

Protecting the Nation's Drinking Water Means Protecting Forests (Op-Ed)
By Kathy Abusow, Sustainable Forestry Initiative, and Carlton Owen, U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities

WREN thanks Kathy Abusow and Carlton Owen for granting us permission to reprint this op-ed.



An estimated two-thirds of the nation's freshwater resources originate in forests, according to the [U.S. Forest Service](#). This makes protecting forestlands critically important in order to ensure a supply of clean, safe water. Recent research also suggests that protecting watersheds reduces long-term water treatment and storage costs for consumers. Recognizing this, water utilities increasingly are taking responsibility for the health of local watersheds, with a special emphasis on protecting the forests they contain.

To that end, the [U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities](#) (Endowment), supported by a grant from the [Sustainable Forestry Initiative](#) (SFI), is launching an initiative to better engage forest landowners and water utilities in finding new ways to protect and maintain watersheds on privately owned forest lands.

The project will encourage forest owners and water utilities to work together to conserve watersheds by keeping their forest locations healthy — the most cost-effective way for communities to ensure continued access to clean water.

Both the Endowment and SFI believe strongly that one of the best ways to protect the nation's water quality is to develop effective collaborations between water utilities and forest landowners. Investing in land protection to protect sources of drinking water is smart, both economically and environmentally.

It's important to note that protecting forests does not necessarily mean public ownership or "set asides." Well-managed private forests offer many advantages, such as keeping land on the tax rolls, while still providing the myriad benefits that flow from forests — renewable wood and paper products, wildlife habitat, places for recreation and much more. The magic is in keeping forests as forests.

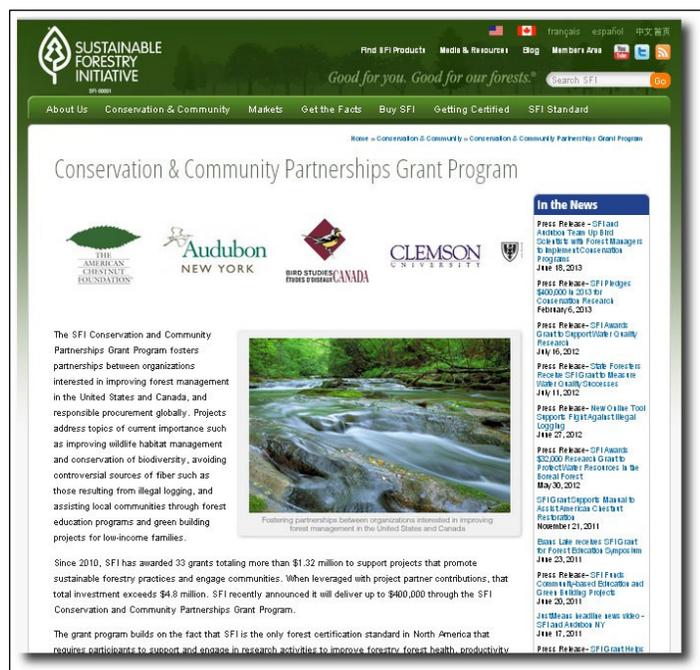
"The magic is in keeping forests as forests."

In 2011, for example, Raleigh, N.C., established a watershed protection fee of 1 cent per 100 gallons in customers' monthly water bills. The fee costs homeowners an average of 40 cents a month and generates about \$1.8 million annually for land protection and management to protect drinking-water quality. Dozens of communities across the country are taking similar steps to protect their watersheds. The [SFI Conservation Grant](#) will help the Endowment educate community stakeholders, water utilities and landowners, and ultimately develop financial instruments that will compensate forest landowners for protecting and maintaining the health of the watersheds they manage. This grant builds upon SFI's commitment to water resources through conservation grants awarded in 2012 to the [World Resources Institute](#) to examine how SFI requirements related to best-management practices result in improvements in water quality, and to the [National Association of State Foresters](#) to assess development and implementation of best-management practices in all U.S. states and territories.

In 2010, SFI Inc. invested \$400,000 to create the SFI Conservation and Community Partnerships Grant Program to foster partnerships and conservation research that improve forest management in the United States and Canada, and responsible procurement globally. In a few short years, by leveraging partner contributions, SFI has achieved a total investment of \$4.8 million in conservation partnerships and research, supporting more than 40 grants with 150 partners across North America.

The SFI program is the only forest certification standard in North America that requires participants to support and engage in research activities to improve forest health, productivity and sustainable management of forest resources.

Through the new collaboration with the Endowment, an investment in healthy forests will pay dividends for the nation's future water quality, and perhaps keep a little extra change in everyone's pocket



The U.S. Endowment for Forestry & Communities, Inc. is a not-for-profit corporation established in 2006, at the request of the U.S. and Canadian governments, endowed with \$200 million. SFI Inc. is an independent, nonprofit organization responsible for maintaining, overseeing and improving the internationally recognized Sustainable Forestry Initiative program. Across the United States and Canada, 240 million acres are certified to the SFI forest management standard. Learn more at <http://sfiprogram.org/BuySFI>. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher. This article was originally published on [LiveScience](#).

~~~~~

**About the Authors:**

Kathy Abusow is president and CEO of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative. Carlton Owen is president and CEO of the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities. The authors contributed this article to [LiveScience's Expert Voices: Op-Ed & Insights](#). August 26, 2013.

~~~~~

More Information on Drinking Water and Forests in Pennsylvania:

- [The Link between Forests and Clean Source Waters](#)

Examples of Pennsylvania Water Suppliers Protecting Forests

❖ **State College Borough Water Authority** was a major funding partner in the [2006 purchase of Musser Gap](#) a 423-acre mountain gap in Centre County with the [Clearwater Conservancy](#). The forested area recharges the groundwater in the vicinity of the Harter and Thomas wellfields in the **State College area**.

The Harter and Thomas wells have supplied high-quality drinking water to 38,000 area residents since the 1940s. But a proposed residential development in Musser Gap could have had a huge impact as new pollutants percolated into the groundwater system and migrated toward the wells. To find out how quickly potential pollutants would show up in the drinking water wells, State College Borough Water Authority conducted dye-trace testing in its recharge area. The findings were a wake up call and brought a sense of urgency to acquire and protect the wellfield recharge property in perpetuity: under low stream flow conditions, the dye showed up in the wells in about three weeks; in high flow conditions, it took only **two days**.

“In Pennsylvania, a well that produces 200 gallons per minute is unique. The Harter and Thomas wells produce 3,000 gallons per minute, making them extraordinary... These wells are very productive and will be able to serve the community essentially forever.”

Max Gill, former Executive Director of the State College Borough Water Authority

❖ **Bethlehem Authority** was the first partner in The Nature Conservancy’s [Working Woodlands Program](#), and agreed to the largest private conservation deal in Pennsylvania history. The city serves 100,000 customers, and depends entirely on surface water sources stored in reservoirs in the Pocono Mountains:

“Our primary mission is to supply the highest quality drinking water to the 115,000 plus customers of the Bethlehem Water System as we possibly can. Preserving the pristine quality of our watershed properties supports that mission. And the Working Woodlands Program enhances our ability to do just that, and offers a modest revenue source as well”

Stephen Repasch, Executive Director of the Bethlehem Authority

- ❖ In 2012, the **Lock Haven City Authority** in north central Pennsylvania, partnered with The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) **Working Woodlands Program**, and agreed to forever protect and sustainably manage its forest and freshwater resources so they will endure for future generations.

“Our primary mission is to supply the highest quality drinking water to the customers of the Lock Haven and Suburban Water Systems. Preserving the pristine quality of our watershed properties supports this mission. Also, the Working Woodlands Program enhances our ability to sustainably manage our forests and infrastructure, while offering a new revenue source,”

June Houser, Board Chair of the Lock Haven City Authority

Acting on the recommendation of Lock Haven City Council, the Lock Haven City Authority agreed to enroll its 5,200 acres of contiguous forest in TNC's Working Woodlands Program, which provides forest landowners with access to forest certification and revenue from carbon markets in exchange for a commitment to practice sustainable forestry. The Authority's lands are located in Pennsylvania's ridge and valley landscape in the Central Appalachian Mountains. They contain numerous native brook trout streams, valley and ridgetop forests, and a stand of old growth hemlock and mixed hardwood forest.

For More Information see [The Working Woodlands Program](#).

Working Woodlands in the News

- [The Allegheny Front, Value-Added Forests: The Working Woodlands Program](#)
- [Living on Earth, Working Woodlands for Carbon and Cash](#)