Summary Report

GHG Inventory for Forests and Trees Outside Forests, 2011 to 2016

Prince William County, Virginia

Summary

Forests and trees play a key role in mitigating climate change, yet they are often not included in local greenhouse gas (GHG) inventories or climate action plans. Prince William County, Virginia has taken the first step towards understanding how local changes in land use and tree canopy have contributed to the county's net greenhouse gas profile. Unlike other sectors, land use (in this case, forests and trees) not only emit GHGs, they also remove CO2 from the atmosphere through photosynthesis, and play a critical role in regulating the planet's climate. The information contained in this summary report can be useful when designing climate actions that reduce GHG emissions and/or increase removals of GHGs from the atmosphere.

Key findings:

- Over the period 2011 to 2016, emissions from forests and trees were 77,946 t CO2e per year.

- Over the period 2011 to 2016, the Net GHG balance of forests and trees was -321,504 t CO2e per year.

- Roughly 48% of Prince William County's total land base of 88,824 hectares (219,489 acres) is forest. Many areas outside of forests are also covered by trees, including an average of nearly 15.8 percent tree canopy on lands outside of forest areas

- Over the same period, annual CO2 removals from forests and trees were -399,450 t CO2e per year. (Carbon removals are represented by negative values.)

- Total GHG emissions for Prince William County across all sectors could be reduced if additional forests/trees were added to its land base, and/or if losses of trees were reduced further.

Table 1. Prince William county' s GHG fluxes from forests and trees for inventory period 2011 – 2016, all values reported in t CO2e per year

	Removals(t CO2e/yr)	Emissions(t CO2e/yr)
Undisturbed Forest	-310,674	
Forest Disturbances		17,684
Non-Forest to Forest	-5,188	
Forest to Settlement		26,841
Forest to Grassland		18,108
Forest to other non-forest lands		3,203
Trees outside of forests	-83,588	12,112
Harvested Wood Products	0	
TOTAL	-399,450	77,946
Net GHG balance	**-321,504**	

Data Inputs

Data used as inputs into the GHG emission and removal calculations are described below.

Land and Forest Cover

GHG inventories for lands are reported in six “land use” categories which were defined by data on land cover—forest land, grassland, cropland, wetland, settlement and other land (barren, snow, ice). Prince William County’s total land base is approximately 88,824 hectares (219,489 acres), with nearly 32.3% Settlement (i.e. developed areas of varying intensity), around 48.3% forest, 14.6% Grassland (which includes hay/pasture, shrub/scrub and other herbaceous cover), 2.3% cropland, 2.2% wetland and 0.3% other land.

Figure 1. Land cover in Prince William from the National Land Cover Database, 2016

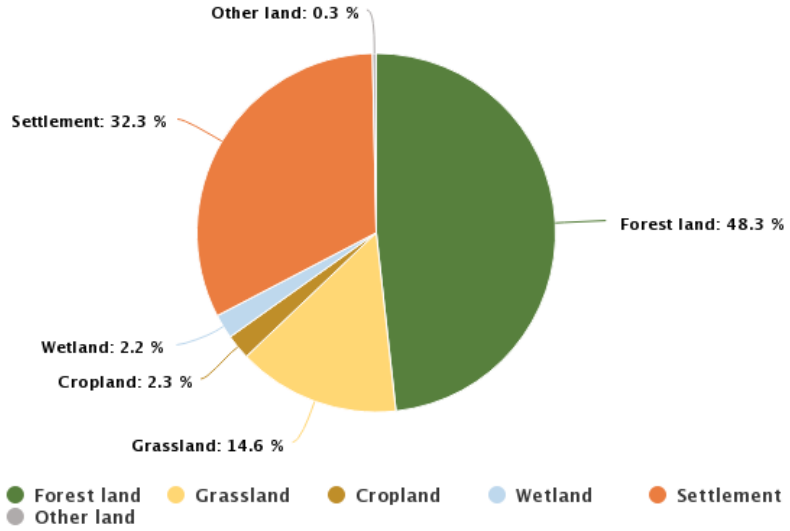
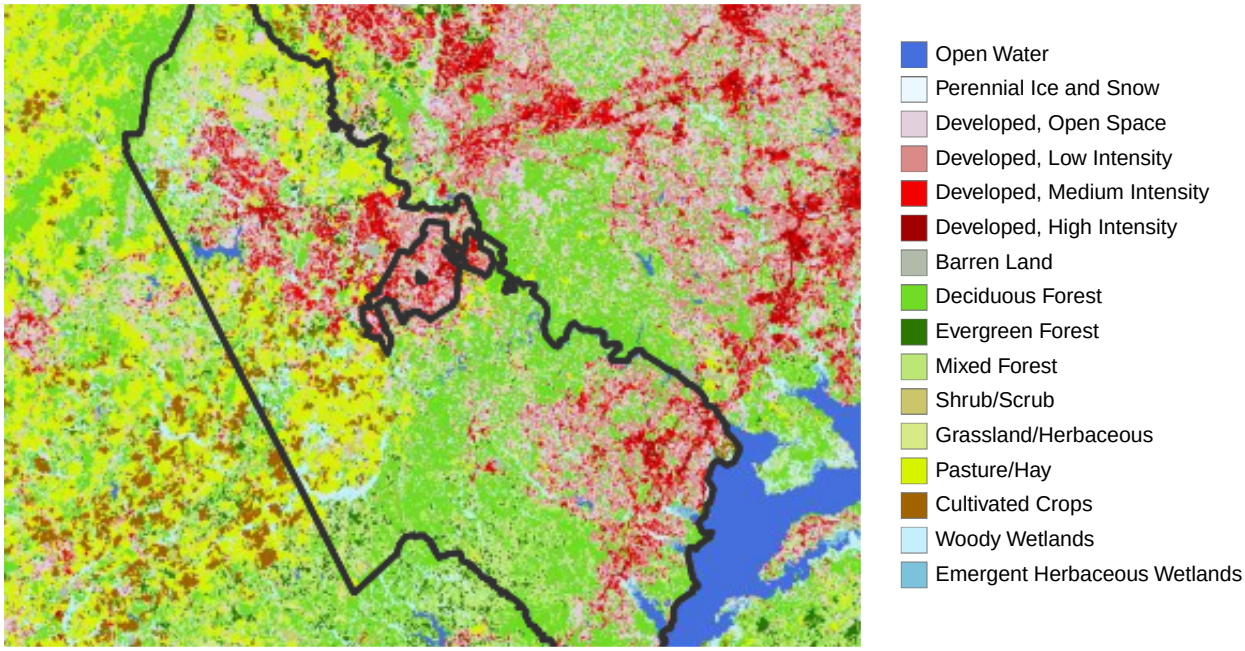


Figure 2. Land cover in Prince William from the National Land Cover Database, 2016



Forest Cover Change

Generating GHG estimates requires data not just on areas of land use, but also data on how land use has changed over time. Between 2011 and 2016, the county lost around 1,168 hectares (2,885 acres) of forest land, largely conversion to Grassland. Over the same period, the county gained around 575 hectares (1,420 acres) of forest land, largely from Grassland.

Figure 3. Loss of forest to other land use types between 2011 and 2016 (ha)

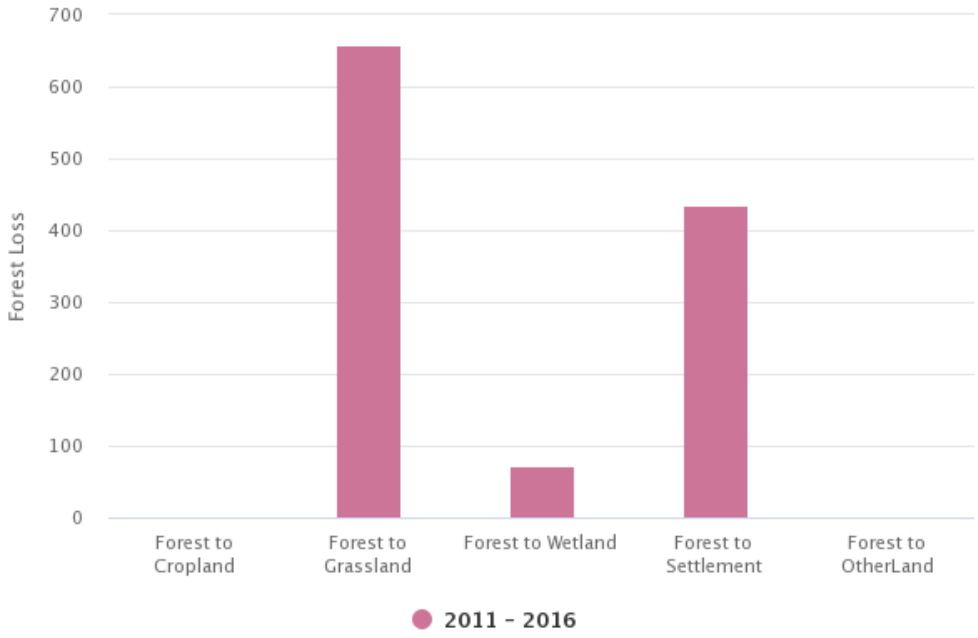
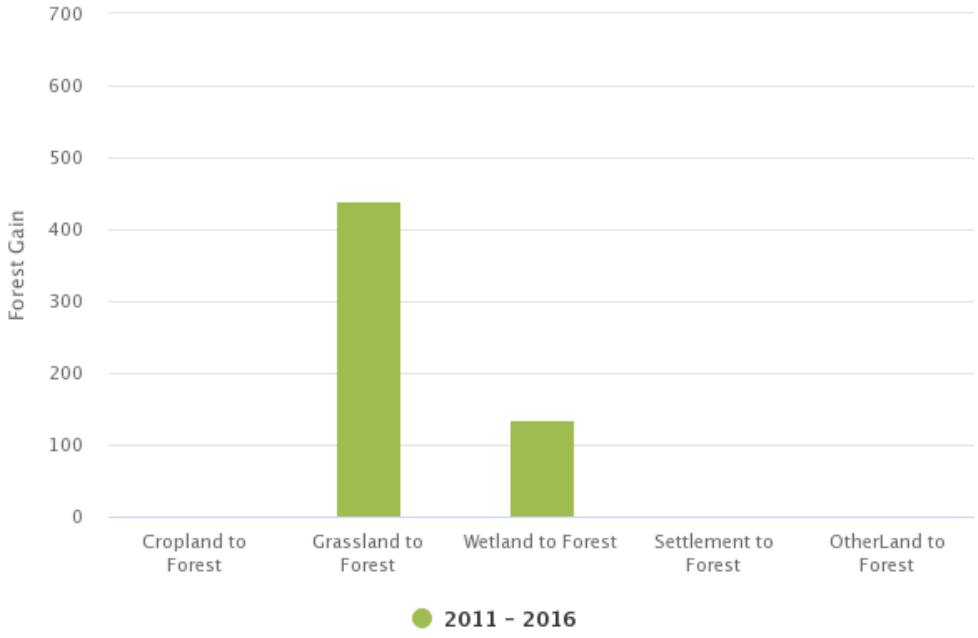


Figure 4. Gain of forest from other land use types between 2011 and 2016 (ha)



Forest Disturbances

Over the inventory period 2011 to 2016, forest disturbance from harvests/other disturbance was the most significant in Prince William County, affecting 396.3 hectares (979 acres), followed by fires, which affected 0 hectares (0 acres) and insects, which affected 0 hectares (0 acres).

Trees Outside Forests

Figure 5 shows tree canopy captured by the NLCD tree canopy data. (Note that some areas with high tree canopy in Figure 5 overlap with the NLCD forest class shown in Figure 2.)

This data are available only for the years 2011 and 2016. Over this time period, Prince William County had an average of 7,095 hectares (17,532 acres) of tree canopy outside forests. Between 2011 and 2016, 32 hectares per year of tree canopy were lost, for a total of 160 hectares (396 acres) of tree canopy loss over the 5 year period. Most of this loss occurred within the Settlement class.

Figure 5. Tree canopy 2016 (Source: National Land Cover Database)

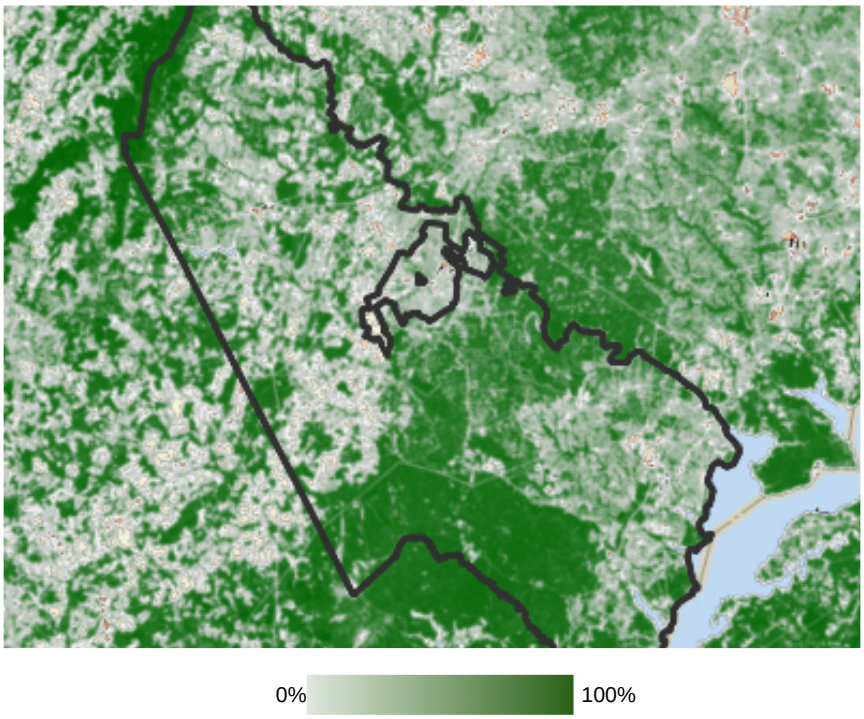


Figure 6: Average tree canopy (in hectares) and % tree canopy in different non-forest land use categories in Prince William County for the period 2011-2016. Note: bars relate to tree canopy area (left vertical-axis, hectares) and dots are the % tree cover per land use category (right vertical-axis). “Other” category not shown due to very low area.

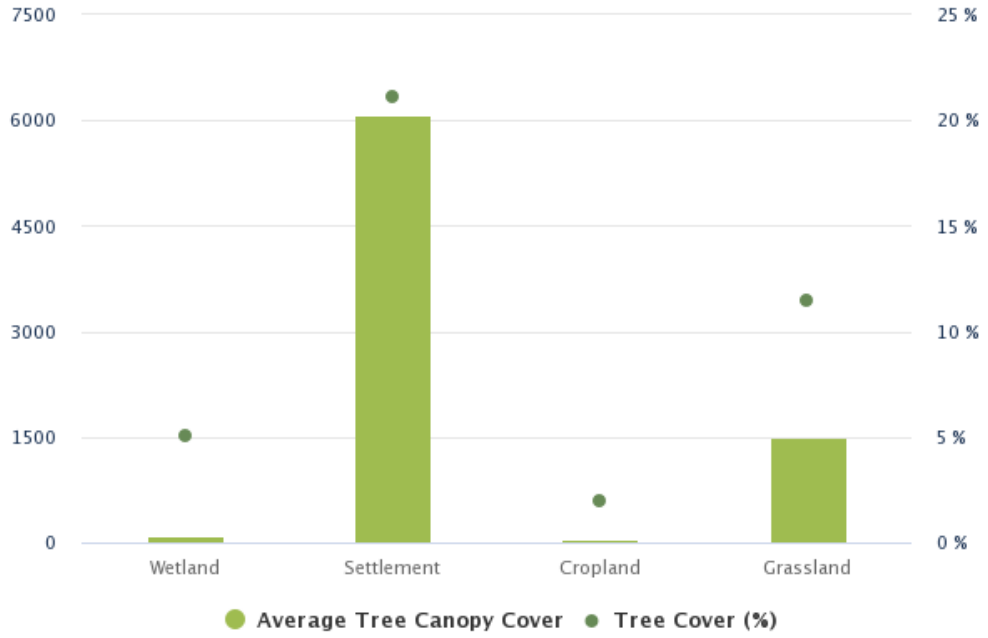
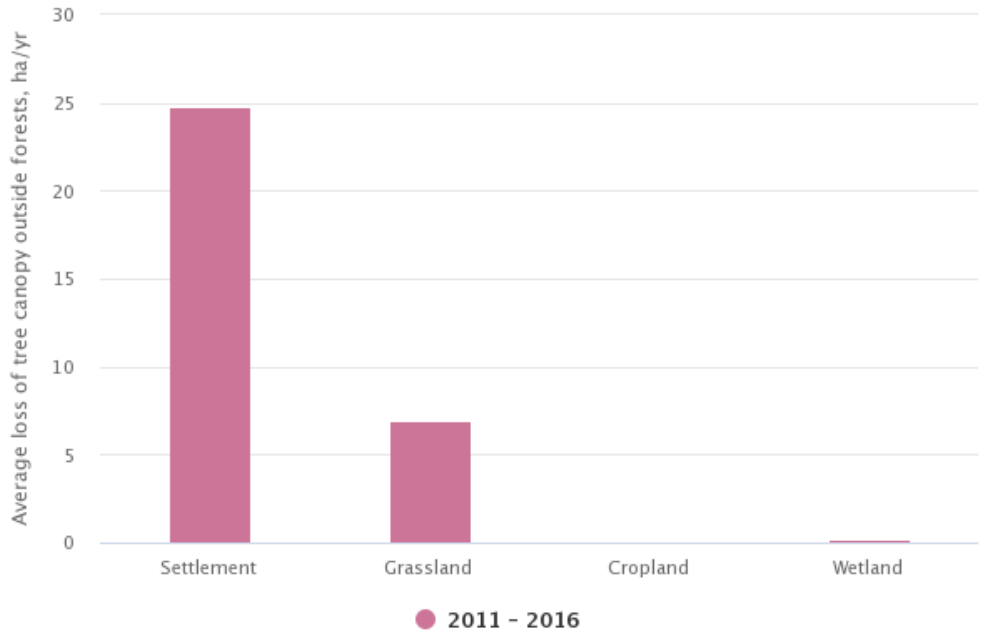


Figure 7: Average area of tree canopy loss in different non-forest land use categories in Prince William County over the period 2011 to 2016 (hectares per year). Note: other category not shown due to very low area.



Land Cover Change Matrix

Table 2. Full NLCD land cover change matrix for 2011 to 2016. All areas are in hectares.

2016: Top 2011: Left	Deciduous Forest	Evergreen Forest	Mixed Forest	Woody Wetlands	Cultivated Crops	Pasture/Hay	Grassland/Herbaceous	Shrub/Scrub	Open Water	Emergent Herbaceous Wetlands	Developed, Open Space	Developed, Low Intensity	Developed, Medium Intensity	Developed, High Intensity	Barren Land	Perennial Ice/Snow	Total
Deciduous Forest	22,607	3	6	0.6	0.4	9	285	275	6	0.3	85	107	111	31	2	0	23,528
Evergreen Forest	2	1,998	3	0.4	0	0.1	37	33	0.6	0	6	9	13	4	0	0	2,103
Mixed Forest	3	1	12,274	0	0	0.7	11	7	0.4	0	26	6	4	0.5	0	0	12,333
Woody Wetlands	0	0	0	5,396	0	0	0	0	8	56	14	9	10	2	0.4	0	5,496
Cultivated Crops	0	0	0	0	1,951	0	0	0	0.1	0.1	3	14	14	1	0.5	0	1,983
Pasture/Hay	3	9	32	0.5	49	11,159	6	17	0.1	0.2	46	39	33	9	2	0	11,403
Grassland/Herbaceous	48	31	24	0.4	6	0.8	426	201	3	2	12	23	27	16	1	0	820
Shrub/Scrub	124	68	100	0	1	2	42	474	0.4	0	8	7	6	2	0.5	0	835
Open Water	13	1	2	12	0.1	0.8	7	0.5	1,414	36	0.2	0.3	0.3	0	2	0	1,487
Emergent Herbaceous Wetlands	0.2	0	0	108	0	0.5	0.5	0.3	9	416	4	2	0.9	2	1	0	544
Developed, Open Space	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13,047	78	136	21	0	0	13,282
Developed, Low Intensity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8,741	0	0	0	0	8,741
Developed, Medium Intensity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4,858	0	0	0	4,858
Developed, High Intensity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1,119	0	0	1,119
Barren Land	0.5	0.1	0	0.1	0.2	0	0.3	0	3	0.4	0.9	4	4	0.7	277	0	290
Perennial Ice/Snow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	**22,800**	**2,111**	**12,440**	**5,517**	**2,007**	**11,173**	**816**	**1,008**	**1,443**	**512**	**13,250**	**9,038**	**5,216**	**1,206**	**285**	**0**	**0**

Table 3. Simplified land cover change matrix for 2011 to 2016.All areas are in hectares.

2016: Top 2011: Left	Forest Land	Cropland	Grassland	Wetland	Settlement	Other Land	Total
Forest Land	42,293	0.4	658	72	435	2	**43,461**
Cropland	0	1,951	0	0.2	32	0.5	**1,983**
Grassland	439	56	12,329	6	225	3	**13,058**
Wetland	135	0.1	10	1,875	9	3	**2,031**
Settlement	0	0	0	0	28,000	0	**28,000**
Other Land	0.7	0.2	0.3	3	9	277	**290**
Total	**42,868**	**2,007**	**12,997**	**1,955**	**28,710**	**285**	**0**

Emission and Removal Factors

A summary of the emission and removal factors used in the calculations is provided in Table 4.

	Emission Factor (t C/ha)	Removal Factor (t C/ha/yr)
Forest Change		
Deforestation		
To Cropland	17.03	
To Grassland	37.48	
To Settlement	83.97	
To Wetland	58.99	
To Other	66.19	
Reforestation (Non-Forest to Forest)		-2.46
Forest Remaining Forest		
Undisturbed		-2.02
Disturbed		
Fire	0	
Insect/Disease		
Harvest/Other	60.79	
Trees Outside Forest		
Tree canopy loss	103.00	
Canopy maintained/gained		-3.21

Harvested Wood Products

Harvested wood products (HWP) temporarily store carbon from the forest ecosystem as the wood goes through a series of production processes and end-uses, with eventual disposal (and emission to the atmosphere). The delay represents a net benefit to the atmosphere. The period of storage varies from long-lived solid wood products that remain in use for long periods of time to products that are quickly disposed of in landfills.

In the web tool, the HWP Calculator tracks carbon in harvested wood through four different “fates,” from harvest to timber products to primary wood products to end-use to disposal, applying best estimates for product ratios and half-lives at each stage. Based on user inputs entered about annual harvest volumes in Prince William County, the change in the harvested wood pool over the inventory period 2011 to 2016 is estimated as 0 t CO2e per year.

Caveats

Information presented here represents a snapshot in time of the net GHG balance and many of the factors contributing to that balance. The estimates can help identify where policies may be designed to reduce net GHG emissions. This inventory currently uses a simplifying assumption that a loss of forest or trees results in immediate emissions to the atmosphere (rather than delayed emissions in the case of various use cases from long-term storage to shorter decay timelines if sent to landfills). In general, it is important to consider that these estimates represent a relatively short period of time compared with the long-term consequences of policy decisions and land management actions. For example, a forest converted to settlement represents a permanent loss of removal capacity. Over the long term, maintaining forests will sustain a higher rate of carbon removal, depending on age-related growth rates and occurrence of disturbances.

There are significant uncertainties in the estimates. Although not quantified here, typical greenhouse gas inventories of forests using similar approaches, including the national GHG inventory, report uncertainties in the net GHG balance that can be as high as ±45% (with 95% confidence). In the results presented here, the most uncertain estimates involve emissions from land-use change which are based on well-documented remote-sensing products, but relatively few field observations from a statistical sampling of county forests. While uncertainties can be high, the estimates can still provide useful information on the relative magnitude and importance of such GHGs; subsequent analyses can also provide information on the directionality of emissions and removals from land management.

Finally, it is recommended that additional analyses be done using models that project impacts of alternatives over coming decades. Such models are available and have been used in other studies at county scale. The GHG inventory presented here is only the first step to providing science-based information to support policy decisions. To more fully explore the potential impacts of alternate policies, projection models can be used to compare long-term results among the alternatives which typically include a “business as usual” (i.e. no change in policy) alternative. This feature may be added into the web tool in the future.