As reports of land management issues ranging from fires in Australia to urbanization in the southeast make their way into the news media, an equally impactful issue is facing family-owned forests here in South Carolina. Sixty-three percent of the state’s almost 13 million acres of forestland are private, family forests, the majority of which have a man as the primary owner and decision-maker. The average age of more than 80% of these men is fifty-five and over, which will lead to a significant intergenerational land transfer in the next few decades. Since wives are often younger than their husbands and outlive them 70% to 80% of the time, they can be thrust into the role of decision-maker with little to no preparation when a husband passes away. Women may also acquire land through inheritance from other family members, or less commonly by purchasing land. Why does this matter in terms of the ability of women to make land management decisions? Because the timber industry contributes $21 billion to the economy of South Carolina, and family-owned forests provide a significant portion of this wood fiber. Educating women forest landowners about sustainable forestry can encourage them to maintain their land as family-owned working forests.

Dr. Thomas Straka, Professor in the Forestry and Environmental Conservation Department of Clemson’s College of Agriculture, Forestry, and Life Sciences specializes in forest resource management and economics. He explains, “It is all demographics. The Baby Boomers are a huge bulge in the nation’s forest owner age distribution and are aging fast. Many owners are couples and women tend to live longer than men. You don’t need to be a forest economist to see the result, but it helps.”

Since women tend to inherit property later in life, getting them involved when they are younger and more physically active will lead to them implementing more forest management practices throughout their ownership. However, most forestry education programs are constructed by male natural resource professionals for primarily male audiences, and there is a shortage of programs targeting female landowners or managers.

To better educate South Carolina’s women forest landowners, Clemson Cooperative Extension is partnering with ten other agencies, organizations, and female-owned natural resource management companies to host three pilot workshops based on the successful Women Owning Woodlands (WOW) program. This program was created to address the needs of educating female forest owners and supporting women in forest leadership roles. It is a collaborative project of the National Woodland Owners Association and the US Forest Service. WOW provides an online resource for forest management materials and publications, as well as providing support to individual states organizing their own WOW networks. States have successfully hosted single to multi-day forestry meetings, workshops, field tours, and training, with topics ranging from treatment of invasive species and how to sell timber, to keeping forest land in the family and timber taxes.

With funding from a Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) Community Engagement Grant, the first
South Carolina Women Owning Woodlands workshop was held in October 2019 in Colleton County and the second in March 2020 in Jasper County. These full-day events included morning sessions to introduce participants to general forestry terms and concepts and guide them to resources they can use to help them manage their property. The afternoon property tours highlighted sustainable forestry, wildlife habitat enhancement, longleaf pine restoration, and conservation practices. Over sixty women participated in the two workshops. A third workshop is being planned for Greenville County.

Before attending the workshops, participants were sent a brief survey to gauge their level of knowledge about forestry and to determine their attitude towards forest ownership. Twenty-five percent of the participants felt they had no knowledge for managing their woodlands, 18% felt slightly knowledgeable, 54% felt moderately knowledgeable, and 3% felt very knowledgeable. None felt significantly knowledgeable. Evaluations after the workshops indicated that participants gained knowledge on all topics presented, with some indicating that they had gained significant knowledge. When asked in another survey question what three things they valued most about owning woodlands, the most common responses were family, legacy, conservation, stewardship, beauty, and wildlife. These responses echo other studies which have found that women forest landowners are concerned about caring for their land and transferring it to family members, and not just producing timber for income.

Following the three pilot workshops, topic-specific workshops such as managing invasive species, handling legal issues of forestland ownership, timber harvesting, and reforestation will be offered throughout the state. For more information on the SC WOW program, contact Area Forestry and Wildlife agent Janet Steele at jmwatt@clemson.edu or 803-534-6280.

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