

2025 Memorial Lecture Series Presentation

Conserving our Working Forests



By Keynote Speaker: Brian Dangler
Senior Vice President
Working Forest Fund,
The Conservation Fund

Plenty of people have poked holes in the notion that bigger is better – the Titanic being one of the most famous examples. But when it comes to timberlands, there is no question - larger blocks have lots of positive attributes and they are worth keeping that way – big!

My first forestry job in 1989 took me to northern Maine and at the time it looked like the lands owned by the pulp and paper mills were stable and I was likely to spend my career in one place. Back in those days, I looked at the “old guys” and said to myself, “I can envision what lies in store for me; managing these same forests, hunting grouse and moose and retiring with the same company I started with.” Well, that didn’t happen.

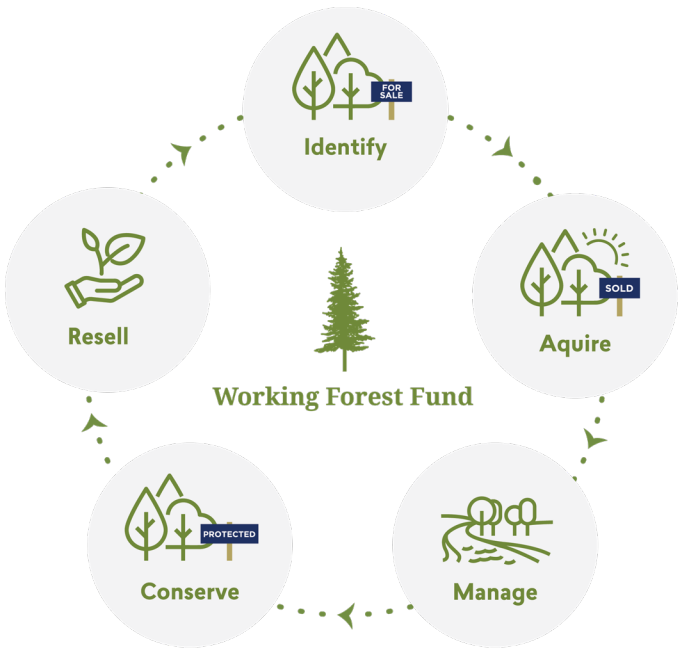
The large integrated forest products companies—names like International Paper, Weyerhaeuser, and Continental Can—had assembled vast blocks of timberland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They stitched together small and medium tracts into large, contiguous ownerships to ensure a steady wood supply and increase management efficiency. This approach was good for business, and it also brought big benefits to local communities and to our country. These large timberlands supported loggers, truckers, sawmills, and an entire network of rural economies. They gave us clean water, clean air, habitat for wildlife, and access to the outdoors—snowmobile trails, hunting grounds, fishing streams.



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Those large, working forests were the backbone of both the forest products industry and many rural communities. But over the last 40 years, that backbone has been weakening. Starting in the 1980s, tax policy and market forces triggered the divestiture of millions of acres of timberland. In came Timberland Investment Management Organizations (TIMOs) and Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs), backed by pension funds and university endowments. These new owners often did a decent job managing the land, but they usually weren’t in it for the long haul. Their business model required them to maximize investor returns—often within ten to 15 years. Subdividing large tracts into smaller parcels made the most business sense because smaller tracts tend to sell at higher per-acre prices.

As forests were sliced into smaller pieces the impact rippled outward. Small parcel owners are far less likely to harvest sustainably or follow a forest management plan. Their priorities often shift to observing nature, personal recreation, second homes, etc. And that’s understandable—we all need places to live and work and call our own. But when we chip away at these large working forests, we lose the interconnected ecosystems and the economies that depend on them. On an operational level, moving equipment from small woodlot to small woodlot means higher costs and more downtime.



There is a tool that works—and it works especially well at scale: Working Forest Conservation Easements (WFCEs). At their core, WFCEs are real estate transactions. A landowner voluntarily sells certain development rights—like the right to subdivide or convert to non-forest uses—in exchange for a one-time payment. The forest stays in private hands, remains on the tax rolls, and continues to operate as a working forest. In many cases, the land also stays open for recreation—hunting, fishing, snowmobiling. And, critically, the landowner agrees to manage the property sustainably. It’s a great way to make sure at least some of our large timberland tracts stay intact.

For the last 17 years, I have worked for The Conservation Fund whose tagline is “Land Sustains US”. Our mission includes keeping America’s working forests working. WFCEs are a great tool for this work and by deploying WFCEs, we’re not just keeping forests working – we’ve also seen the market price of these large protected forests become affordable to local folks in the business - like logging companies and sawmills – which is itself a great result!

Using this model, The Conservation Fund has protected more than 1 million acres of high-conservation-value forests across 21 states. These forests generate more than \$830 million in annual economic impact, store more than 250 million metric tons of carbon dioxide, support more than 7,500 jobs and protect more than 2,500 miles of streams, all across the country.

In this way, the future is even better than what I envisioned back in 1989 at the start of my career.



Brian Dangler speaking at the 2025 Great Lakes Timber Professionals Spring Celebration in Green Bay, WI.



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