

# Forest of Recognized Importance (FORI)

## Background

Forest of Recognized Importance (FORI) is a term first introduced in AFF's 2015-2020 Standards of Sustainability. FORI replaces the High Conservation Value Forest (HCVF) designation in an effort to address confusion related to conservation of ecosystems of recognized importance at the landscape scale.

*Standard 5: Fish, Wildlife, Biodiversity and Forest Health*

*Performance Measure 5.4: Where present, forest management activities should maintain or enhance forests of recognized importance.*

*Indicator 5.4.1 Appropriate to the scale and intensity of the situation, forest management activities should incorporate measures to contribute to the conservation of identified forests of recognized importance.*

## What are FORIs?

FORIs represent globally, regionally and nationally significant large landscape areas of exceptional ecological, social, cultural or biological values. These forests are evaluated at the landscape level, rather than the stand level and are recognized for a combination of unique values, rather than a single attribute.

FORIs may include but are not limited to landscapes with exceptionally high concentrations of one or more of the following:

- protected, rare, sensitive or representative forest ecosystems such as riparian areas and wetland biotopes
- areas containing endemic species and critical habitats of multiple threatened or endangered plant and animal species, as identified under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) or other recognized listings
- recognized large - scale cultural or archeological sites including sites of human habitation, cities, burial grounds and in situ artifacts
- areas containing identified and protected water resources upon which large metropolitan populations are dependent
- areas containing identified unique or geologic features including geysers, waterfalls, lava beds, caves or craters

## How are FORIs recognized?

In the United States, because of their significance, FORIs have, generally, been identified and protected by federal or state governments or are under conservation easement by an environmental nonprofit organization. There is, at this time, no state or federal agency that regulates FORIs on private forest lands in the United States. Several conservation organizations have identified areas that they believe are of exceptional status yet there remains no single central clearinghouse of information regarding such forested landscapes.

## **How do FORIs relate to family woodland owners?**

For family woodland owners, a more likely scenario is that their property is adjacent to a state or federally protected area and identified as a FORI at a landscape scale. Landowners should consider the impact to a neighboring FORI and opportunities to support consideration of specific values or attributes when planning and implementing activities on their forest property. Given the size and scale of family ownerships eligible for ATFS certification, landowners may be limited in their abilities to significantly impact FORI presence and quality through management at the small scale.

## **Consultation on FORI: A Note to ATFS Inspectors**

Due to the small scale and low - intensity of family forest operations, informal assessment for the occurrence of FORIs through consultation with experts or review of available and accessible information is appropriate. AFF seeks to develop a tool that may be used as a reference for landowners and qualified natural resource professionals. This tool is not yet available, however, the AFF National Standards Interpretation Committee (NSIC) advises consulting state forest action plans, state wildlife action plans and state natural heritage databases as resources for identifying FORIs.

Consideration of FORIs is relatively new to forestry practice and planning in the United States. As such, adoption of the model has been uneven and a range of terms has been deployed in the identification, protection and management for enhancement of FORIs. Landowners or qualified natural resource professionals may use terms such as “high conservation value forests” or “forests of exceptional value” or other terms to describe this concept, which are considered acceptable in fulfilling this Standard. Qualified ATFS inspectors and third - party assessors are advised to recognize this diversity of terms and the intent in verifying conformance.

## **FORI vs. Special Site**

FORIs and Special Sites share similarities in that they recognize unique biological, geological, and/or historical features. However, they differ in terms of scale. FORIs hold global, national, or regional significance and are evaluated at the landscape level, while Special Sites hold local or personal significance and are evaluated at the stand or sub-stand level.

Here are some examples to put the difference of scale in context:

- A vernal pool (Special Site) vs. Yellowstone (FORI)
- A family cemetery (Special Site) vs. a National Battlefield (FORI)

Please note that just because a feature is old, does not mean that it warrants special site designation. There are criteria related to significance, age and integrity that are used for special sites of historical, social or cultural value. For more information on the identification of historic special sites, please see the 2015-2020 ATFS Standards and Guidance.

## **Resources**

FORI Guidance: <https://www.treefarmssystem.org/fori>

Special Sites <http://mylandplan.org/content/what-special-site>

Your state natural heritage database

Your state wildlife action plan

Your local Natural Resources Conservation Service office

Your state archaeologist