

# County lost 77,000 acres of forest in 15-year period

Researcher says development exceeding growth

BY GARY HYNDMAN  
staff writer

Greenville County's trees are disappearing at an alarming rate, according to a Clemson study.

Research by the Strom Thurmond Institute's South Carolina Water Resources Center at Clemson University found that the county lost 77,683 acres of forested land from 1985 to 2000. Developed land increased by 89,849 acres or 145 percent during that same period.

The loss represents more than 16 percent of the total 501,000 acres in the county.

"I knew we were losing our forest cover, but I didn't know it was this bad" said Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, a local nonprofit organization that supports sensible growth.

The project is part of ongoing research being coordinated by the Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium. Researchers

> County Council is meeting to study the issue. They have until November to present their recommendations.

An ordinance proposed last year by Diane Eldridge, a conservation planning consultant and member of the Greenville County Planning Commission, called for a two-fold approach. It would require developers of large commercial and residential projects to either save mature trees or replace those they remove.

But her proposal faced opposition from some council members who object to regulating what owners can do with their property. It also may face an uphill battle on the citizens' committee, which includes foresters, homebuilders and developers.

Eston Rodgers, executive vice president

1985	2000
Farmland... 66,524 (13 percent)	Farmland... 50,130 (10 percent)
Water and wetlands... 9,491 (2 percent)	Water and wetlands... 13,719 (3 percent)
Developed land... 62,036 (12 percent)	Developed land... 151,885 (30 percent)
Forested land... 371,992 (73 percent)	Forested land... 294,309 (57 percent)

used satellite imagery to measure changes over the 15-year period of the study.

Scientist Jeff Allen, the project's research director, said the results are typical of other urban areas across the country where land is being developed faster than the population is growing.

He attributes the phenomenon to developers pursuing more affordable land farther away from population centers on which to build. The trend has been observed locally, where some of the fastest growing areas are in the largely rural northern and southern parts of the county.

Often the outcome is sprawl, with growth outdistancing public infrastruc-

ture such as schools and water, sewer, fire and EMS services.

"I don't blame people or businesses or anybody for doing that," said Allen. "The problem is we don't have policies and incentives in place for builders to build in closer to an urban area."

The Clemson study adds another bullet point to the argument of environmental interests that have appealed to Greenville County Council for an ordinance to protect the local tree canopy.

"I think it shows beyond a shadow of doubt we need a countywide tree protection ordinance," said Wyche.

A citizens' committee appointed by >

to reduce potential damage to trees from construction activities not only saves money in the landscaping budget but sets an example of responsible, environmentally sensitive development."

But the release also cautions standards for tree ordinances should be flexible to accommodate the needs of builders.

Approving comprehensive public policy to protect trees is an uphill battle, especially in areas like Greenville County where the property rights movement is strong, said Allen.

"Everyone has to be involved—individuals, businesses and local governments," he said.

Contact Gary Hyndman at 679-1226 or ghyndman@greenvillejournal.com.