

# What is the history of Indiana's forests?

It is impossible to discuss the history of Indiana's forests without exploring the history of its people. No official inventories of Indiana's forested landscape exist prior to the mid-1900s. However, accounts from Native Americans, settlers, and the Government Land Office show that Indiana was over 85 percent forestland as recently as 200 years ago. Land that lacked trees included grasslands in the northwestern part of the state, very wet areas in the southwestern part, and very dry areas in south-central Indiana.

Forests were, by far, the best lands for farming, as other lands were considered either too wet or too dry. By 1860, approximately half of the state's forests were burned, cleared, farmed, and some abandoned after the soil's nutrients were depleted.

Indiana's population grew from 20,000 Native Americans in the 1700s to almost 1.5 million people in 1860. By 1900, Indiana was the nation's leading producer of forest products. Forests comprised approximately 1.5 million acres, or about 7 percent of the original amount of forestland in the state.

What happened to the forests during the 20<sup>th</sup> century? FIA results provide a very accurate picture of the growth and changes Indiana's forests have undergone since 1950. The good news is that the forests have continued to grow along with increases in human population in Indiana. Almost one out of every five acres in the state is wooded, and nearly 6 million people now make Indiana home.

### Indiana - Timberland Area, 1950 to 1998

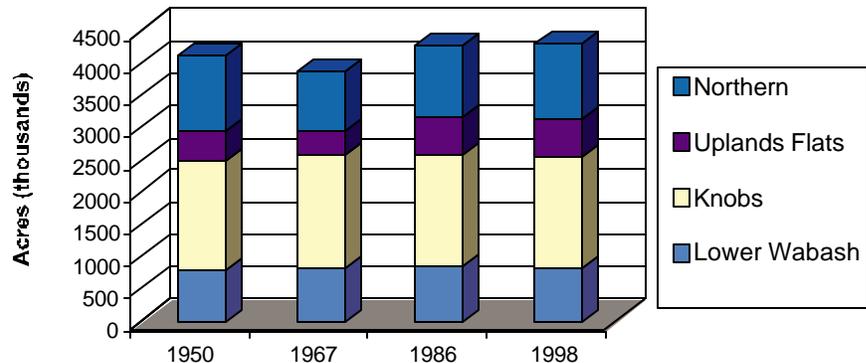


FIGURE 5



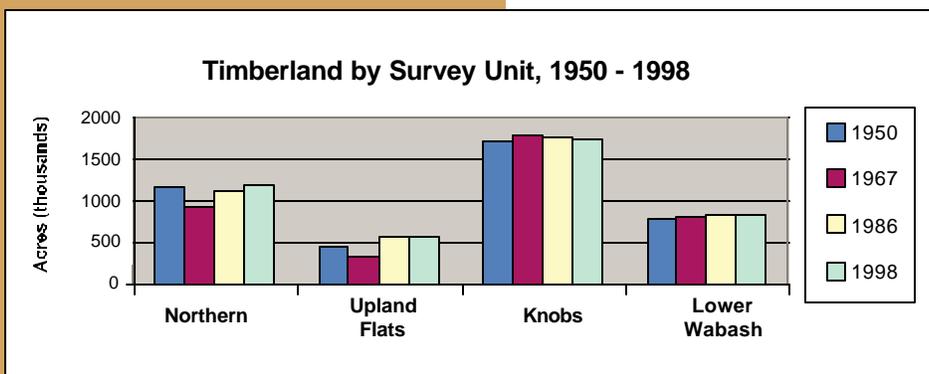
In 1950, Indiana timberland totaled 4.1 million acres (Figure 5). By 1998, the amount of timberland increased by 200,000 acres to slightly more than 4.3 million acres. The state total decreased from 1950 to 1967, although the amount of timberland in southern Indiana increased. The loss, which was concentrated in the north-central part of the state (Figure 6, Northern Unit), may be attributed to increased farming and the evolution from small family-run farms to larger agricultural operations. The statewide increase in timberland area between 1967 and 1998 (Figure 5) is proof that conservation programs and measures are affecting the extent and quality of Indiana's forests!

Between 1967 and 1986 timberland decreased in southern Indiana. This trend of timberland loss continued between 1986 and 1998 (Figure 6, Knobs Unit). Clearing forests for agricultural purposes leveled or declined in the north; however, clearing forests for residential and commercial use continued, especially in southern Indiana. This trend will likely continue as more people decide to settle in the rural, wooded areas that lay within commuting distance of nearby cities.



**What does this mean? Increases in northern Indiana forestland are promising. This trend has continued for two inventory periods. It appears that forestland is rebounding and new forested habitat is being developed for wildlife. More streams and riversides are becoming forested in the north, helping to filter and clean the state's water. Through time, resources for forest products in northern Indiana will increase.**

**Conversely, southern Indiana has the most continuous forests in the state. Wildlife habitats will be affected should these forests continue to decline or to be parceled into smaller sections. Smaller and separate pieces of forestland are less likely to support animals that require large, forested areas. Managing resources for forest products will also become more challenging. In addition, road construction could rise due to the increased demand and need to reach the more numerous, smaller, and separate forests.**



**FIGURE 6**