



SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY AND AFRICAN AMERICAN LAND RETENTION NETWORK

Request for Proposals - *Network Expansion*

Summer 2025

SFLR Network Overview

The Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention (SFLR) Network envisions a world where African American and rural landowners are empowered to protect, control and enhance their land assets through forestry, agriculture, and conservation – all while building a generational legacy of life on the land. Our organization exists to create a sustainable system of support for rural land and forest owners that significantly increases the value of small acreage forests through sustainable forestry practices, land retention services, technical assistance, and more.

The SFLR Network seeks proposals from organizations, teams or coalitions (i.e., Network Site) interested in initiating or expanding their services through SFLR Network programming.

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Section 1. Network History and Purpose

The SFLR Network began as a program in 2013 as a 2.5 year pilot implemented in three multi-county sites in Alabama, North Carolina, and South Carolina to advance sustainable forestry and forest health and to address the involuntary loss of rural African American land. The program was expanded in 2016 to include multi-county sites in Arkansas and Georgia, in 2017 to include multi-county sites in Mississippi and Virginia, and again in 2019 to include a multi-county site in Texas. As a program, SFLR tested and proved the concepts that:

- Better practice of sustainable forestry increases income and builds land asset values, thus contributing to more stable land ownership, and
- Moving families toward productive forestry practices requires accessible and coordinated support services from private, nonprofit, and government forestry and legal services agencies.

Over the years, the SFLR Network has included:

- Research to set baseline understanding about current African American forestland ownership, forest conditions, challenges to success, and opportunities to address identified hurdles;
- Learning opportunities to facilitate sharing and learning among the project sites; and,
- Network evaluation to track progress and measure impact

Given prior success, in 2023, site directors of the SFLR elected to begin the process of forming a standalone non-profit organization, transitioning from a project to an independent entity. As an emerging organization, SFLR works collaboratively across the seven network sites to convene landowners and forestry sector leaders to raise funds to support landowner services on the ground, to train emerging leaders, to amplify community-based land stories, and to advocate for empowering land policies.

The SFLR Network now seeks to add **up to two** additional forested, multi-county regions with concentrations of African American forest landowners in the following states: Texas, Tennessee, Florida and/or Louisiana. The organization, team or coalition (i.e., Network Site) will define, coordinate, and manage a comprehensive, flexible, multi-partner network to provide forestry and land tenure support to rural, historically underserved, small acreage forestland owners. The Network Site(s) will be selected based on merit, balance of approach and geographic area represented, and organizational experience and capacity. More details and specific criteria are provided in Section 5: Elements of Success and Criteria.



Section 2. Funding and Matching Funds Requirement

The partnership will provide a total of up to \$400,000 over a 2 year period to the newly selected Network Site(s). Funding will be renewed on an annual basis, based on performance, with up to \$200,000/year for each year. Matching funds of at least 25% are required over the course of the grant. Matching funds need not be identified as part of the initial proposal, but the capacity to raise matching funds should be clearly demonstrated in the proposal.

Section 3. Background & Opportunity

In the rural South, land ownership is a primary and historic source of rural wealth, security, and community health. Land loss damages the potential of communities to capture and build generational legacies. Within the context of a comprehensive and flexible network of private and public landowner support, expanding and improving sustainable forestry can help plug the land leak by demonstrating the productive capacity of the land, creating new income for land owners, increasing land value, stabilizing land ownership, and slowing the conversion of working forests to non-forest uses. To bolster these efforts, SFLR Network seeks to engage private forestry efforts and to catalyze changes in policies that may inadvertently create barriers to African American and small acreage, non-industrial timberland owner participation in government programs.

African-American farmland ownership, which peaked in 1910 at 16 to 19 million acres¹, has decreased to less than 7 million acres today.² Despite dramatic land loss across rural African American communities, farm and forest land continues to be an important source of African American family resilience & wealth, with a total value of \$14.3 billion in 1999.³ Of Black farmland owners, 43% have forestland totaling 1.2 million acres; 16% of Black-owned farmland is in forest with the average forestland holding being 43 acres compared to an average 60 acres for whites.⁴

The causes of underutilization and involuntary loss of rural African American land are numerous and complex. In addition to fragmented family ownership (heirs' property), financial pressure from development and consequent rising taxes, failure to maximize potential income from land due to lack of information, limited access to government programs, and lack of credit are contributing factors. Moreover, support for African American forest owners is fragmented and difficult to access. Relevant nonprofit service providers tend to be under-resourced and lack capacity. Past history of discrimination and a corresponding lack of trust has resulted in underutilization by African American landowners of some federal programs.

¹ Note: Statistics referring to African American land ownership and land loss are frequently shifting, thus those provided in this document should be understood as illustrative rather than definitive.

² 1999 Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey, USDA, Census of Agriculture.

³ Who Owns the Land? Agricultural Land Ownership by Race/Ethnicity, Wood, Gilbert, Sharp, Rural America, Economic Research Service, USDA, Winter 2002, Volume 17, Issue 4.

⁴ Ibid.



Section 4. Network Expansion Priorities

As SFLR Network seeks up to two additional forested, multi-county sites to join the Network, here are our shared priorities:

1. **Forest health and land retention.** Building on its early success, SFLR continues supporting landowners through basic forestry and land tenure services:
 - a. The services of forestry professionals for forest management planning, forest restoration, and access to markets.
 - b. Assistance in connecting landowners to various federal and state programs to support forestry
 - c. Legal services for clearing title (restorative) and estate planning (preventative) to cure and prevent the condition of heirs' property.
 - d. Landowner education through various organized educational events and one on one contact with landowners by SFLR project staff and volunteer landowner "ambassadors".
2. **Ecological resilience and partnership in conservation movements.** As SFLR impacts ecological resilience through sustainable forest management, forest health, and increasing forest cover, our network leverages and facilitates large-scale peer learning and advocacy. SFLR landowners have the opportunity to participate in and benefit from private conservation programs including landscape scale conservation initiatives. To this end, SFLR convenes large private conservation organizations for a dialogue with SFLR organizational and landowner networks about sustaining partnerships in conservation.
3. **Landowner and organizational impact.** SFLR landowner education programs and the practical work by landowners on forest restoration and land tenure is generating a cadre of knowledgeable African American leaders with deep ties to their rural places. In the expansion of SFLR, these leaders are more formally organized for collective voice both at the local and regional level.
4. **Enhanced communications capacity at the regional and site levels.** As the SFLR sites continue to develop, we are dedicated to providing the tools and capacities needed to help pave their individual paths to sustainability. One such capacity is the ability for each site to communicate about SFLR, the work they've done through the program, their accomplishments, and their vision/plans for the future.
5. **Increase landowner access to professional sustainable forestry services.** To address the inadequate professional forestry services available to meet small-acreage landowner needs, SFLR aggregates resources to support landowner clustering efforts as well as small-acreage landowner access to emerging markets (i.e. carbon, mass timber, agroforestry, etc.)

Section 5. Network Impact Strategies

SFLR was designed to address seven barriers to African American success in profitable and sustainable forestry:

1. Weak support systems for landowner capacity including limited nonprofit, government, and university programs.
2. Limited access to forestry markets.
3. Insecure land tenure due to heirs' property and limited succession planning.
4. Limited access to capital.
5. Diminished forest financial, aesthetic, and ecological value.
6. Broken trust between landowners and private foresters and government natural resources programs.
7. History of limited return on investment for forest management.

SFLR Network seeks to overcome these barriers by helping stabilize African American land ownership and enhance family wealth through a set of interrelated strategies. Primary among these is supporting the development and functioning of flexible and effective forest landowner support networks composed of nonprofits, government service providers, universities, the private sector, and other partners.

Role of the Network Site

Network Sites identify, develop, and build or supplement the capacity of a flexible network of nonprofits, government service providers, universities, the private sector, and other partners to support African American and historically underserved forestland owners in rural communities. The goal of this support is to significantly increase the potential for long-term, forest-related income for African American forestland owners in the selected multi-county region. Specific areas of support provided through the network will likely include technical, educational, and legal assistance to address issues related to land tenure, and technical assistance for business and estate planning, developing and implementing forest management plans, appropriate sustainable forestry techniques and practices, and other areas identified throughout the course of the project.

The seven other SFLR Network sites are Black-led organizations that are known and have a history of trust by African-American landowners in the communities they are serving. They are also known, trusted and have good working relationships with governmental agencies with resources and technical capacities, including NRCS, Rural Development, the US Forest Service, Farm Services Agencies, state forestry organizations, and the private sector. As such, these sites are able to leverage both the long-term stability and funding of the government programs; marketing networks; possible funding, and technical expertise from the private sector; and the community trust and innovation of community-based nonprofits. Collaboration with the NRCS EQIP program and state forestry programs that support individual forest owners are important elements of the program.



The future Network Site will develop strong and durable relationships that are flexible enough to strategically respond to the changing and evolving needs of forestland owners over the course of the project and beyond. This flexibility will require that relationships within the network have various characteristics, shaped by and adapted to landowner needs and the environments in which they operate. This flexibility, responsiveness, and adaptability will contribute to effectiveness, resilience, and sustainability of the network.

Section 6. Elements of Success and Criteria

SFLR Network proposal selection will be based on 6.1) Keys to Success from SFLR Network's history, 6.2) Proposal Criteria, and 6.3) Required Network Activities, all described below. Proposals should address how the listed criteria will be met and how the required network activities and others will be structured.

6.1 Keys to Success from SFLR Network's history:

The following prioritized attributes represent the critical success factors for the SFLR Network. Proposals will be partially measured by the presence of these attributes:

1. An organization, team or coalition with a demonstrable track record of earning and sustaining the trust of historically underserved landowners, government agencies, and private forestry professionals.
2. An organization, team or coalition with sufficient management capacity and proximity to the project site to actively manage and support front-line forestry and legal staff.
3. A knowledgeable lead forester (or outreach person with deep knowledge about forestry and forest services) capable of enabling landowners to understand the basic elements of successful forestry, land tenure, and government program requirements.
4. Trusting and respectful relationships between the landowner, lead forester, and legal support personnel.
5. Patience to allow landowners to get comfortable with the SFLR Network information, lead SFLR staff, and SFLR support staff.
6. Time to have multiple (if needed) face-to-face sessions on the landowners' property to fully understand their interests and aspirations.
7. A strong and systematic educational program for landowners.
8. A structured plan for success along with an execution strategy with clear accountability for primary outcomes.
9. Consistent and effective communication between the future Network Site and Network partners.
10. Key agency participation in the Network, including NRCS, FSA, and state forestry agencies.
11. A formal, long-term vision about how the project contributes to the organization, team or coalition's overall mission and development.

6.2. Primary Proposal Criteria:

Based on SFLR learning and outcomes over the past ten years, the following criteria will be used to review proposals:



1. An organization, team or coalition with strong leadership, project management, and support structures focused on clearly defined project outcomes.
 - a. Resources and staffing focused on well-defined primary objectives documented and reported in a timely manner.
 - b. Capacity to raise matching funds from local and regional resources.
 - c. Coordination of stakeholders, partners, and landowners to maintain network cohesion and effectiveness.
 - d. Project management structure with key roles and responsibilities defined as:
 - i. Project Director: establish a vision for success, build and nurture partner and stakeholder relationships, manage and support the project team in the field, document and report progress in a timely fashion, and address any overarching issues that might impede project success.
 - ii. A Lead Forester, forestry practitioner, or outreach person with deep knowledge about forestry and forest services: implement the strategies and tactics of the Sustainable Forestry Network, including:
 1. provide and/or coordinate initial outreach and education;
 2. provide and/or coordinate forestry services for landowners;
 3. coordinate and build an effective and trustworthy cadre of professional forestry practitioners; and
 4. build and sustain trustworthy relationships with landowners, contractors, and vendors; advocate for the landowners during partner and stakeholder interactions; collect and consolidate project related data; and follow through on landowner, partner and stakeholder needs to keep the project moving.
 5. The preference is for the lead forester/outreach person to be employed directly by the organization, team or coalition, but if direct employment is not feasible, a contractor could be considered.
 - iii. Legal Assistance Director or outreach person to secure legal assistance: develop and implement a landowner land tenure program through internal and/or contracted legal services. The legal assistance director may be an employee of the organization, team or coalition or contractor through a legal services organization.
 - iv. (Optional) Other outreach support: identify and reach out to potential Sustainable Forestry Network landowners within the project service areas to plan and manage educational workshops to recruit interested participants into the network.
2. A credible plan to develop comprehensive forestry services using project, government, and private resource providers, including:
 - a. Capacity for landowner relationship management.
 - b. Capacity for managing forestry services.
 - c. Cooperative relationship with USDA and state agencies with clear, shared goals.
 - d. A well-structured, well-managed, and active landowner support network contributing to landowner outcomes.
 - e. Connection with forestry consultants and loggers to help scale the program and reach/assist additional landowners during and beyond the grant period.



- f. A plan to address private forestry infrastructure to support landowner needs including a credible list of contractors and vendors to deliver high-quality forestry practices and services.
3. Clear goals and an effective system to support both restorative and preventative services for land tenure.
 - a. Capacity to clear titles, set clear goals for the number of titles cleared, and explicitly defined processes.
 - b. Strong capacity for preventative services such as wills and estate planning.
 - c. Methods to transfer knowledge about heirs' property to individuals and families through consultation and educational programs and a refined ability to work with heirs property owners (individuals and families) through the heirs' property resolution process.
4. Clear and workable strategies to spread knowledge of sustainable forestry and trust of forestry support organizations widely through regional networks of Black forest landowners, even beyond those receiving direct forestry and/or land tenure services from the project, including:
 - a. Intensive landowner leadership training programs that enable accurate and sophisticated landowner-to-landowner information transfer.
 - b. Landowner-to-landowner sharing and celebration sessions.
 - c. A structured communications plan using print and electronic media.
 - d. Regional project exposure through events, social media, and public relations.
 - e. A research method to measure transmission of knowledge, connections, and trust from landowner-to-landowner and agency-to-landowner interactions.

6.3. Required SFLR Network Site Activities:

1. Forestry services for forest management planning, forestry practices, forest certification, and access to forestry markets.
2. Land tenure program to assist in resolving heirs' property issues and preventing future land tenure problems carried out through in-house or contracted service providers.
3. Activities to support landowner access to and success in federal and state government financial assistance and landowner support programs.
4. Formal landowner forestry education program aimed at creating a core group of well-informed landowners capable of counseling peers and referring others to appropriate forestry and land tenure services.
5. Program to connect landowners to trusted and effective forestry professionals (consultants, timber buyers, and loggers) to enable effective forest management and access to markets.
6. Program to fill capital gaps for landowners and forestry professionals.
7. Participation in SFLR Network programs and convenings (i.e. Network General Meetings, Forestry Caucus, Policy Caucus, Landowner Gatherings, and more.)
8. Representation on SFLR Network Board through the allocation of one (1) board seat.



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Section 7. Proposal Guidelines and Format

Proposals are due by July 3rd, 2025 at 11:59pm eastern.

Submit proposals electronically to breah@sflrnetwork.org. A confirmation of receipt will be sent within 48 hours. If no confirmation is received, please call (470) 485-6764.

Please follow the proposal outline below from Part A to Part F. You may include up to two pages of additional information to support your proposal.

There is not a specified page limit. However, reviewers will appreciate succinct answers to the questions.

Process Schedule

- a. RFP released on May 21st 2025.
- b. Proposals due on July 3rd, 2025.
- c. Grant notifications begin September 1st, 2025.

Technical Assistance and Support

Please email breah@sflrnetwork.org or call at (470) 485-6764 with any questions.



Section 8. Application Outline

Please follow the outline below in preparing your proposal. Once you have answered the questions, you may add up to two pages of additional text to support your application.

Part A: General Information

Organization name:

Organization location:

Contact person:

Contact information (mailing address, email address, phone number):

Please describe your organization's long-term vision for how joining the SFLR Network contributes to your organization's broad overall mission and development.

Who are the stakeholders or constituencies to whom your organization is most accountable?

What multi-county region do you propose to serve in the project? Please name the counties and provide data about the percentage of African Americans and the poverty rate in those counties.

Please very briefly describe the forests in the region. Are there significant markets available for low and high value timber? Are there a sufficient number of forestry consultants, forestry services contractors, and loggers available in the region? Are those forestry professionals generally available to small land owners? To minority landowners?

Part B: Sustainable Forestry and Land Retention

Please describe your organization's understanding and experience with sustainable forestry.

What opportunities do you see for sustainable forestry? What is your organization's history with it? What skills does your organization have in it? What are the links between your organization's existing programs and sustainable forestry? What resources will you draw on (local, state, federal) to implement a program focused on sustainable forestry?

Please describe your organization's understanding and experience with African American land retention. (See section 6.2.3 of the RFP for definition of land retention services.)

What opportunities do you see for African American land retention? What is your organization's history with it? What skills does your organization and/or your primary partners have in it? What are the links between your organization's existing programs and African American land retention? What resources will you draw on (local, state, federal) to implement a program focused on African American land retention?

What is your organization's vision for integrating sustainable forestry and land retention?

Please describe your experience, if any, of working with state and local offices of NRCS, other USDA programs, and state forestry programs.



Part C: Comprehensive Program Services

Forestry Services: Please outline, in detail, your plans for developing comprehensive forestry services using project, government, and private resource providers. (See Section 5.1 of the RFP) In your response, please also explain how you intend to:

- provide landowners services for forest management planning, forestry practices, forest certification, and access to forestry markets,
- build productive and trusted relationships between landowners and government forestry services including NRCS and state forestry programs,
- connect landowners to trusted and effective forestry professionals (consultants, timber buyers, and loggers) to enable effective forest management and access to markets, and
- help fill capital gaps for landowners and forestry professionals.

Land Tenure Services: Please provide your goals and approach to supporting both restorative and preventative services for land tenure. Specifically, please describe how you will assist landowners to resolve heirs' property issues and prevent future land tenure problems carried out through in-house or contracted service providers.

Part D: Forest Landowner Network of Support

The program seeks to stabilize African American land ownership and enhance family wealth through sustainable forestry by promoting flexible and effective regional networks of support for landowners through nonprofit, forest industry, and government program collaboration.

Given the varied needs of many African American landowners combined with the documented lack of infrastructure in the regions targeted through this initiative, we recognize applicants may not have the partnerships to address all the needs identified.

Please describe your organization's vision for a flexible and effective system of African American forest landowner support. In responding, please consider:

- What different technical approaches and methods (i.e. legal assistance, business planning technical assistance, forest management planning technical assistance, etc.) are most relevant for African American landowners in your multi-county region and which do you plan to leverage to support them?
- What potential partners (internal or external to your multi-county region) have capacity to provide the support described above? What is your organization's current relationship with these potential partners?
- What process will you use to identify and recruit the missing capacities and skills you would seek to incorporate into your landowner support system?
- What skill and capacity gaps do you foresee needing to fill outside of what will be available from your organization and your most likely partners in order to provide the necessary support to landowners in your multi-county region?
- What are your plans for sustaining and strengthening that support network?
- How will this system of support be sustained beyond the timeline of this project?



Landowner and organizational power: Please describe your strategy for diffusing innovation and learning through landowner networks and building the implementation and advocacy power of landowners and the key organization. (See section 6.2.4 of the RFP)

Note: “Diffusing innovation” means the transfer of knowledge, skill, and connections to resources from landowner to landowner. Ultimately, the goal is to change the generally-held perception about the value and possibility of managed forestry and secure land tenure among Black landowners in a multi-county region.

Part E: Programmatic, Administrative, and Financial Management and Fundraising

Please describe your organization's capacity to successfully manage a sustainable forestry & land retention program. Drawing on specific examples, please describe your organization's abilities and capacities to:

- staff up and manage the forestry, outreach, and land tenure staff required to execute the project,
- facilitate and manage networks and collaboratives,
- manage various types of financial resources (government, philanthropic, private, other), and
- fundraise to meet the project match requirements and to secure long-term resources to carry the work forward.

If your organizational capacity is not currently adequate to fulfill the desired criteria, please outline specific plans for strengthening your organizational capacity.

Please elaborate on the following:

- Plans for staffing the sustainable forestry & land retention program, including specific staff experience and capacity relative to the roles and responsibilities described in the criteria. Please list each staff position that will directly contribute to the program operation and the full time equivalent percentage that position will focus directly on this project. For example: Outreach specialist: .75 FTE or Executive Director/Project Manager: .30 FTE or Project Forester: 1 FTE. Also, please indicate where positions will be filled by new hiring.
- Your plan for raising the match required, noting likely sources and your plans for researching new opportunities.

Part F: Budget and Budget Narrative

Please provide a simple line item project budget for a one year period, including your 25% match. Please note that

Budget table: As indicated below, include \$10,000 for team travel to attend an orientation meeting, an annual project meeting, and one federal partner visit in DC. Insert more rows, if necessary.



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Categories	SFLR Budget Request	Applicant Match	Total
Travel – Required Program Meetings	\$10,000		\$10,000

Part G: Letters of Support

Please include letters from your state NRCS and state forestry program (forestry commission or equivalent) offices stating their willingness to actively collaborate on this program by helping to support forest owners enrolled in the program. At this point, we do not require letters from other partners.

Part H: Additional Information (optional)

You may add up to two pages of additional information to support your proposal.