

Indicator 47. Area and Percent of Forest Land Used for Subsistence Purposes

What Is the Indicator and Why Is It Important?

Forest lands provide products for survival outside the formal economic or market-based system. Such products include foodstuffs, medicine, fuel wood, clothing, and shelter. Subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering are important to the material and cultural survival of people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Forest policy and management affect the area of forest land available for subsistence activities, the physical availability of those goods, and the terms of access to them. Identifying available lands and trends in access provides an indication of the continued potential for individuals and cultural groups to engage in subsistence practices.

What Does the Indicator Show?

Three legal canons establish subsistence rights in the United States: (1) the Alaska National Interest Land Conservation Act (P.L. 96-487) provides for "customary and traditional uses by rural Alaska residents of wild, renewable resources for direct personal or family consumption...for the making and selling of handicraft articles...for barter or sharing...and for customary trade"; (2) Federal treaty law, which has consistently upheld the rights of American Indians to hunt, fish, trap, and gather on reservations and on treaty-specified lands off reservation as "not much less necessary to the existence of the Indians than the atmosphere they breathed" (U.S. v. Winans 1905); and (3) Article XII, Section 7 of the Hawaii State Constitution, which protects "all rights, customarily and traditionally exercised for subsistence, cultural and religious purposes and possessed by ahupua'a tenants who are descendants of native Hawaiians." While subsistence activities have unique legal and cultural standing for indigenous communities, they also have multicultural importance. The Alaska legislation guarantees subsistence rights for rural residents

of all ethnicities. Hunting, fishing, and gathering to meet basic needs have been documented for African Americans, Asian Americans, and European Americans and in all regions of the United States. Families that rely on subsistence practices do so within mixed livelihood systems that generally include at least some income earned in the formal market system. There are 749 million acres of forest land in the United States. Access to forest lands for subsistence purposes varies by practice and landownership. Legal foundations for access may be greatest for fishing, followed by hunting, with gathering least protected. Nevertheless, State-established season limits, bag limits, size limits, permit costs, equipment restrictions, and prohibitions on harvesting of individual species—designed to regulate recreational and commercial uses—can pose barriers to subsistence hunting and fishing. Within these limitations, some activity is legally permissible on most of the 316,475,000 acres of public lands in the Nation. Recent events, however, indicate that access to public lands may be abruptly curtailed in response to security concerns. Tribes determine eligibility and set seasons and allowable takes on the 17,902,658 acres of reservation and tribal forest lands. Several trends appear to be reducing access to subsistence resources on the 362,796,000 acres of nonindustrial private forest lands. These include fragmentation, subdivision, conversion to nonforest cover, increased posting, and leasing for hunting and recreation. Rural residents have traditionally used forest industry lands (67,687,000 acres nationally) for hunting, fishing, and gathering. A clear trend toward limiting or closing access to industry lands is evident, however, as corporations respond to concerns over liability and vandalism and increasingly let leases for hunting and recreation. Thus, in general, the area and percent of U.S. forest lands available for subsistence appear to be decreasing.