

Executive Summary

For the better part of the 20th century, land ownership patterns in West Virginia remained virtually unchanged. Large energy and land-holding corporations bought up mineral-rich acres and held them until market conditions were favorable for mining, drilling or leasing. Two separate investigations – one by reporter Tom Miller in 1974 and another by the Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force later that decade – found that vast acres, especially those in the southern coalfields, were controlled by a handful of mostly absentee corporations.

While much of the state's private land is still owned by large, mainly absentee corporations, the list of top owners – once dominated by energy, land holding and paper companies – now includes major timber management concerns, which are in essence money-managers for investors. The North Carolina-based Heartwood Forestland Fund, a timberland investment company that owns 500,366 acres in 31 counties, is West Virginia's largest landowner.

Although the purchase of West Virginia's land by timber management companies is perhaps the most interesting finding by investigators for this report, researchers also found:

- The top 25 private owners own 17.6 percent of the state's approximately 13 million private acres.
- In six counties, the top ten landowners own at least 50 percent of private land. Of the six, five are located in the southern coalfields – Wyoming, McDowell, Logan, Mingo and Boone. Wyoming County has the highest concentration of ownership of any county.
- Not one of the state's top ten private landowners is headquartered in West Virginia.
- Many of the counties - including Harrison, Barbour, Mineral, Lincoln, and Putnam - that had high concentrations of absentee corporate ownership (over 50%) in Miller's 1974 study did not in this analysis.
- Only three corporations that were among the state's top ten landowners in 1974 remained on that list in 2011. If the sale of MeadWestvaco properties to Plum Creek Timber is completed, only two of the 1974 top owners will still be on the list.
- Nationally timberland management concerns control about half of the nation's timberlands that had been managed by industrial timber companies until the 1980s.

This study has only scratched the surface of analyzing and understanding land ownership patterns in West Virginia.

While this report has identified changes in overall patterns of land ownership, there are undoubtedly many other comparisons that can be made by examining the 1974 Miller study, the 1981 Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force study and the present data. Furthermore, a more detailed analysis of land ownership by county might reveal the role that absentee and local land ownership, as well as highly concentrated and widely distributed land ownership, has played in the county's economic development over time.

Recommendations & Future Research:

- Ensure that large landowners are adequately taxed on all of their property and holdings.
- Make property tax records more transparent and accountable to the public.
- Find creative ways to incentivize economic development in counties that have high concentrations of land ownership.
- Establish a "Future Fund" (or permanent mineral trust fund) immediately so counties can build assets and regenerate growth in their communities.
- Conduct further research and analysis on mineral ownership and taxation patterns to ensure that everyone is carrying the tax load.