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Study: 700,000 acres of forest land lost

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The Upstate region lost more than 700,000 acres of forest cover from 1992 to 2010, according to a study released today by Clemson University. The amount of loss is almost equal to the combined size of Greenville and Cherokee Counties.

Based on satellite and aerial photographs of the region over the 18-year period, the study was conducted by Barry Nocks and Stephen Sperry, who teach in the city and regional planning program at Clemson.

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

Nocks and Sperry also evaluated urban density trends in the Upstate. Density measures the number of people living in urbanized areas on a per square mile basis.

Density in the Upstate was 2,091 persons per urban square mile in 1992, but it declined to 1,515 in 2000 and today is only 1,201 – a decrease of almost 50% over the 18-year period.

"This is a clear indicator of sprawl," Nocks said. "People and development are spreading out across most of the region rather than being concentrated around the urban centers. Sprawling development and increased pasture land were the main reasons our region has lost so much of its forest cover."

The study evaluated density trends in four different areas of the Upstate: Abbeville, Greenwood and Laurens counties, Greenville and Spartanburg counties, Anderson, Oconee and Pickens counties, and Cherokee and Union counties.

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%. The density declines in the other areas were 47% for Abbeville, Greenwood and Laurens counties, 34% for Greenville and Spartanburg counties, and 30% for Cherokee and Union counties.

The study also evaluated the growth ratio for the region, which compares the rate of land development to the rate of population growth. In 2008, the Strom Thurmond Institute at Clemson found that from 1990 to 2000 for every 1% increase in population, the amount of developed land increased by 5%.

Nocks and Sperry found that from 1990 to 2010, the ratio was closer to 4.4-to-1. The decrease in the ratio is primarily the result of two economic downturns during the past decade.

Upstate Forever, a nonprofit organization that advocates for planned growth and sustainable development in the Upstate, was the managing partner of the Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium, which sponsored the growth projection study done by the Strom Thurmond Institute.

"The small reduction in the growth ratio is the only bit of good news in what is otherwise a dismal assessment of our region's growth pattern," said Executive Director Brad Wyche. "This pattern continues to be classic sprawl – mainly spread out, low-density development connected only by roads.

"Growing like this has huge impacts, both fiscal and environmental. It's extremely expensive to provide services to a population that is so spread out across the region, and the impacts on our natural resources can be devastating," he added. "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."

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