



Forest Carbon and Climate Program  
Department of Forestry  
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY



# State and Tribal Capacity Building on Forest Carbon

## *Forest Carbon and Climate Change in Wisconsin*

These technical briefings summarize topics such as forest densities and cover types, carbon storage, and climate considerations for states in the Eastern United States.

This technical briefing is a product of the Forest Carbon and Climate Program (FCCP), Department of Forestry, Michigan State University. Briefing content was co-developed with the Northern Institute of Applied Climate Science (NIACS), a collaborative, multi-institutional partnership led by the USDA Forest Service. This briefing was made possible through funding from the Penn Soil Resource Conservation and Development Council under a cooperative agreement with the USDA Forest Service.





The content of this technical briefing is the product of the State and Tribal Capacity Building on Forest Carbon webinar and workshop series that occurred from December 2023 – July 2024. The series sought to support state and tribal forestry agencies in various stages of working on forest carbon management and stewardship efforts through webinars, interactive in-person learning, and print materials. The project developed four webinars focusing on numerous aspects of forest and carbon in the Eastern US helping participants develop the tools to assess potential trade-offs and opportunities in forest management and planning. In addition to the four webinars, participants were invited to participate in two in-person workshops to delve deeper into technical topics of forest carbon including forest inventorying, forest carbon models, stakeholder perceptions, and communication tactics for both internal and external audiences. For more information please visit:

<https://www.canr.msu.edu/socioeconomics/Workshops/Carbon-Capacity>

**Published December 2024**

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**Suggested Citation:** FCCP. (2024). State and Tribal Capacity Building on Forest Carbon Series: Forest Carbon and Climate Change in Wisconsin. *Technical Briefing*. Forest Carbon and Climate Program, Department of Forestry, Michigan State University. East Lansing, Michigan. Available at:

<https://www.canr.msu.edu/socioeconomics/Workshops/Carbon-Capacity/technical-briefings>

Funding for this project was provided by the USDA Forest Service, Eastern Region. USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender

Cover Photo: Kayla Ihrig on [https://unsplash.com/@kayla\\_ih](https://unsplash.com/@kayla_ih); Cover image: MSU FCCP

## Table of Contents

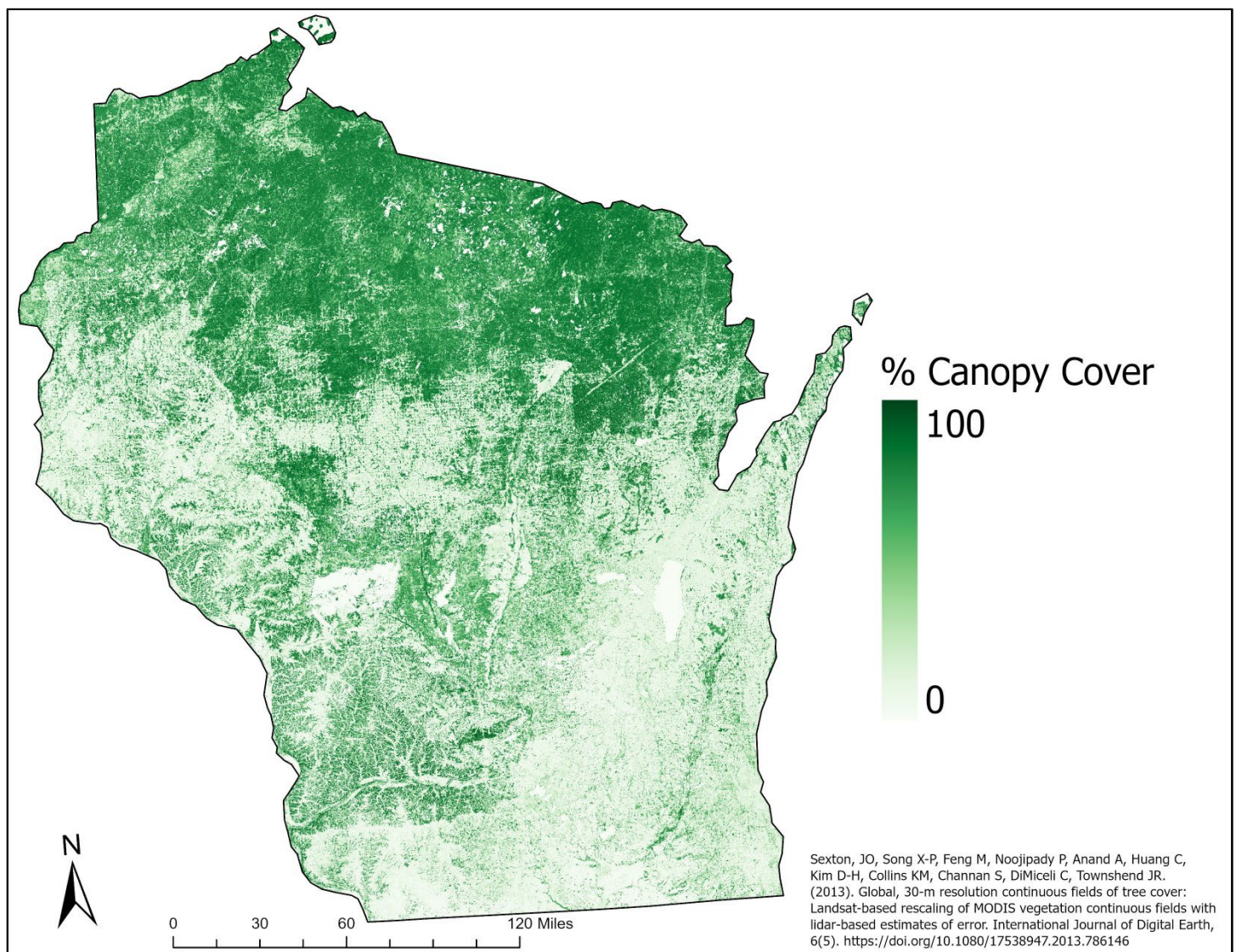
|   |    |
|---|----|
| Wisconsin Forest Overview.....                            | 3  |
| Temperature and Precipitation .....                       | 4  |
| Projected Future Trends in Temperature/Precipitation..... | 5  |
| Forest Density.....                                       | 6  |
| Forest Cover Types and Carbon.....                        | 7  |
| Forest Carbon Pools .....                                 | 8  |
| Forest Carbon Density .....                               | 9  |
| Species-Specific Climate Considerations .....             | 10 |
| <i>Habitat Suitability and Migration Models</i> .....     | 11 |
| <i>Adaptability Ratings</i> .....                         | 12 |
| <i>Climate Change Atlas Summary for Sugar Maple</i> ..... | 12 |
| Citations: .....  | 13 |
| <i>Data Sources:</i> .....                                | 13 |
| <i>Habitat suitability models on trees:</i> .....         | 13 |
| <i>Adaptability of tree species:</i> .....                | 13 |
| <i>Climate summary definitions:</i> .....                 | 13 |

## Wisconsin Forest Overview

Wisconsin is situated in the Midwest region of the United States and lies within the US Forest Service's Eastern Region (USFS Region 9). Bordering states include Minnesota and Iowa to the west, Illinois to the south, and Michigan to the northeast. Wisconsin is bordered by Lake Superior to the north while Lake Michigan marks the state's eastern boundary.

A map of percent tree canopy cover in Wisconsin is shown in **Figure 1**. This state has a gradient in forest coverage, with high levels of canopy cover across the north, grading into medium coverage in the west and central interior, and markedly lower levels of forest cover across the southeast. These trends coincide with land use trends across the state, where forests and wetlands characterize the north, the west and central interior represent a mixture of forest and agricultural lands, and the southeast portion of the state is primarily used for agriculture and contains the state's most populated urban centers (including the cities of Milwaukee, Madison, and Green Bay) and surrounding sprawl.

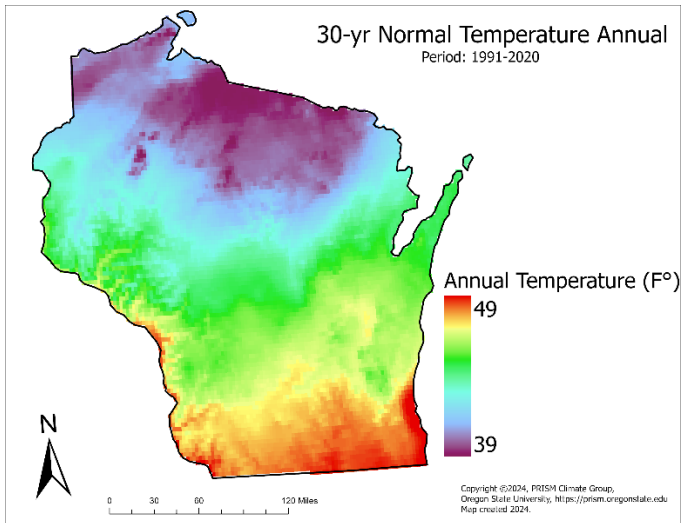
**Figure 1.** Percent tree canopy cover in Wisconsin.



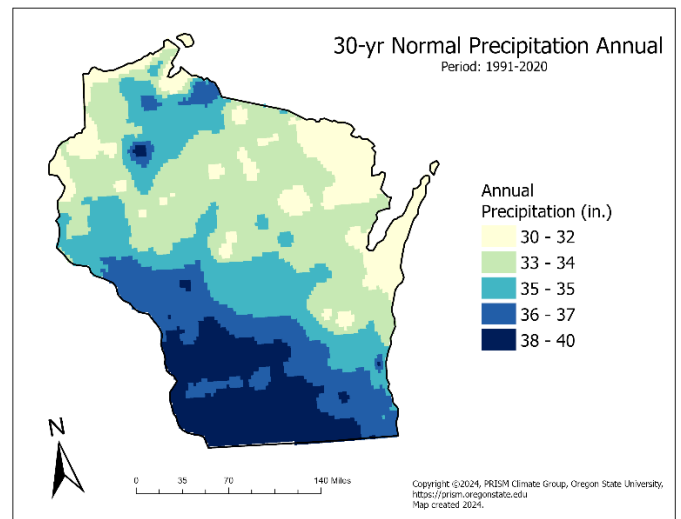
## Temperature and Precipitation

Two major factors affecting forest carbon and productivity are temperature and precipitation. **Figure 2** shows normal mean temperatures throughout Wisconsin between 1991 and 2020. Over this 30-year period, mean annual temperatures varied by about 10 °F across this state. Temperature trends largely follow latitudinal gradients, with warmer mean temperatures occurring in the southernmost portions of the state and giving way to cooler temperatures to the north. The warmest mean annual temperature is around 49 °F and along Wisconsin’s southern border, while the coolest mean annual temperature is around 39 °F in the northernmost portions of the state and coincides with higher elevations.

**Figure 2.** Normal mean temperature (°F) from 1991–2020 in Wisconsin.



**Figure 3.** Normal mean precipitation (in.) from 1991-2020 in Wisconsin.

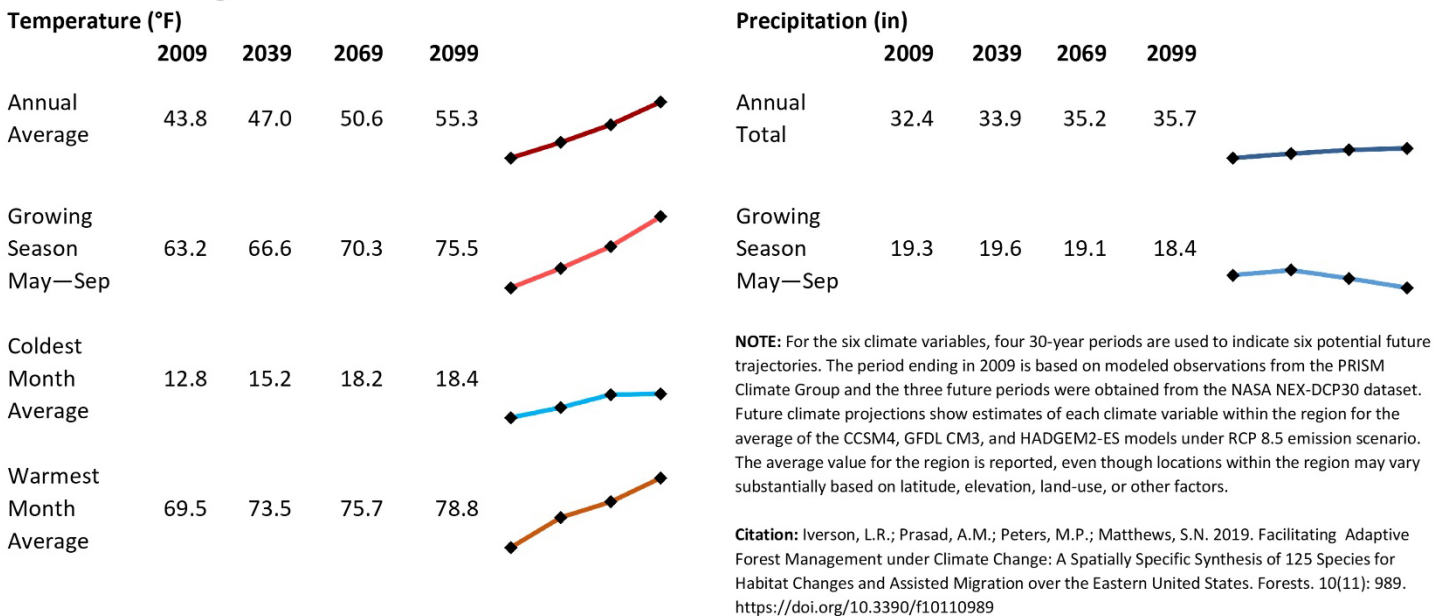


**Figure 3** shows normal mean precipitation throughout Wisconsin between 1991 and 2020 and demonstrates the geographic variation in these trends. Over this 30-year period, mean annual precipitation levels varied by about 10 in. Areas that receive the lowest levels of precipitation (30-32 in.) primarily occur along the northeast and northwest corners of the state. Areas receiving the highest amounts of precipitation (38-40 in.) occur in the southwest portion of the state.

# Projected Future Trends in Temperature/Precipitation

**Figure 4.** Model results for potential changes in temperature and precipitation trends in Wisconsin through 2099 under a high emission scenario (RCP 8.5).

## Potential Changes in Climate Variables



Projected future trends in temperature and precipitation for Wisconsin between 4 time periods (timeframes in graphic span from 1980-2009, 2010-2039, 2040-2069, and 2070-2099) are shown in **Figure 4**. Model results suggest average temperatures will continue to increase through the end of the century, a trend which is also projected for the coldest and warmest month averages, as well as throughout the growing season (May – Sep.). During this period, average annual temperatures are expected to increase by an estimated 11.5 °F, with the most drastic increases expected to occur during the growing season (+12.3 °F).

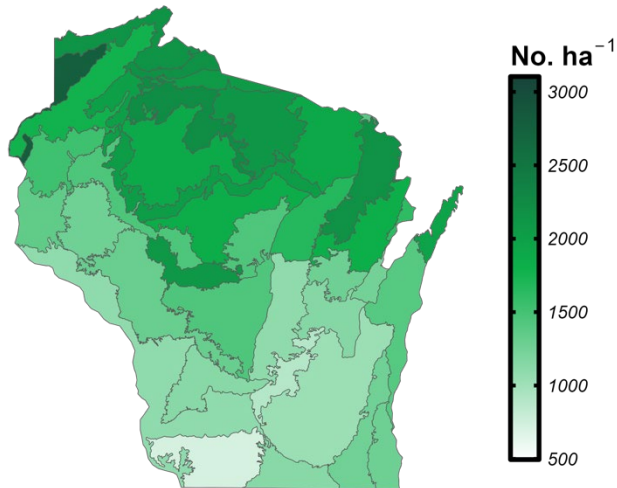
Model results of future precipitation in Wisconsin follow variable trends, with totals projected to steadily increase through 2099 (**Figure 4**). Over this period, annual precipitation is expected to increase by an estimated 3.3 in., however, precipitation levels are projected to *decrease* during the growing season by an estimated 0.9 in. This suggests that precipitation in Wisconsin may increase substantially during the winter months (Oct. – Apr.), while drought events may become more frequent and severe during the growing season.



# Forest Density

**Figure 5.** Forest density as live tree density (No. ha<sup>-1</sup>) in Wisconsin.

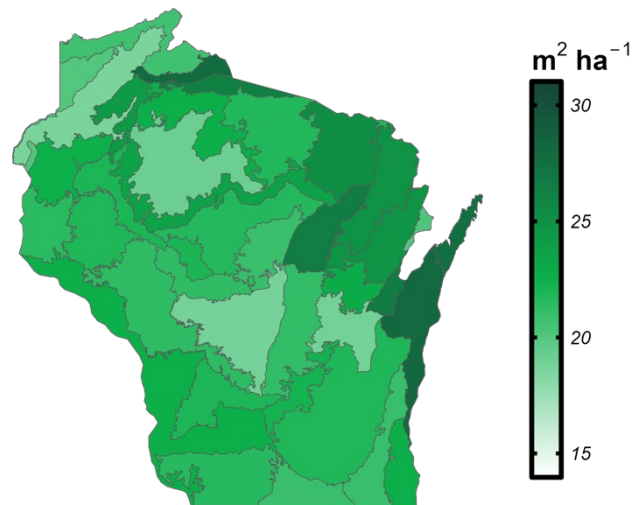
## Forest Density: Live tree number



Data: USDA Forest Service, 2024

**Figure 6.** Forest density as live tree basal area (m<sup>2</sup> ha<sup>-1</sup>) in Wisconsin.

## Forest Density: Live tree basal area



Data: USDA Forest Service, 2024

Forest density<sup>1</sup> is both a structural characteristic of forests and a reflection of forest dynamics. It can be measured as the number of trees per unit area, or it can be measured in terms live tree area per unit area, known as “basal area”. Live tree basal area represents the amount of ground covered by living trees in two-dimensional space. **Figure 5** shows average forest density in terms of live trees per hectare by ecosection<sup>2</sup> across the state of Wisconsin, while **Figure 6** represents forest density by ecosection in terms of basal area (m<sup>2</sup> ha<sup>-1</sup>).

By comparing these figures we can see that the northwestern ecosection circa Douglas County has the state’s highest forest density in terms of number of trees per hectare (**Figure 5**), but an average density in terms of basal area (**Figure 6**). This suggests that in this ecosection, there may be more total trees per unit area, but on average, these trees tend to be relatively small. Meanwhile, Wisconsin’s large southeastern ecosection has a relatively low forest density in terms number of trees per hectare, but a relatively high forest density in terms of basal area, suggesting the prevalence of fewer, relatively large trees in this zone.

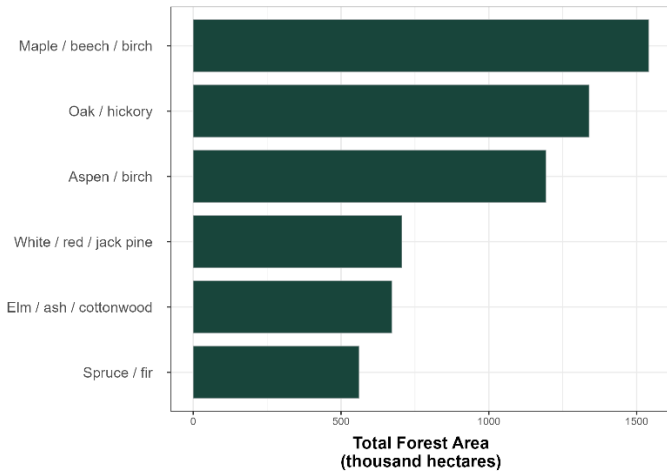
<sup>1</sup>All forest inventory and carbon data were estimated using data from the Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) Program which can be accessed through the FIA DataMart (USDA Forest Service, 2024. *Forest inventory and analysis program*. Available at: <https://www.fia.fs.usda.gov/>) using the rFIA package (Stanke et al, 2020. rFIA: an R package for estimation of forest attributes with the US Forest Inventory and analysis database. *Environ Model Softw.* 127:104664. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsoft.2020.104664>) in the R programming environment (R Core Team, 2020. *R: A language and environment for statistical computing*, Vienna, Austria: R Foundation for Statistical Computing.

<sup>2</sup>Ecosection definition can be found at Cleland et al, 2007. Ecological Subregions: Sections and Subsections for the conterminous United States. *General Technical Report WO-76D*, Washington Office, USDA Forest Service. <https://doi.org/10.2737/WO-GTR-76D>

# Forest Cover Types and Carbon

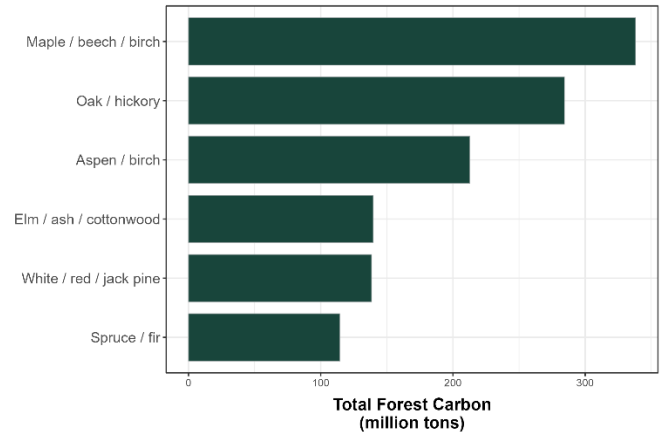
**Figure 7.** Total forest area (thousand ha) by forest type<sup>3</sup> in Wisconsin.

Data: USDA Forest Service, 2024



**Figure 8.** Total forest carbon (million tons) by forest type in Wisconsin. Total forest carbon is the sum of carbon stored across all aboveground and belowground pools (includes Soil Organic carbon + Live Belowground carbon + Live Aboveground carbon + Litter carbon + Dead wood carbon).

Data: USDA Forest Service, 2024



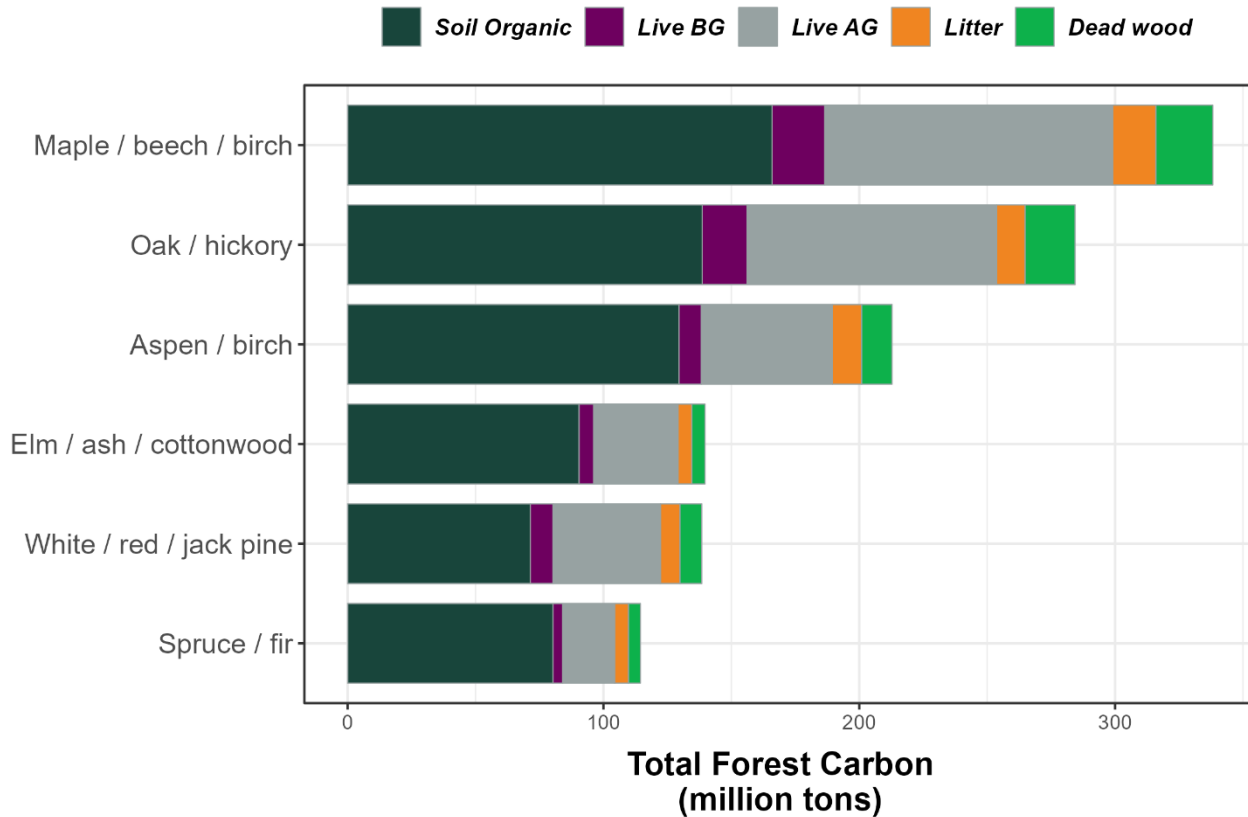
Wisconsin is dominated by 6 key forest cover types: Maple/beech/birch, Oak/hickory, Aspen/birch, White/red/jack pine, Elm/ash/cottonwood, and Spruce/fir. **Figure 7** and **Figure 8** show state-level data of total forested area and total forest carbon, respectively, for each of these cover type groups. As these figures show, Maple/beech/birch is the dominant forest type of Wisconsin, spanning an area upwards of 1.5 million hectares and storing over 325 million tons of carbon statewide. With coverage levels ranging from ~500,000 to ~1.3 million hectares, other forest types in this state are less abundant, yet play an important role contributing to enhanced biodiversity and landscape heterogeneity. Comparing trends from **Figure 7** with those in **Figure 8** demonstrates how carbon storage levels vary by forest cover type. For example, White/red/jack pine forests cover slightly more land area than Elm/ash/cottonwood stands in Wisconsin (**Figure 7**), yet when it comes to carbon, Elm/ash/cottonwood stands store slightly more carbon than their White/red/jack pine counterparts (**Figure 8**).

<sup>3</sup>Forest Types are a classification of forest land based upon and named for the tree species that forms the plurality of live-tree stocking. These forest types used in the briefing align with FIA's definition of Forest type group which are a combination of forest types that share closely associated species and site requirements. Longer definitions of both forest types and forest type groups are found in Appendix D of the Forest Inventory and Analysis Database: Database Description and User Guide for Phase 2 (version 9.1) which can be accessed here: [https://research.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2023-11/wo-fiadb\\_user\\_guide\\_p2\\_9-1\\_final.pdf](https://research.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2023-11/wo-fiadb_user_guide_p2_9-1_final.pdf)



# Forest Carbon Pools

**Figure 9.** Total forest carbon (million tons) by pool and forest type in Wisconsin.



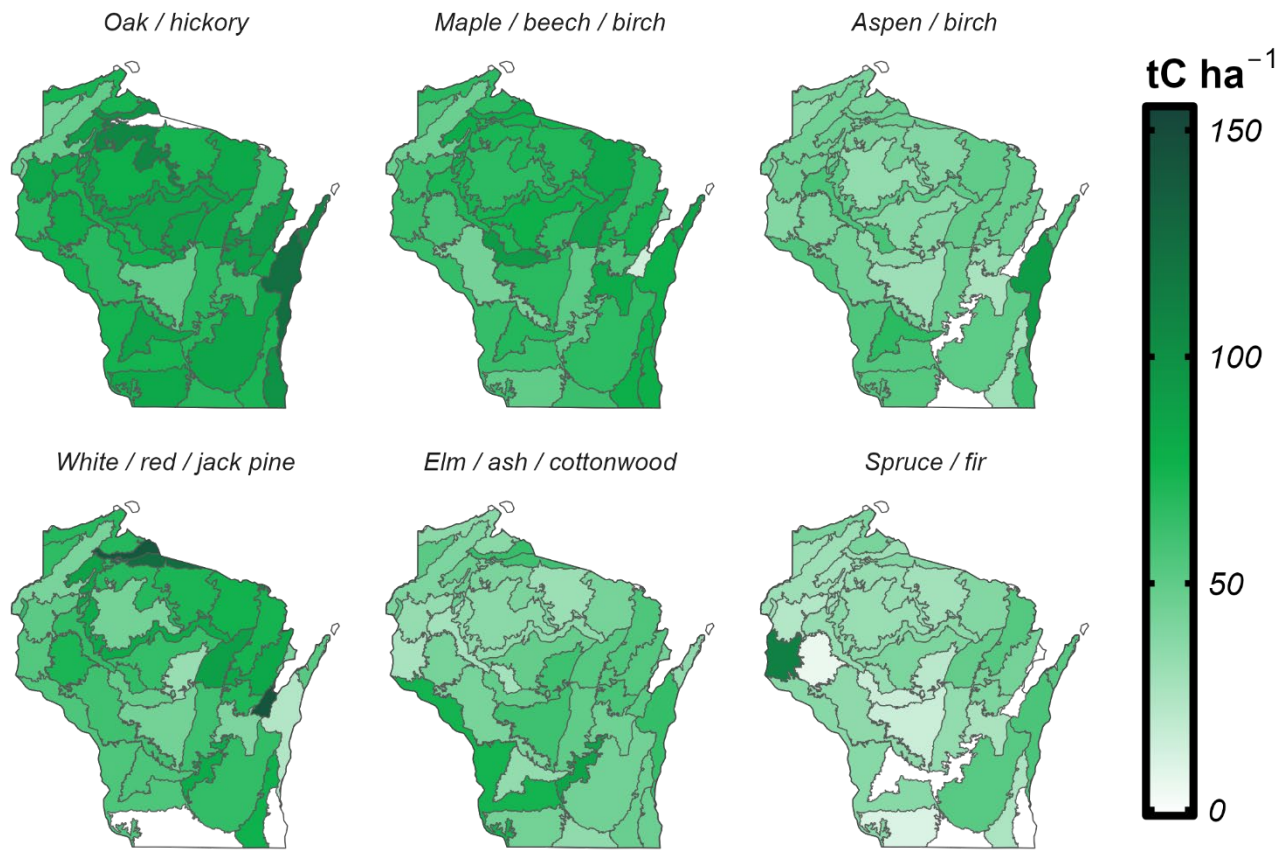
Data: USDA Forest Service, 2024

Forest carbon storage can be further assessed by examining how it's distributed across different ecosystem carbon pools. **Figure 9** shows the amount of carbon stored in different carbon pools of key forest cover types in Wisconsin. These values show how different forest types allocate distinct proportions of forest carbon into soil organic matter, live belowground (BG) biomass, live aboveground (AG) biomass, litter, and dead wood pools. Wisconsin forests generally allocate more ecosystem carbon to belowground pools (soil organic matter + live BG biomass) than aboveground pools (live AG biomass + litter + dead wood), yet the proportions in which they do so varies significantly across forest cover types. For instance, Spruce/fir forests allocate more than 2/3 of their total stored carbon to belowground pools, whereas forest types like Maple/beech/birch and Oak/hickory distribute carbon more evenly between aboveground and belowground pools. Another noteworthy trait shown in **Figure 9** is the magnitude of carbon storage levels across different pools and cover types. Maple/beech/birch's dominating presence on this landscape means its statewide carbon pools are outsized compared to other groups. For example, leaf litter and dead wood pools of Wisconsin's Maple/beech/birch forests on their own contain more stored carbon than the total aboveground carbon (live AG biomass + litter + dead wood) contained by the Spruce/fir group.

# Forest Carbon Density

**Figure 10.** Aboveground live forest carbon density (tC ha<sup>-1</sup>) by forest type in Wisconsin.

## Average Forest Carbon Density by Ecoregion: Aboveground Live



Data: USDA Forest Service, 2024

Forest carbon density can be influenced by many ecosystem traits, such as tree density, stand age, species mix/ cover type, soil fertility, elevation, and a site's management and disturbance history. In **Figure 10**, the carbon density of aboveground living forest biomass is shown for 6 key cover types in Wisconsin. Of these White/red/jack pine stands hold the highest levels of aboveground live carbon per unit area, represented by the deep shades of green in a northern and eastern ecoregion. Across much of their extent, Maple/beech/birch and Aspen/birch stands exhibit relatively even carbon densities, while cover types like Oak/hickory and White/red/jack pine show higher levels of variability across ecoregions. In these instances, variable carbon densities can be driven by the relative prevalence or absence of each forest type from a given ecoregion.

## Species-Specific Climate Considerations

Climate change is expected to impact the distribution of species into the future. The Climate Change Tree Atlas is a tool that lets you explore current tree species traits and suitable habitats in the Eastern U.S. and how they are likely to be affected by a changing climate. Researchers with the USDA Forest Service developed a set of models that form the basis of the Tree Atlas. The Tree Atlas brings together information about habitat suitability, migration potential, and tree species traits to understand current and potential distributions for 125 tree species (<https://doi.org/10.2737/Climate-Change-Tree-Atlas-v4>).

### Core Climate Change Atlas Components:

- DISTRIB-II: Species habitat suitability model
- SHIFT: Migration model (when combined with DISTRIB-II, estimates colonization potential of future suitable habitats )
- Adaptability Ratings: Species adaptability ratings (species traits not included in DISTRIB-II and SHIFT models)

Summaries for tree species are available for a variety of geographies, in both PDF and Excel format.

| Geographic Area   | Description  |
|---|--|
| National Forest Summaries                                 | Results summarized for 55 national forests   |
| National Park Summaries                                   | Results summarized for 78 national parks   |
| HUC6 Watershed  | Results summarized by hydrologic unit codes level 3 (HUC 6) which are hierarchical classifications based on surface hydrologic features in which level 3 maps watershed basins (Seaber et al, 1987)<br><a href="https://pubs.usgs.gov/wsp/wsp2294/">https://pubs.usgs.gov/wsp/wsp2294/</a> |
| Ecoregional Vulnerability Assessments (EVAS)              | Results summarized by ecoregions used in the Ecoregional Vulnerability Assessments <a href="https://www.climatehubs.usda.gov/assessments">https://www.climatehubs.usda.gov/assessments</a>   |
| USDA Forest Service EcoMap 2007 Sections                  | Results summarized by ecological sections that delineate ecosystems with distinctive vegetation and other unique ecological characteristics (Cleland et al, 2007, McNab et al, 2007)   |
| National Climate Assessment (NCA) 2015 Regional Summaries | Results summarized by National Climate Assessment Region which include the Midwest, Northeast, Northern Plains, Southeast, and Southern Plains   |
| 1 x 1° Grid Summaries                                     | Results summarized by 1x1° latitude and longitude  |
| State Summaries   | Results summarized for 38 states   |
| Urban areas   | Results summarized for 185 urban areas across the eastern US   |

Additional background on this tool can be found at: <https://doi.org/10.2737/Climate-Change-Tree-Atlas-v4> along with short video tutorials on the Climate Change Atlas website.



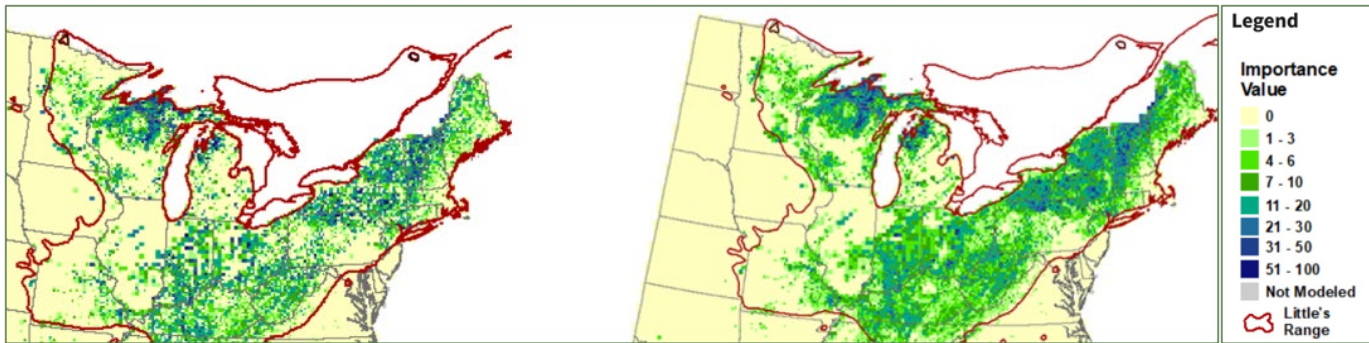
# Habitat Suitability and Migration Models

The Tree Atlas brings together information about habitat suitability, migration potential, and tree species traits to understand current and potential distributions for 126 tree species. The following maps and figures are examples of Tree Atlas model results for one species of importance in this state: sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*). We highly encourage reading the interpretive narrations and tutorials on the Tree Atlas website: <https://doi.org/10.2737/Climate-Change-Tree-Atlas-v4>.

## Key Species Example: Sugar Maple (Model Reliability: High)

Current Forest Inventory and Analysis

Current Modeled Habitat (1981 to 2010)

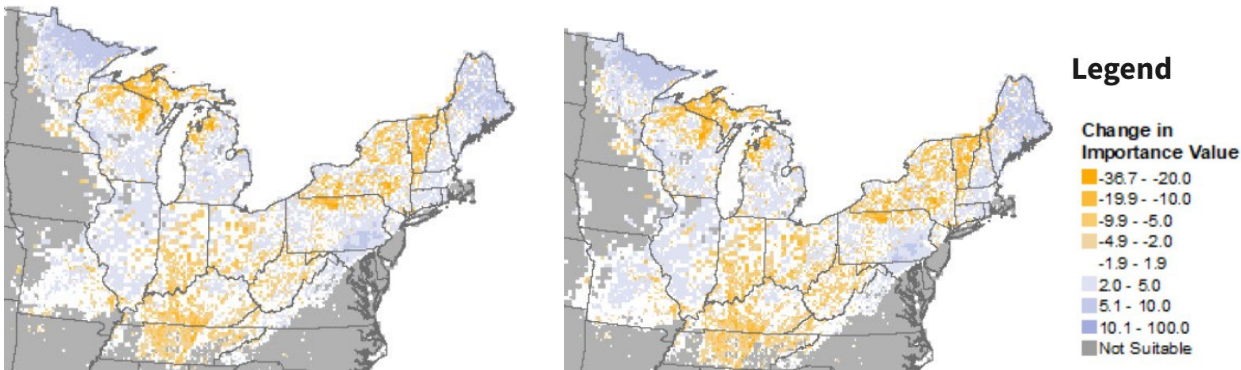


### Summary of Change Maps for Sugar Maple

Maps depicting changes in habitat quality (represented as Importance Values) and the difference between the modeled habitats for an average of three general circulation models under two representative concentration pathways (RCP 4.5 and 8.5) for the period 2070 to 2099.

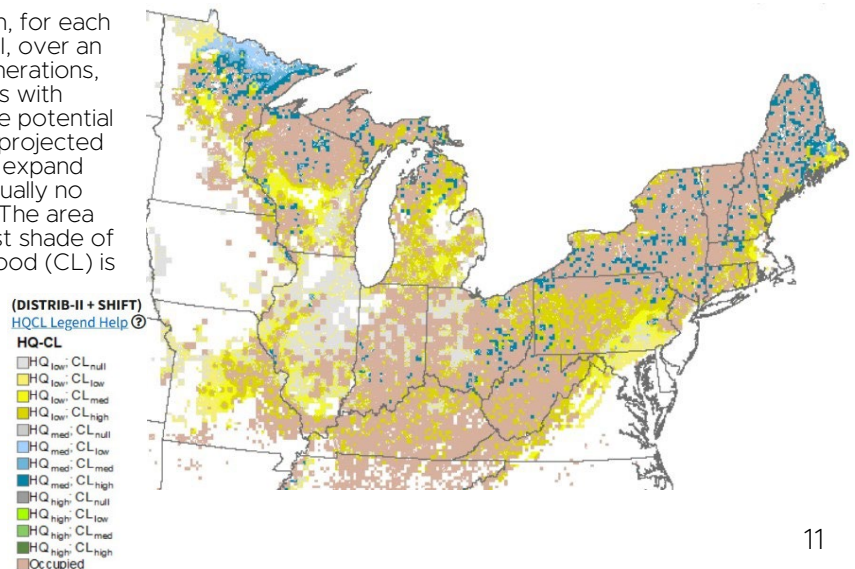
Moderate Emissions (RCP 4.5)

High Emissions (RCP 8.5)



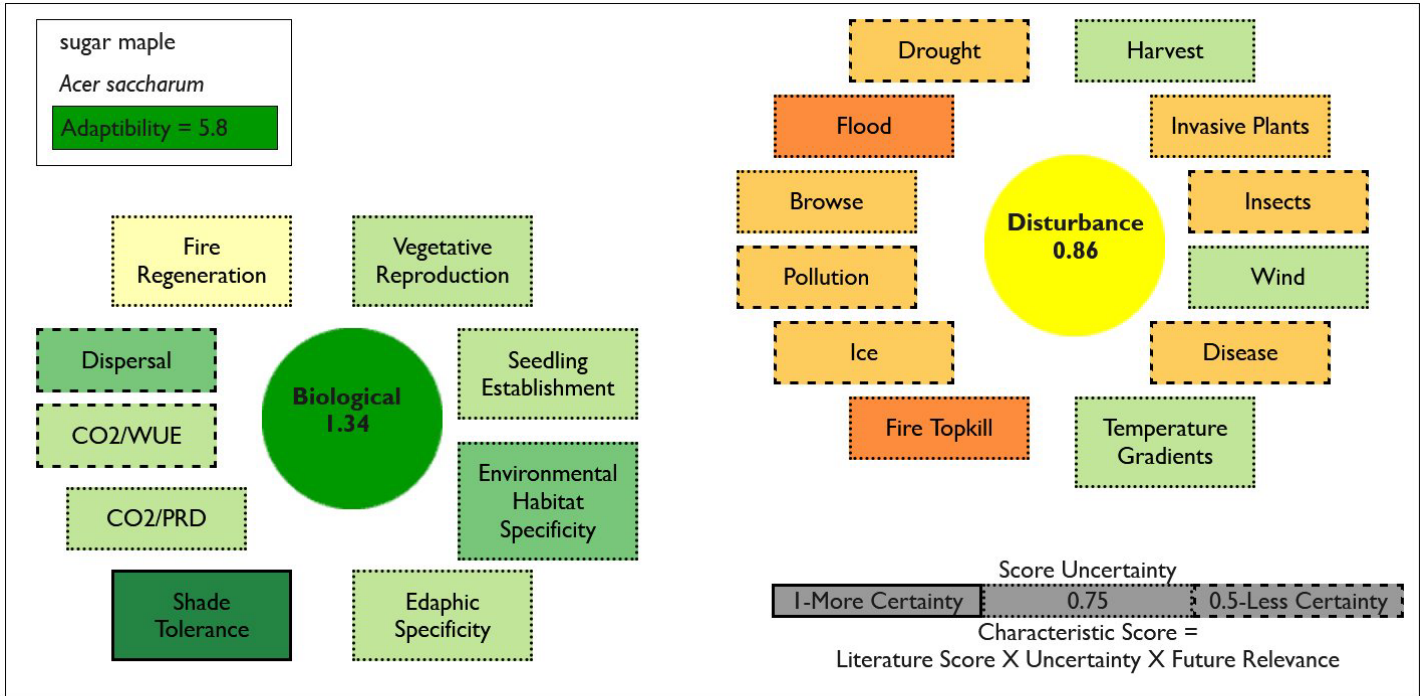
### Migration Potential

The SHIFT model estimates the likelihood of colonization, for each 1x1 km cell, for suitable habitats designated by DISTRIB-II, over an approximately 100-year period consisting of multiple generations, depending on the tree species. Merging SHIFT outcomes with DISTRIB-II outcomes provides the power to evaluate the potential for the species to migrate naturally into the new habitat projected by the DISTRIB-II model. For many species, habitat may expand greatly (especially under high emissions), but there is virtually no chance for much of that area to get colonized naturally. The area most desirable for managed relocation will be the darkest shade of green: habitat quality (HQ) is high and colonization likelihood (CL) is high.



# Adaptability Ratings

Key Species Example: Sugar Maple (*Acer saccharum*)



|                |                |               |              |               |                |                |
|----------------|----------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| V Hi Pos<br>+3 | High Pos<br>+2 | Low Pos<br>+1 | Minimal<br>0 | Low Neg<br>-1 | High Neg<br>-2 | V Hi Neg<br>-3 |
|----------------|----------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|

The Adaptability score, which assesses 21 variables to assign adaptability ratings to tree species in the eastern US, reflects a species’ potential adaptability to climate change-driven stressors and disturbances at range wide scale. Adaptability ratings provide broad insights into factors that cannot be directly included in the Climate Change Tree Atlas species migration models. Two types of species traits are evaluated: 1) biological and 2) disturbance, each with their own set of factors to help characterize species’ traits and responses to disturbance. Uncertainty is also included for each trait or factor assessed. When coupled with other modeled projections, adaptability ratings can support future planning under a changing climate.

The Adaptability variable is single score derived from the Modification Factors which encompass scores for the 12 disturbance and 9 biological factors. The Adaptability results can be considered relative to other tree species. For example, a species with a low Adaptability variable likely does not have life history characteristics to allow it to thrive under most conditions whereas a high Adaptability variable will likely do better under the climate change outputs from the DISTRIB-II and SHIFT Models.

## Climate Change Atlas Summary for Sugar Maple

Sugar maple is widely distributed (21.3% of area), dense, and with high IV across much of the northern 2/3 of the Eastern US. It ranks fourth in overall abundance across the eastern US, behind loblolly pine, red maple and sweetgum. It rates as highly adaptable although under persistent drought or other stresses, it would likely decline. In contrast to our earlier models which showed substantial habitat decline in the south under harsh climate change, the species is modeled to decline only modestly, so we rate it with a very good capacity to cope, and to be a good infill species (according to SHIFT).

## Citations:

### Data Sources:

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McNab, W.H.; Cleland, D.T.; Freeouf, J.A.; Keys, Jr., J.E.; Nowacki, G.J.; Carpenter, C.A., comps. 2007. Description of ecological subregions: sections of the conterminous United States [CD-ROM]. Gen. Tech. Report WO-76B. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 80 p. <https://research.fs.usda.gov/treesearch/48669>

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