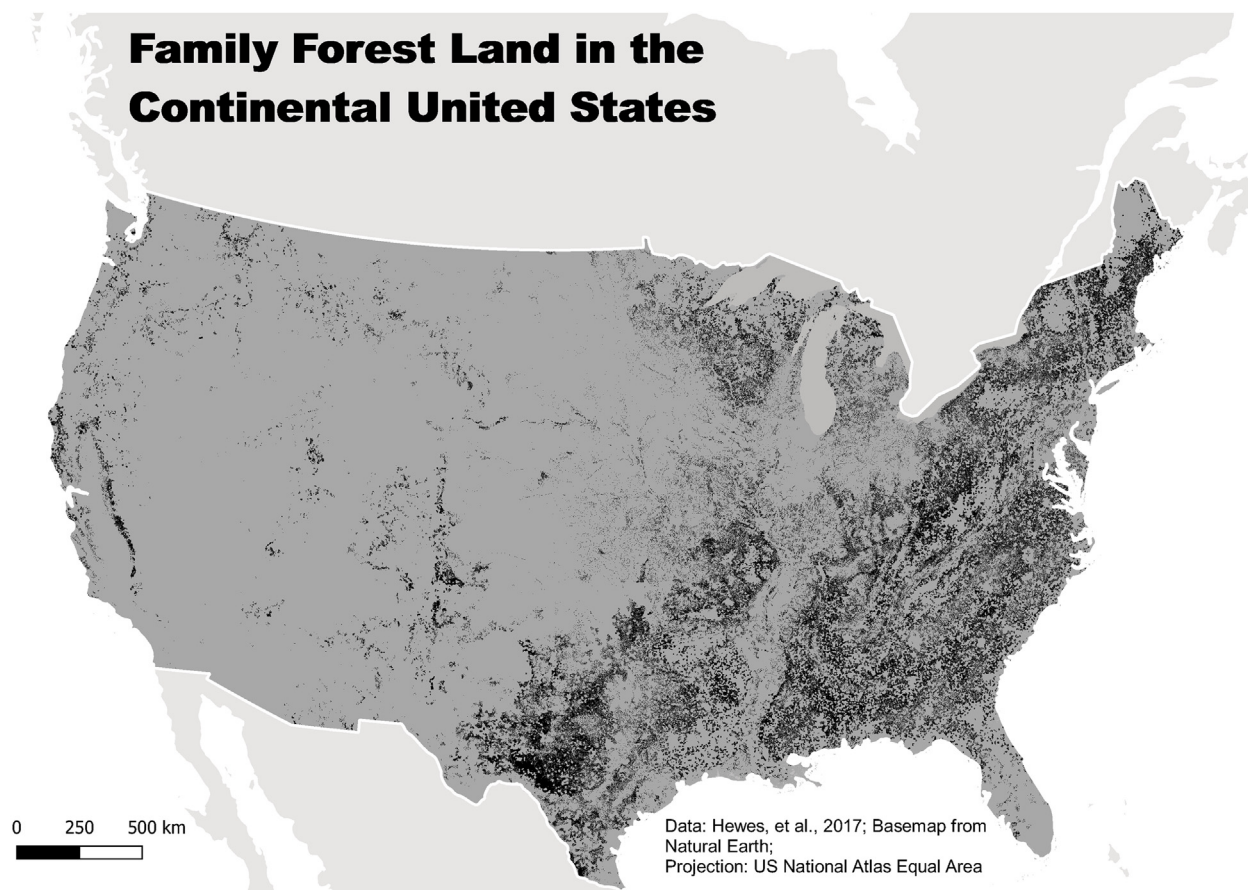


Fig. 1. Family-owned forest lands in the United States (Hewes, Butler, & Liknes, 2017).

Johnson, Loveland, & Theobald, 2005; Drummond & Loveland, 2010; Eimermann, 2015; Gosnell & Abrams, 2011; Haugen, Karlsson, & Westin, 2016; MacDonald & Rudel, 2005; Miller, 2012; Rudel, 2009). Our interest here is different. Inspired by work on migration in tropical forest countries (Hecht, Yang, Basentt, Padoch, & Peluso, 2015), we argue that rural-to-urban migration also can set up complex and enduring relationships fundamentally shaping the geography of absentee NIPF ownership that will impact the future management of US forests.

The geography of absentee landownership is not just about where absentee parcels are located but also about where their owners reside. Studying these relationships requires comprehensive data on parcel locations, as well as a way to link these parcels to specific absentee owner locations. Here, we use county-level tax administration data drawn from a sample of 11 counties in central and southeast Ohio as of 2014 for this purpose. We use these data to identify both absentee-owned parcels and their owners' places of residence. While this approach cannot provide the high-resolution owner characteristics data of national surveys (Butler et al., 2016b), it complements these data sources by lowering response biases (Butler, Hewes, Tyrrell, & Butler, 2017; Golden, Peterson, DePerno, Bardon, & Moorman, 2013; Rickenbach & Kittredge, 2009) and allowing for more explicit consideration of spatial relationships. We are particularly interested in outmigration of younger cohorts. We hypothesize that migration among younger age groups will tend to concentrate absentee ownership in areas with high levels of creative employment, which attract young outmigrants from rural areas who then inherit properties.

## 2. Migration, inheritance, and absentee ownership

Studies of NIPF management have tended to focus on historical transformation (Kaplan, Krumhardt, & Zimmermann, 2009), urban

decentralization (Drummond & Loveland, 2010; MacDonald & Rudel, 2005; Miller, 2012; Rudel, 2009), and factors contributing to use of various management strategies (Beach, Pattanayak, Yang, Murray, & Abt, 2005; Bourke & Luloff, 1994; Erickson, Ryan, & De Young, 2002; Kelly, Gold, & Di Tommaso, 2017; Silver, Leahy, Weiskittle, Noblet, & Kittredge, 2015; Tian, Poudyal, Hodges, Young, & Hoyt, 2015; West, Fly, Blahna, & Carpenter, 1988). Our concerns here are rather different; rather than asking how NIPF landowners manage their land, a question that is well studied (Butler et al., 2007; Golden et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2017; Kendra & Hull, 2005; Linghjem & Mitani, 2012; Miller, Snyder, & Kilgore, 2012; Petzelka, 2012; Petzelka & Armstrong, 2015; Salmon, Brunson, & Kuhns, 2006; Silver et al., 2015), we are interested in understanding where absentee landowners are more likely to reside.

Absentee ownership has been found to be less engaged in active management (Golden et al., 2013; Kittredge, 2004; Linghjem & Mitani, 2012; Miller et al., 2012; Petzelka, Malin, & Gentry, 2012; Rickenbach & Kittredge, 2009), less versed in local ecological knowledge (Eriksen & Prior, 2011), less likely to benefit from the direct social contacts (Kittredge, Rickenbach, Knoot, Snellings, & Erazo, 2013; Mayer & Rouleau, 2013; Petzelka & Armstrong, 2015; Rickenbach & Kittredge, 2009; Ruseva, Evans, & Fischer, 2014; Sagor, 2012; West et al., 1988), and less likely to be affected by extension efforts (Feldpausch & Higgenbotham, 2006; Hughes et al., 2005; Nielsen-Pincus, Ribe, & Johnson, 2015).

Absentee ownership rates are spatially heterogeneous (see Fig. 2). Using NWOS data, Kaetzel, Majumdar, Teeter, and Butler (2012) find that rates of ownership as a secondary residence vary across US geographic regions, with higher rates in North Central, Northeastern, Pacific, and Mountain regions than for the Southeastern and South Central parts of the country. They are also uncertain. Aguilar, Cai, and Butler (2017), for example, find that 25% of the respondents to a forest-use

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