

Study: Forests taking whack from growth

Environmentalists worry sprawl will hurt Upstate's natural resources

By Anna Simon

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CLEMSON — On these crisp fall days, hikers, mountain bikers and horseback riders enjoying fall colors in Clemson University's Experimental Forest and the Andrew Pickens District of Sumter National Forest are taking advantage of a resource that's disappearing in other parts of the Upstate.

New research released Tuesday shows that more than 700,000 acres of forest cover was lost to develop-

ment or turned to pasture since 1992 in the 10 counties of the Upstate, said Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, the managing partner of the Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium, which sponsored the study done by Clemson University's Strom Thurmond Institute.

That 700,000 acres of lost forest cover is half again the size of Greenville County, which encompasses about 500,000 acres, or approximately equal to Pickens and Oconee counties

combined, Wyche said.

The full 10-county area reaches from Cherokee and Union counties to the northwest corner of the state and is 3.9 million acres in size.

"It's shocking and mind-boggling that we've lost 700,000 acres of our forest cover in such a relatively short period of time. If that's not a wake-up call to get serious about managing growth, I don't know what is," Wyche said.

Developers already work with environmentalists and entities such as the state Department of Health and Environmental Control to "be good stewards," said Danny Youngblood, presi-

dent of Youngblood Development and former chair of the Economic Development Alliance of Pickens County. "At the same time, you're going to have development. You're going to have to prepare for it."

Some people want to live in the country away from the urban environment, said Tom Winkopp, a Greenville and Clemson developer. "You're going to have a demand for that kind of development."

However, most "good developers now want to be anti-sprawl" and build where infrastructure already is in place, Winkopp said.

The researchers, Barry

Nocks and Stephen Sperry, who teach city and regional planning at Clemson, said they were surprised at the findings of their study that is based on satellite and aerial photographs over the 18-year period.

"We knew there had been some loss of forest cover in the region, but we never imagined it was of this magnitude," Sperry said. "For a region that prides itself on being green, this is a disturbing trend."

The greatest decline in density occurred in Anderson, Oconee and Pickens counties, from 2,437 persons per square mile in

1992 to 1,065 in 2009, a drop of 56 percent, according to the study. Density declined 34 percent in Greenville and Spartanburg counties.

Wyche said classic sprawling growth has fiscal and environmental impacts.

Concerns include flooding, water and air quality, wildlife habitat and quality of life, Wyche said.

Winkopp, who built an upscale student apartment community in what had been a run-down area in the city of Clemson, said, "It's much more rewarding to take an infill site and turn it into something productive."