

## Development crowding out Va. Forestland

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Urban development was responsible for more than half of nearly 200,000 acres of Virginia forestland cleared between 1992 and 2001, state forestry officials said at a news conference Wednesday.

Virginia had about 16 million acres of forest in 1992, according to estimates in a new forestry survey. In 2001, the state's total forest area declined to roughly 15.8 million acres.

Despite the more recent decline, the state has a million more acres than it did in 1940 when the Virginia Department of Forestry began keeping stock of timberland, officials noted.

"I anticipated more loss than what the inventory showed," said state forester James W. Garner.

The state agency released data collected in its Seventh Forest Survey. The survey has been conducted periodically since 1940.

Agency officials also announced changes in how it collects and publishes the data, moving to an annual system.

With strong population growth in the Hampton Roads and Richmond metro areas, Garner said he expected to see a lower tree inventory in those regions, though that did not play out.

He added that he is concerned about the individual trees species being lost and wants to develop initiatives to encourage people to replant trees nearing extinction.

"At one time, Virginia had 2 million acres of long leaf pine," Garner said. "We have less than 5,000 trees left."

Though about 68,000 acres a year are converted from forest to other uses, about 48,000 acres of forest are replanted annually, according to the survey.

Del. Mitch Van Yahres, D-Charlottesville, said he is interested in exploring whether agricultural lands might be converted to forests.

"That would help farmers with crops, such as peanuts or tobacco," that eventually may not be viable, said Van Yahres, a retired arborist.

Most of the loss of forestlands took place in the Northern Piedmont region, which includes Northern Virginia and Charlottesville metropolitan statistical areas. The region lost more than 175,000 acres, according to the survey.

David Carr, senior attorney for the Southern Environmental Law Center, said one of his concerns is data showing the steady decline of naturally occurring pine trees.

“For some time we have been concerned about the development of rural or forested land through the piedmont of Virginia,” he said. “This demonstrates the effect of that.”