

MAPPING THE SOUTHERN STATE FORESTRY

WORKFORCE LANDSCAPE

2024 Southern State Agency
Workforce Recruitment and
Retention Study

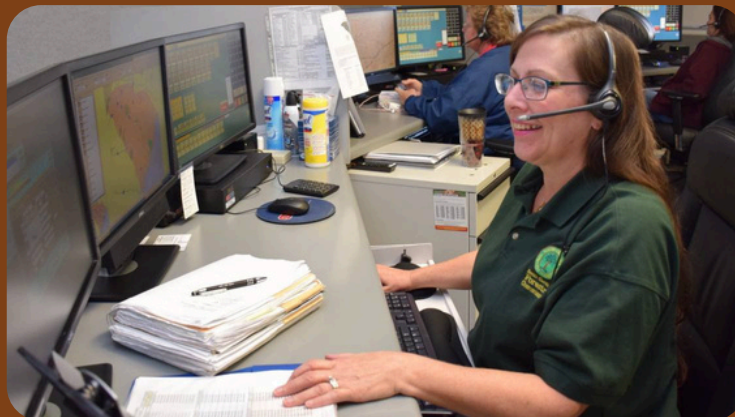


TABLE OF CONTENTS

03	INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW
05	POTENTIAL EMPLOYEES SURVEY
18	CURRENT EMPLOYEES SURVEY
24	FOMER EMPLOYEES SURVEY
27	RECOMMENDATIONS
30	CONCLUSION



INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

With nearly three million fewer Americans participating in the labor force today compared to early 2020, the forest sector has been feeling the burden of the ongoing labor shortage. Southern state forestry agencies have reported persistent struggles filling vacant positions across employment categories. This is a critical issue not only due to the scarcity of employees available to conduct day-to-day operations, but in the implementation of necessary work associated with congressionally-directed funding sources. State agencies need the appropriate workforce to implement funded projects and activities on-the-ground.

In response, the Southern Group of State Foresters membership requested the development of a communications and marketing strategy to help address this issue, and to complement and support state agencies' operational/HR efforts. Part of this process involved the recruitment of a paid intern through the National Association of State Foresters Foundation's James Hubbard Internship Grant. The intern was brought on board in fall 2023 to help gather and illustrate current recruitment and retention data across southern state forestry agencies, as well as developing a communications and marketing plan based on the obtained data.

Through this process, SGSF developed and deployed three surveys, and conducted three focus groups, within southeastern states. These included:

- Online survey of external audiences in the Southeast, ages 18-34, regarding their workplace preferences, values and perceptions of the forest sector as a viable and attractive career choice.

- Online survey of current southern state forestry employees regarding their views of working for their agencies, what they value and prefer, and what changes might make them more or less likely to stay within their current state forestry career path.
- Online survey of former forestry employees who left prior to reaching retirement regarding their views of working for their agencies, why they ultimately chose to seek employment elsewhere, and what factors could have made them consider staying.
- Three virtual focus group sessions to discuss with current forestry employees who have been on staff for less than two years.

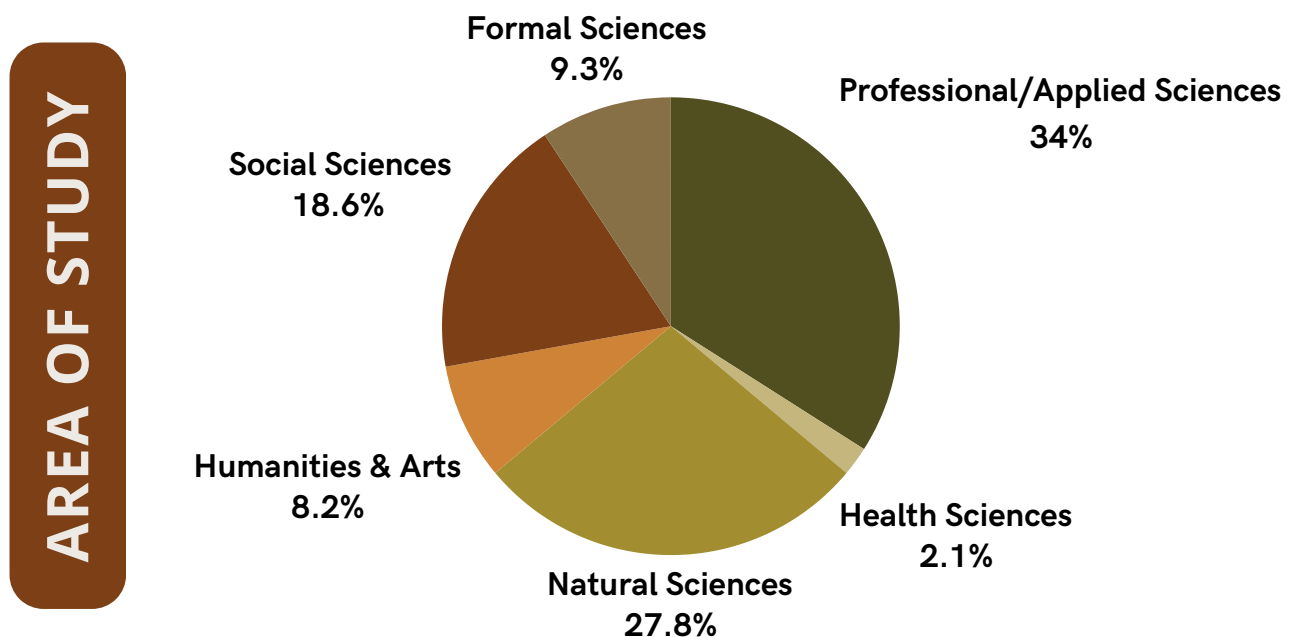
From the data and information gathered, spreadsheets and visualizations were developed to better understand recruitment and retention needs and pain points, while offering a guiding light to identify opportunities for improvement. This document includes a summary of key findings from the research, as well as recommendations for communications and marketing strategy, target areas/audiences, and operational improvements based on the results of the surveys and focus groups.



POTENTIAL EMPLOYEES SURVEY

DEMOGRAPHICS

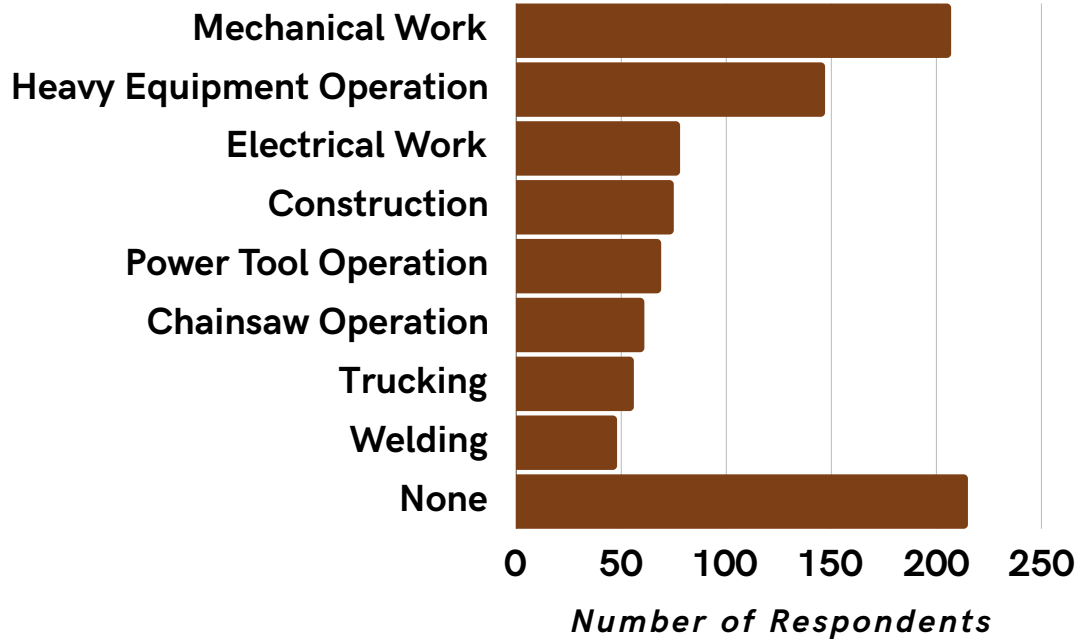
- The survey was completed by 662 eligible individuals between ages 18-34 (total responses, 1,851).
 - 60% of respondents identified themselves as male and 37% female.
 - 73% of respondents are White/Caucasian, 11% Black or African-American, 6% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 5% Asian or Pacific Islander.
 - 52% of respondents are married.
 - 26% have served or currently serve in the military.
- **Education and Skills:**
 - When asked their highest level of education completed, 41% of respondents said they hold a bachelors degree, 19% attended some college, 10% graduated from high school, 10% hold an Associate of Arts (AA) degree, 9% attended but did not graduate high school, 6% completed graduate school, and 5% completed some graduate school. Less than 1% indicated they did not attend any school.



- **Academic Majors and graduate program fields:**

- The most common majors and fields specified by respondents included:
 - *Forestry*: Forestry, Forest Resources and Conservation, Forestry Industry
 - *Engineering*: Mechanical Engineering, Civil Engineering, General Engineering, IT Engineering, Biological Engineering
 - *Biological and Environmental Sciences*: Biology, Ecology, Environmental Science, Natural Sciences, Applied Sciences, Fisheries & Wildlife
 - *Social Sciences*: Sociology, Psychology, Social Work, Philosophy of Social Psychology, Criminal Justice
 - *Business and Management*: Business Administration, Management, Economics, Agricultural Economics
 - *Health Sciences*: Biomedical Science, Healthcare Management, Health Studies, Medicine
 - *Computer Science and IT*: Computer Science, Computer Major, IT Engineer
 - *Education*: Basic Education, Counselor Education, Educational Foundation, Social Studies Education
 - *Communications and Media*: Journalism, Mass Communications, Media Studies, Communications
 - *Agricultural Sciences*: Agricultural Science, Plant Science, Agricultural Communications

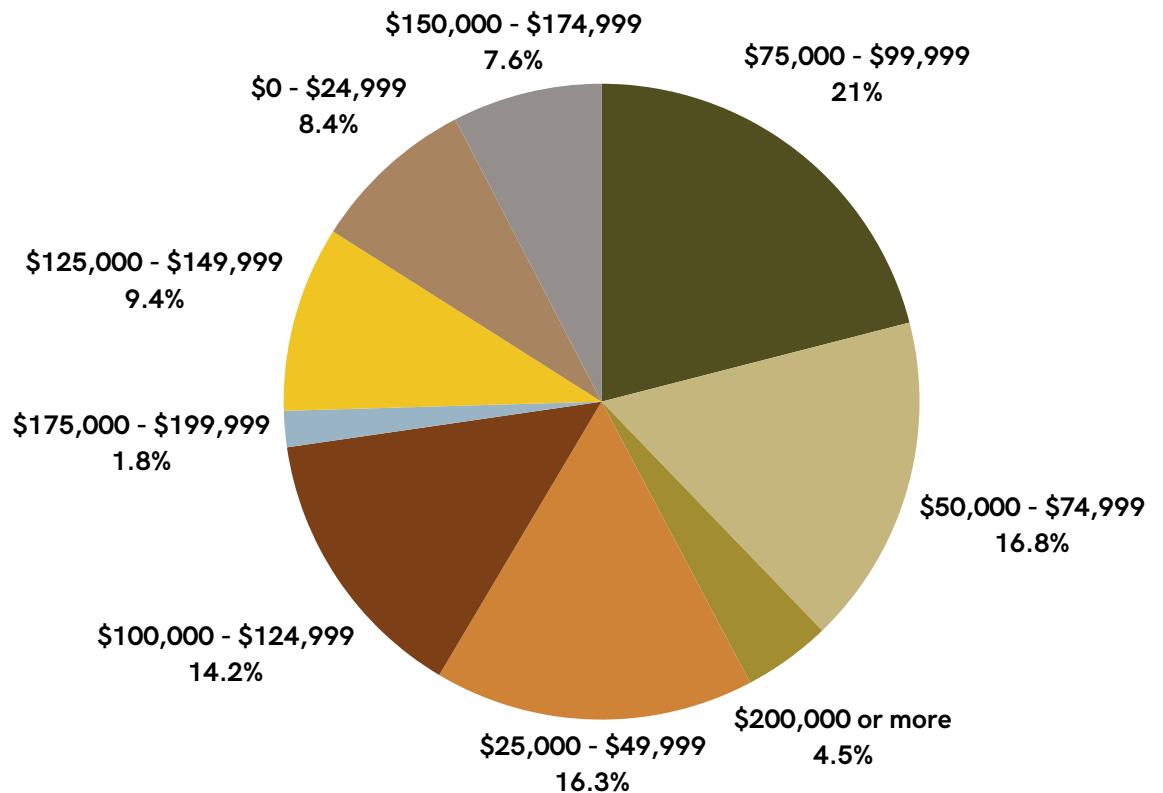
TECHNICAL SKILLS



• Income:

- 43% of respondents rely on support from a parent, or close relation that is not a spouse, for a significant portion of finances or housing.
- 35% of respondents have financial dependents.

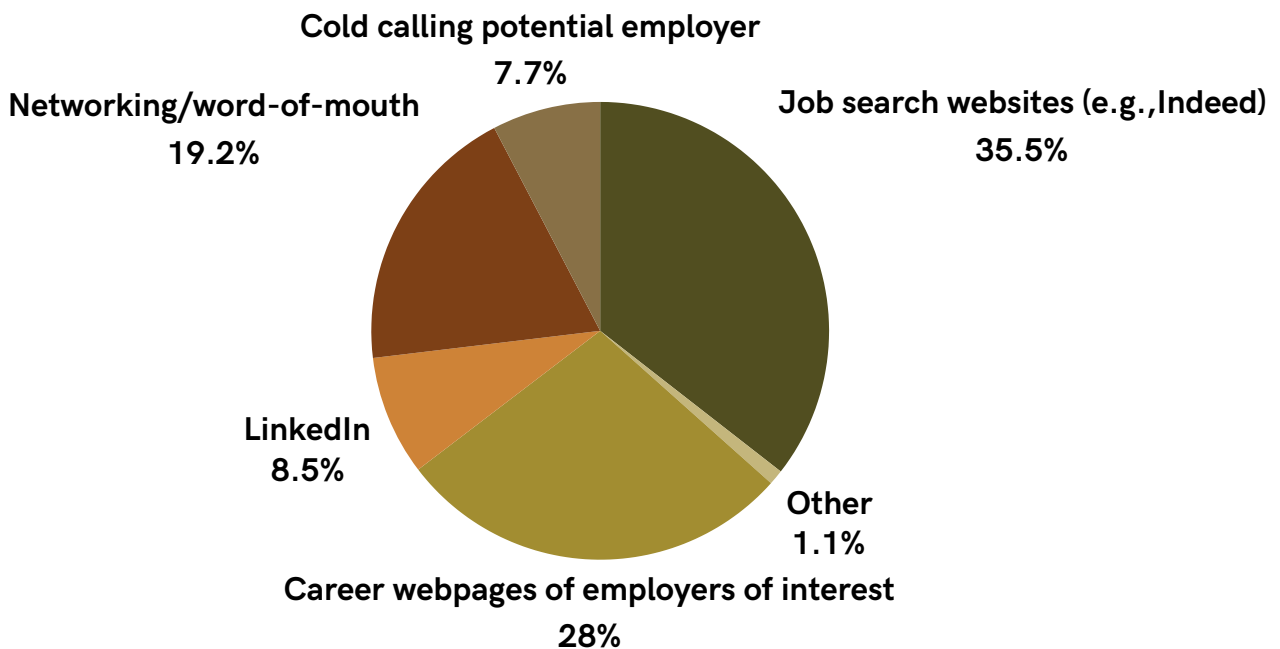
PERSONAL INCOME
LAST YEAR



AWARENESS & PERCEPTIONS

- 82% of respondents feel they have a personal responsibility to protect the natural resources around them.
- The top five contributions made by state forestry agencies in order of importance, as ranked by respondents, are conservation and enhancement of forestland, expanding forestland coverage, protection of natural waterways and water resources, protection of drinking water quality and quantity, and wildland fire management (climate health and clean air ranked sixth).
- 66% have volunteered for a environmental or natural resources non-profit or activist organization

HOW RESPONDENTS ARE SEARCHING FOR JOBS



- 46% of respondents say they were currently considering a career/job change at the time they filled out the survey.
- 68% of respondents say they have considered a career with a state forestry agency.
- 46% of respondents say they have never seen, or are unsure if they have ever seen, a state forestry job advertisement.

- **Recruitment PSA Feedback:**

- Survey takers were provided links to four recruitment video/commercial PSAs and asked to rate and provide feedback.
- **Video 1: [First Arrival](#) | [Be All You Can Be](#) | [GoArmy](#)**
 - The responses to the video are highly mixed, with 18% of respondents rating it as “highly appealing.” Some viewers found it emotionally moving, beautifully shot, and appreciated its positive messages of family support, hope, and inclusivity. They noted the inspirational tone and the appealing depiction of military life. Conversely, others criticized the video as generic, unimpressive, and propagandistic, feeling it targeted minorities unfairly and lacked substantial information about actual Army jobs. Many viewers were either not interested in the military or felt the video didn't inspire them to consider a military career. Overall, while some praised its emotional and visual appeal, others remained unconvinced or uninterested.



- **Video 2: Become a Forestry Technician**

- The responses to the video generally highlight a positive reception, with viewers appreciating the personal stories, the depiction of everyday life on the job, and the connection with nature. 27% of respondents ranked this video as “highly appealing.” Many found the video informative and engaging, valuing the portrayal of the work environment, the responsibility of the role, and the beauty of the natural settings. The passion and dedication of the technicians were particularly admired. However, some criticisms included the video being somewhat long and dry, with a need for more action shots and less focus on interviews. A few viewers found the music unappealing or felt the content was not relevant to their interests or career aspirations. Overall, the video succeeded in presenting an appealing and realistic view of a forestry technician’s work, despite some minor drawbacks.

- **Video 3: Real Jobs, Real Impact - Why I Like Being a Forest Engineer**

- The responses to the video highlight a mix of positive and constructive feedback. Many viewers appreciated the personal touch and interview style, finding it informative and engaging to hear from someone passionate about their work as a forestry engineer. The video successfully showcased the beauty of the natural environment and the importance of forestry and environmental conservation. However, some felt it lacked action and excitement, with criticisms about the video being too long, having awkward language or focusing too much on a single job role. Overall, the video effectively communicated the impact and significance of the job, though some viewers found it less appealing or relevant to their own interests.



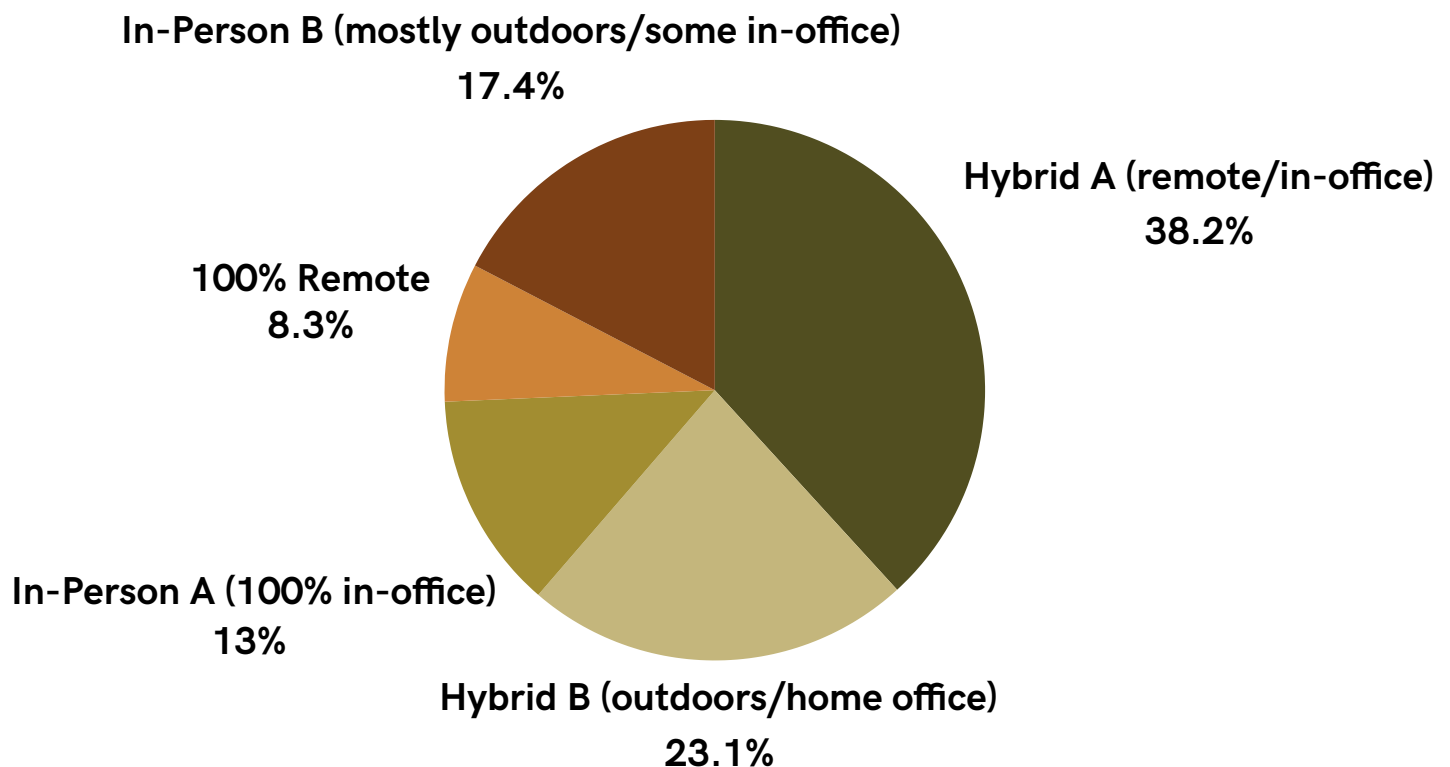
- **Video 4:** [EPA Careers: Superfund Emergency Response and Removal Program](#)
 - The responses to the video showcase a diverse range of opinions. Some viewers found it compelling, well-edited, and inspiring, particularly appreciating the diverse career options and the dedication of emergency responders. They highlighted the powerful visuals, emotional appeal, and the video's ability to convey the importance of environmental protection. Many noted the impactful and clear message, with some even feeling a sense of chills and excitement. However, others criticized the video for being overly dramatic and cheesy, with a few finding it a bit too long to convey the same information as other videos. While some found the visuals and emotional appeal powerful, others felt the content was not relevant to their interests or too depressing. There were mixed feelings about the depiction of children and the dramatic elements, though the video was recognized for effectively showcasing the significance of the EPA's work and the meaningful contributions of its members. Overall, the video managed to highlight the importance of environmental protection and emergency response, though opinions varied on its style, relevance, and overall impact.



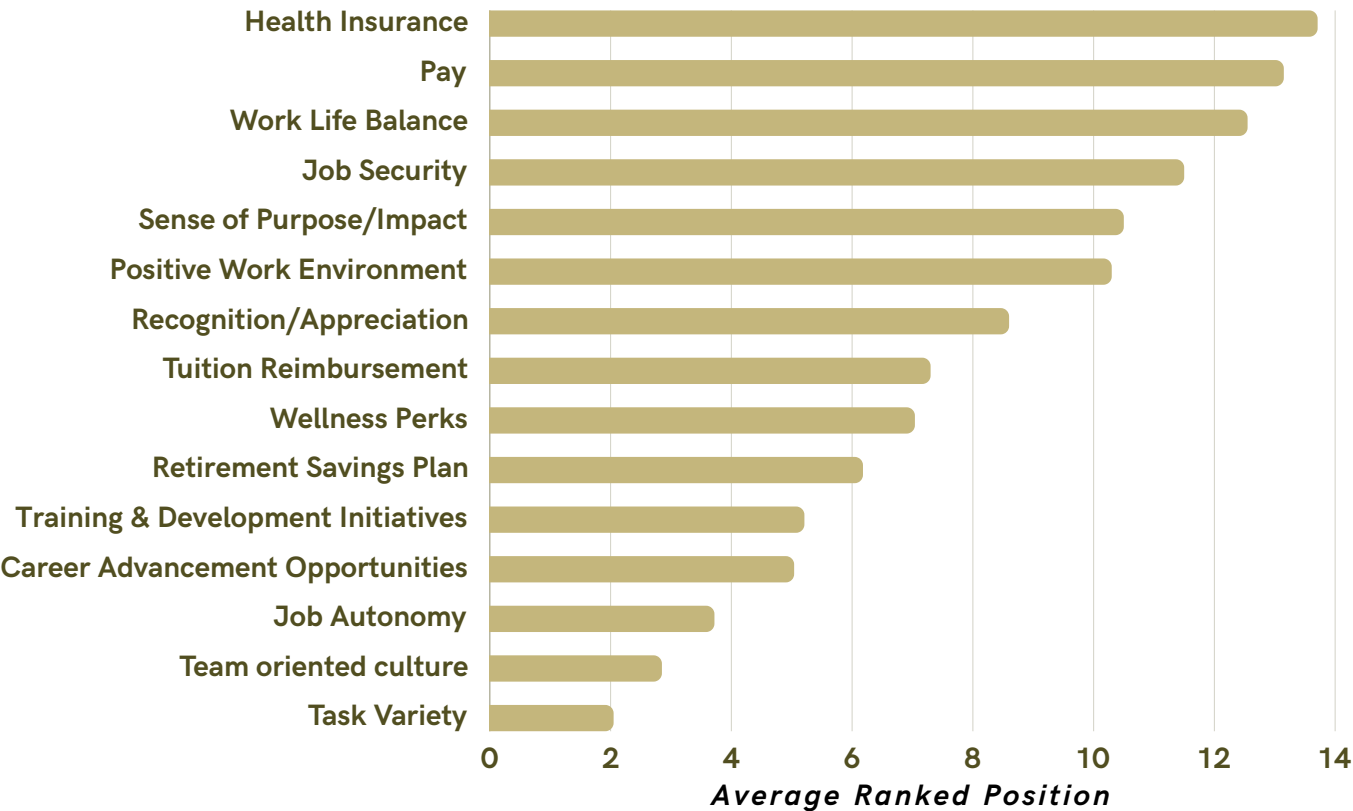
CAREER PREFERENCES & VALUES

- 75% of respondents said that the potential to move up in a formal career "ladder" is important to them.
- 79% of respondents said that a variety of available job options and/or locations within a single organization is appealing to them.
- 78% of respondents said that, if the pay rate was satisfactory to them, promotional opportunities or new responsibilities/locations could provide enough incentive to stay with an employer for longer.

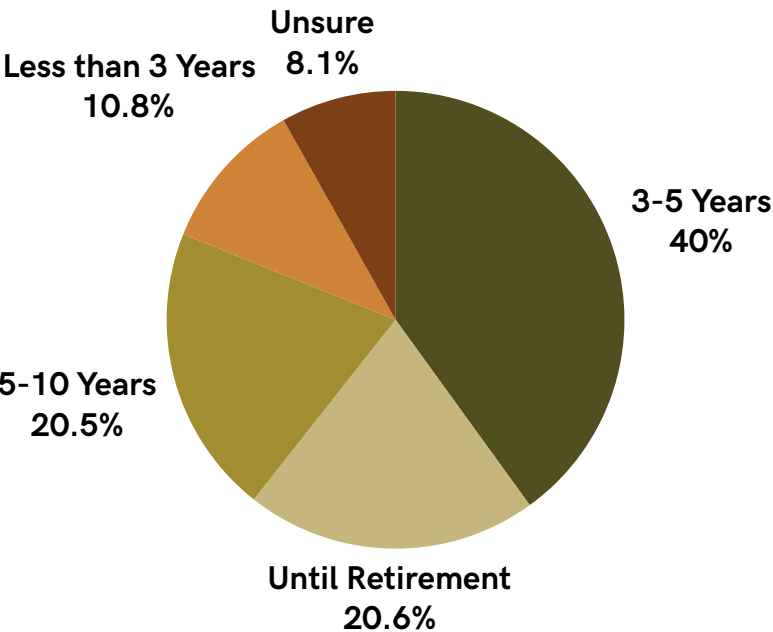
WHERE RESPONDENTS PREFER TO CONDUCT WORK



JOB ASPECTS RANKED BY IMPORTANCE

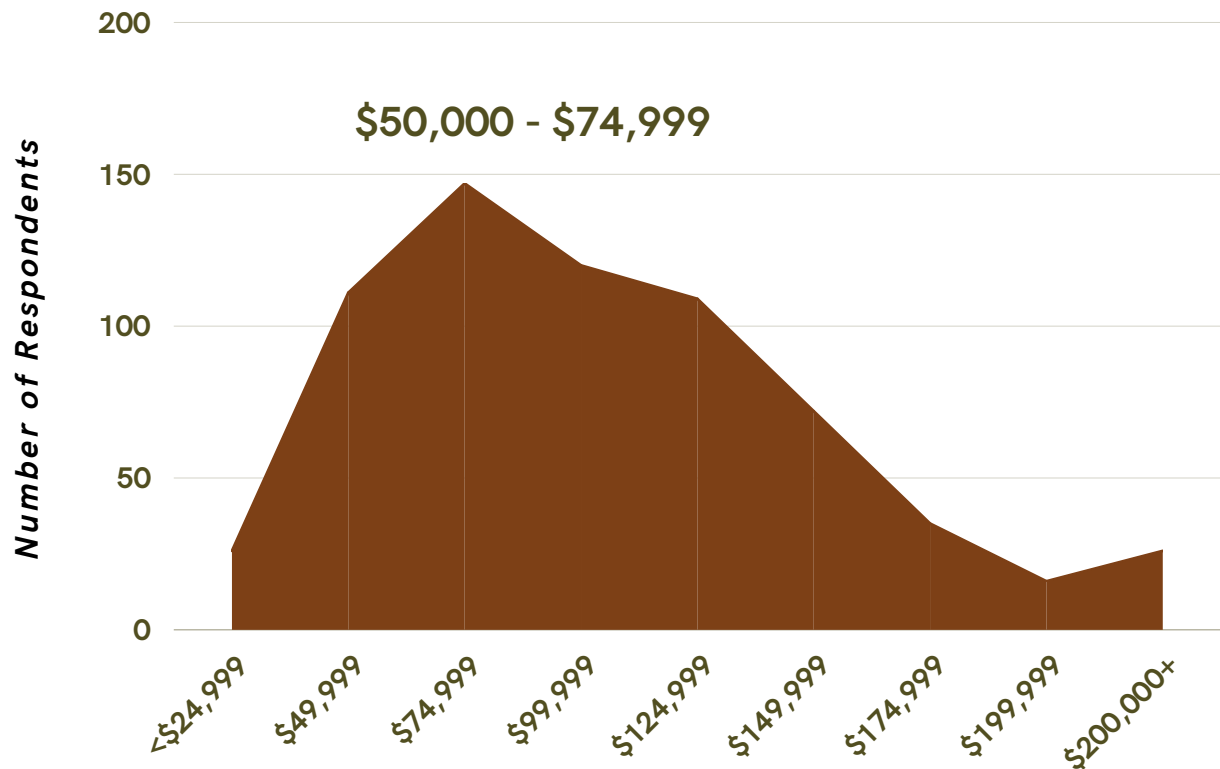


HOW LONG RESPONDENTS WANT TO STAY WITH A SINGLE EMPLOYER



SALARY EXPECTATIONS

(IF OFFERED A FULL-TIME JOB TODAY, WORKING FOR A STATE FORESTRY AGENCY, BASED ON SKILL SET AND CURRENT LEVEL OF EXPERIENCE)



NOTE: Weighted average salary expectation is approximately \$92,463.

THE PERSONAS

Survey responses were filtered based on audience type to help provide further insight into the perceptions, values and preferences. The personas were broken down by recent college graduates (those who are degreed and are aged 18-25), mid-career professionals (ages 27-34), individuals who reported that they have financial dependents, military veterans, non-degreed individuals who reported themselves as having technical skills, and people who are currently employed within the sector but not for a state forestry agency.

LEONARD & LACEY RECENT COLLEGE GRADUATES (18-25)

- Most feel a personal responsibility to protect natural resources (83.04%).
- Most desire a **formal career ladder** (75.89%), a **variety** of available agency job options and locations (81.79%), and a **mix of team and independent tasks** (51.45%)
- 80% are actively spending time on YouTube
- Many feel their Ideal salary would be **\$50,000 - \$74,999** (22.69%) if offered a forestry job today, and the most important benefit is **health insurance**.



ERIC & ERIN MID-CAREER PROFESSIONALS (27-34)

- Most feel a personal responsibility to protect natural resources (86.81%).
- Most desire a **formal career ladder** (81.27%), a **variety** of available agency job options and locations (81.79%), and a **mix of team and independent tasks** (51.45%).
- Many feel their Ideal salary would be **\$50,000 - \$74,999** (22.69%) if offered a forestry job today, and the most important benefit is **health insurance**.



MOM & DAD PEOPLE WITH DEPENDENTS

- Most feel a personal responsibility to protect natural resources (89.66%).
- Most desire a **formal career ladder** (81.03%), and a **variety** of available agency job options and locations (84.91%). Nearly half desire to work in a **mostly team-based** environment (44.83%).
- A clear ideal salary could not be identified, but the most important benefit is **health insurance**.

SAM & SAMANTHA MILITARY VETERANS

- Most have considered a career with a state forestry agency before (71.18%).
- Most feel a personal responsibility to protect natural resources (70%).
- More than half **already possess skills** in mechanical work (53.53%).
- Most desire a **formal career ladder** (65.88%), a **variety** of available agency job options and locations (65.29%), and working in a **mostly team-based** environment (51.45%).
- Many feel their Ideal salary would be **\$100,000-\$124,999** if offered a forestry job today, and the most important benefit is **health insurance**.





JACK & JILL

TRADES MEN & WOMEN, NON-DEGREE

- Many say they have considered a career with a state forestry agency before (62%).
- Most either **do not want or are unsure if they want a formal career ladder** (53%), but prefer to work in a **mainly team-based** environment (67%), **either 100% in-office or hybrid** work arrangement (67%).
- Many feel their Ideal salary would be **\$25,000-\$49,999** (42%) if offered a forestry job today, and the most important benefit is **health insurance**.

FORREST & FERN

CROSSOVER INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

- Nearly all are aware of state forestry agencies (95.38%) but fewer have considered a career with state forestry when compared to other demographics.
- Most are not **not currently considering a job change** (69.23%).
- Their ideal salary would be **\$75,000 - \$99,999** (41.54%) if offered a forestry job today.
- The most important job aspect is **pay**.

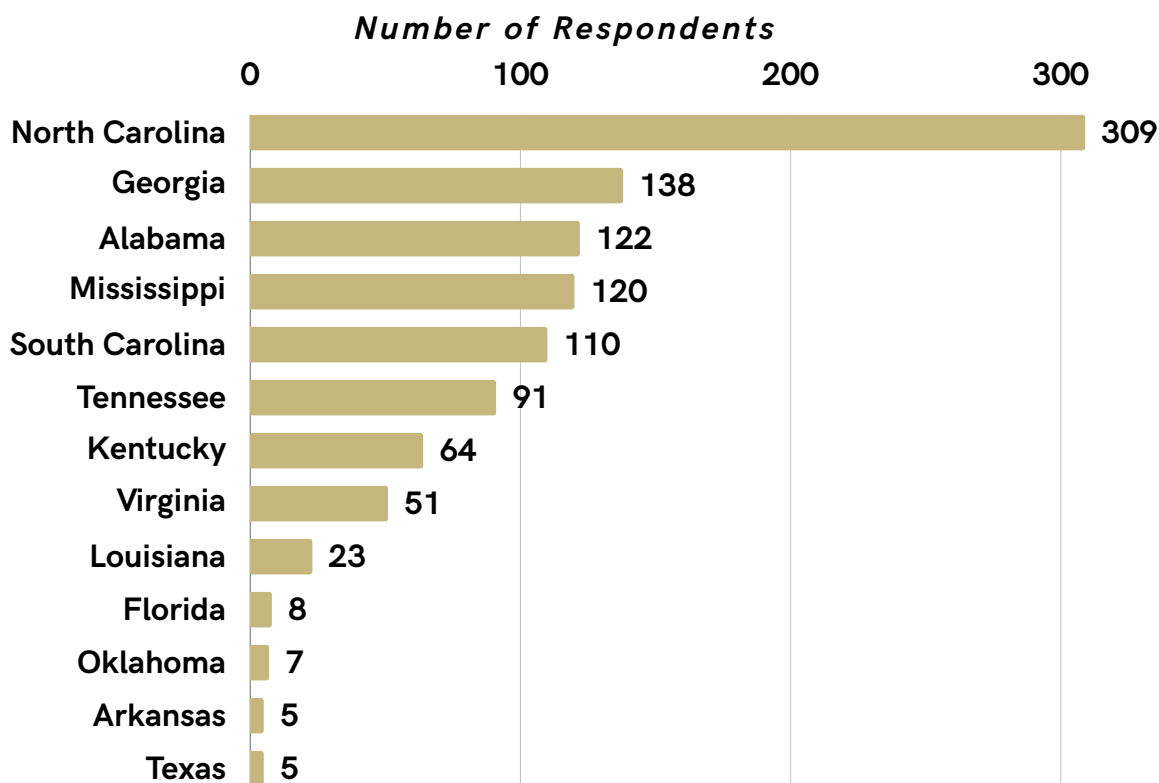


CURRENT EMPLOYEES SURVEY

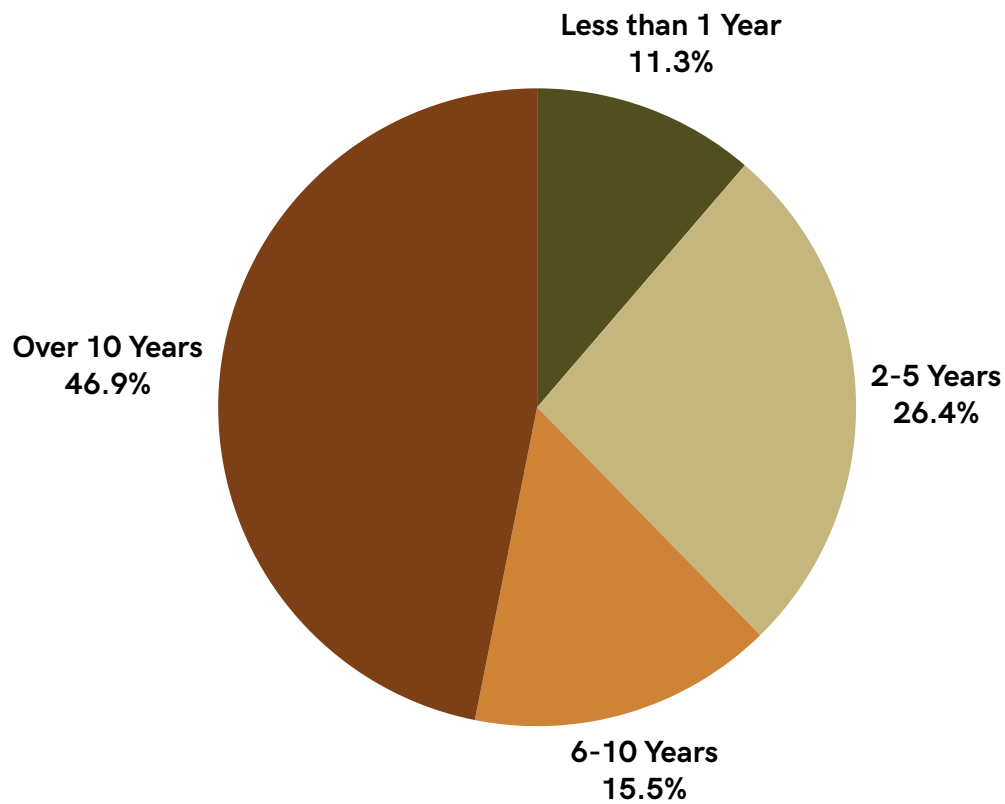
DEMOGRAPHICS

- The survey was completed by 1,054 eligible individuals who are currently employed either full-time or part-time by a Southern Region state forestry agency.
- Respondent ages ranged from 18-76, with an average age of 42.
- 81% of respondents were men and 17% women. 2% declined to answer or opted to self-describe.
- 91% of respondents are White/Caucasian, 2% Black or African-American and 4% declined to answer.

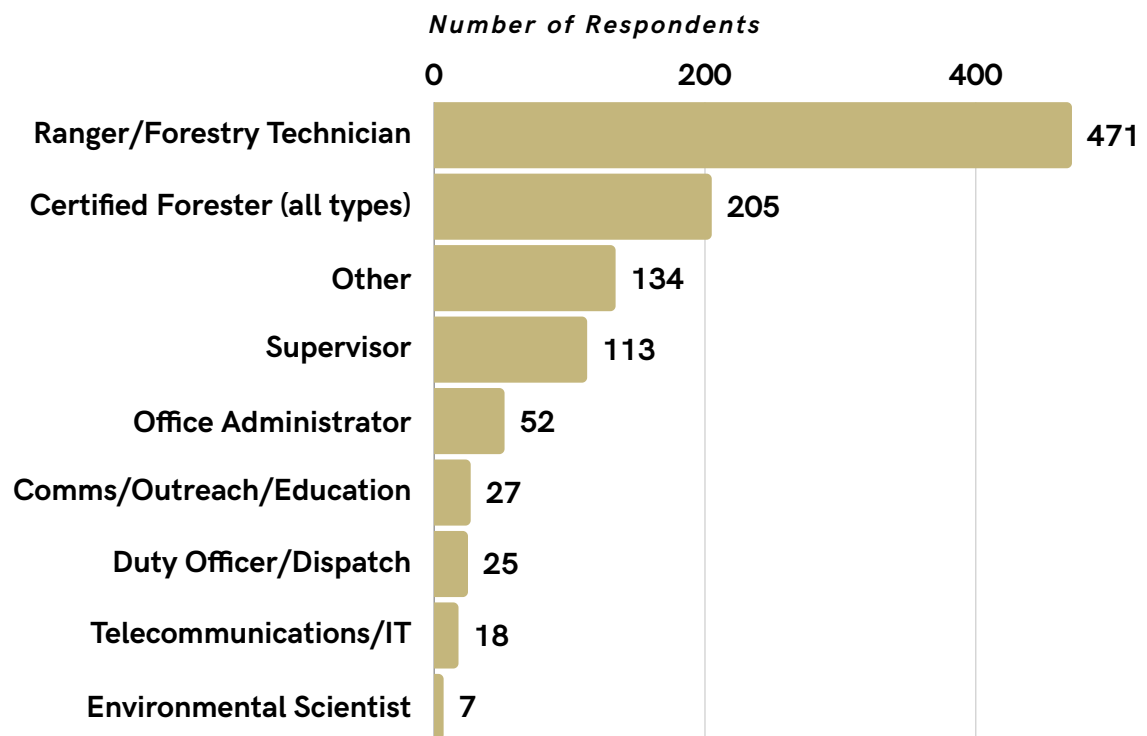
STATES REPRESENTED



LENGTH OF TENURE

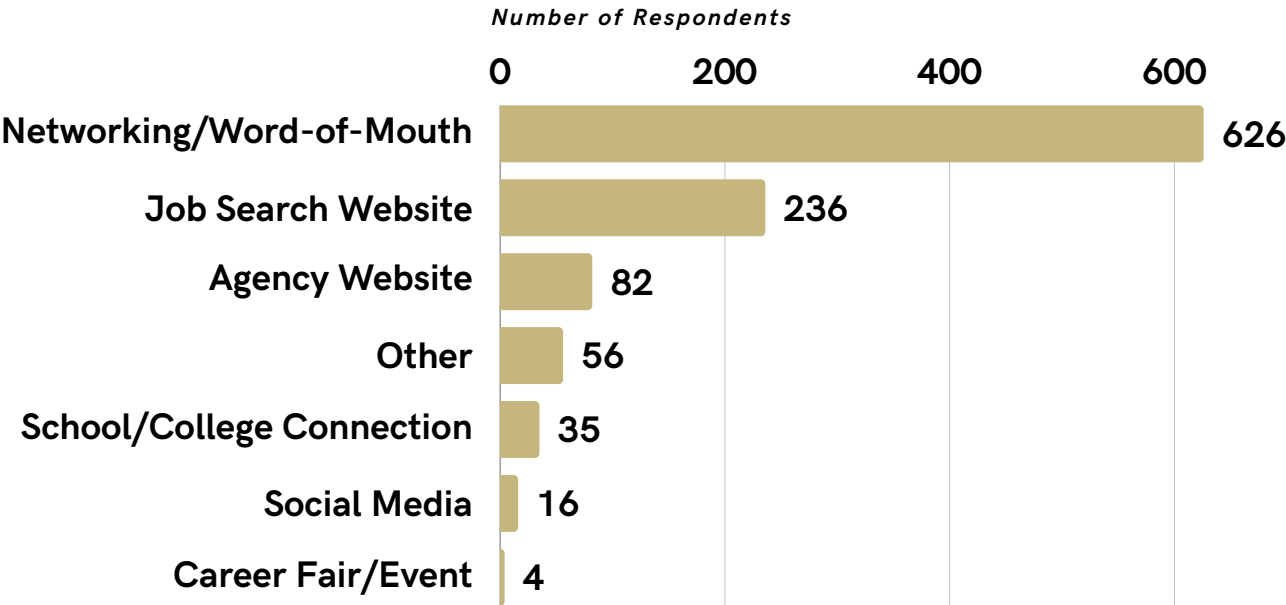


JOB TYPE

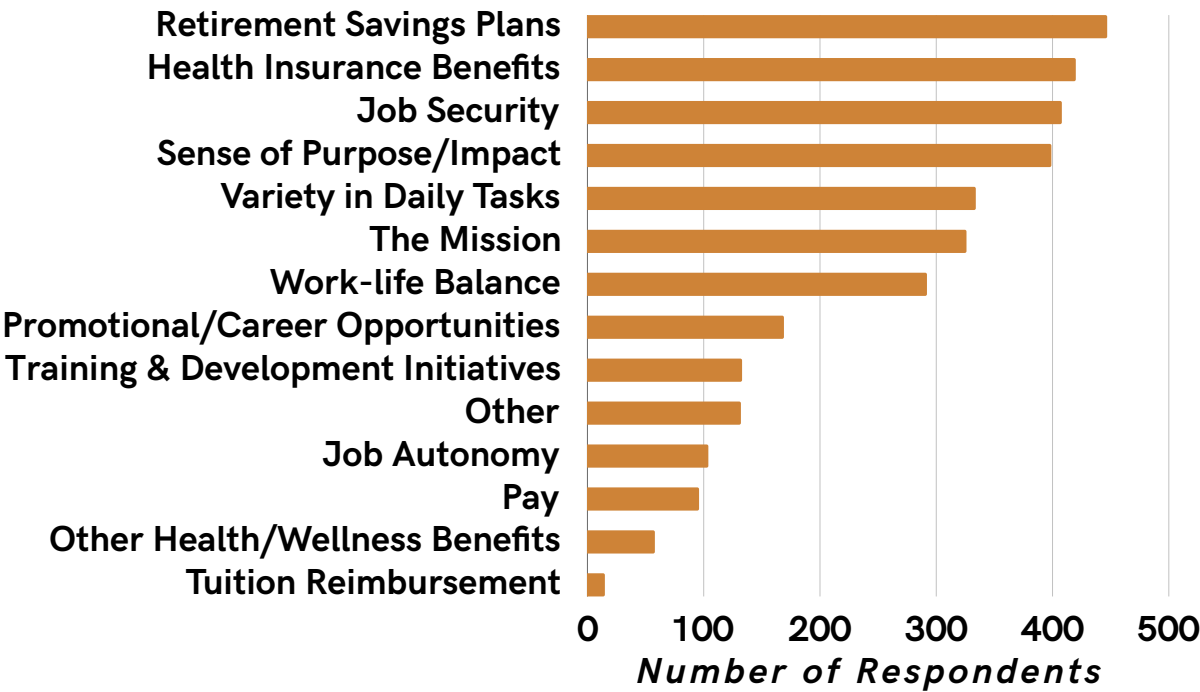


JOB ATTAINMENT

HOW EMPLOYEES FOUND ORIGINAL HIRING OPPORTUNITY



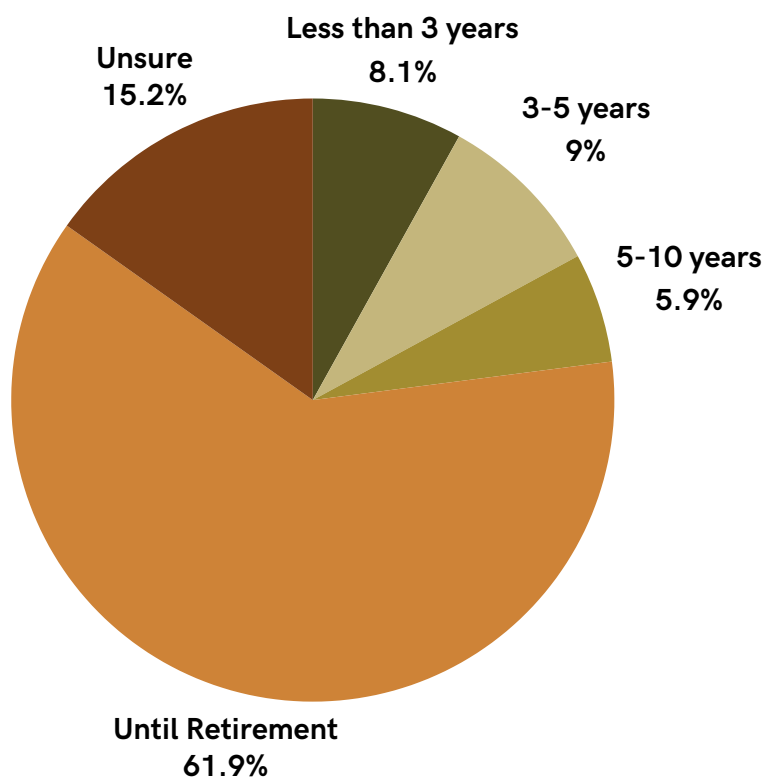
WHAT INITIALLY ATTRACTED EMPLOYEES



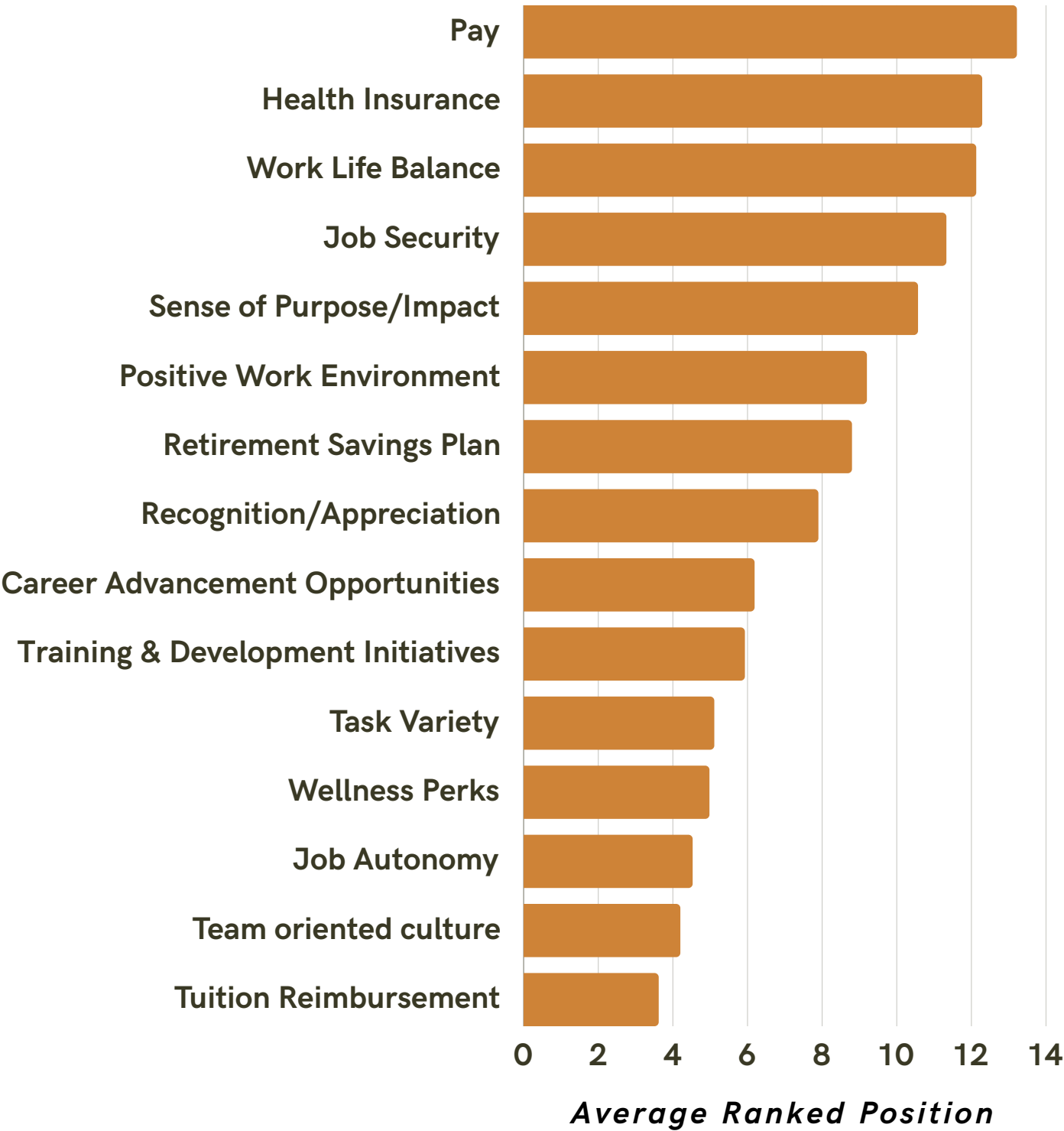
CAREER VALUES & PLANNING

- Respondents rated the importance of having an available, formal career "ladder" at 8 out of 10.
- Respondents rated their likelihood of taking a job with another employer within the next two years a 3 out of 10.
- Respondents rated their job fit for long-range career aspirations at a 7 out of 10.
- 68% of all employees surveyed feel they would most enjoy working for state forestry long-term, compared to other employer types within the sector (private industry, nonprofit, federal).

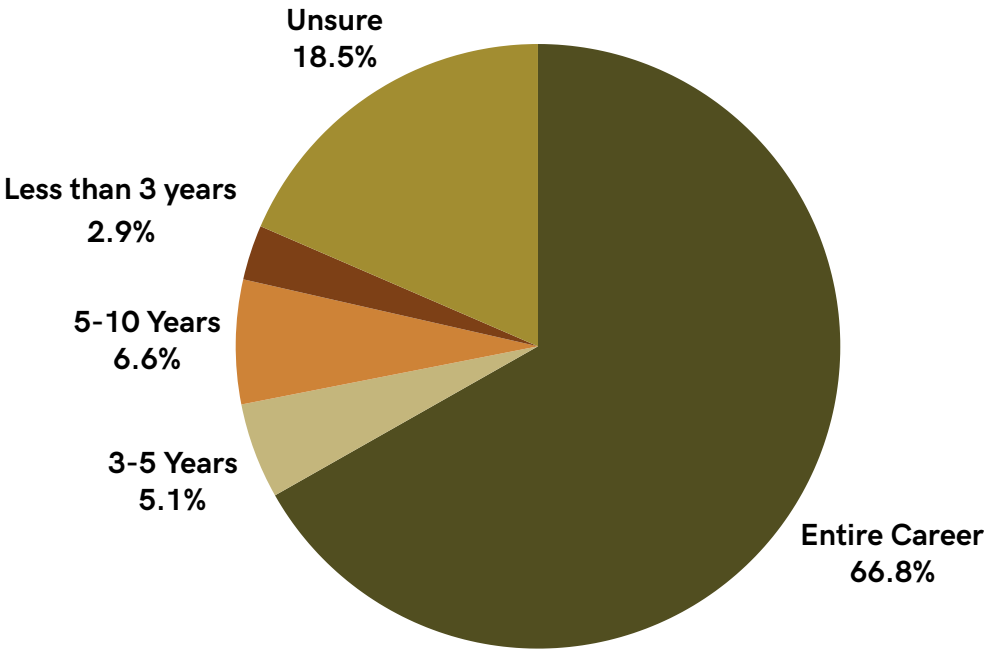
HOW LONG RESPONDENTS WOULD LIKE TO STAY WITH STATE FORESTRY, IDEALLY



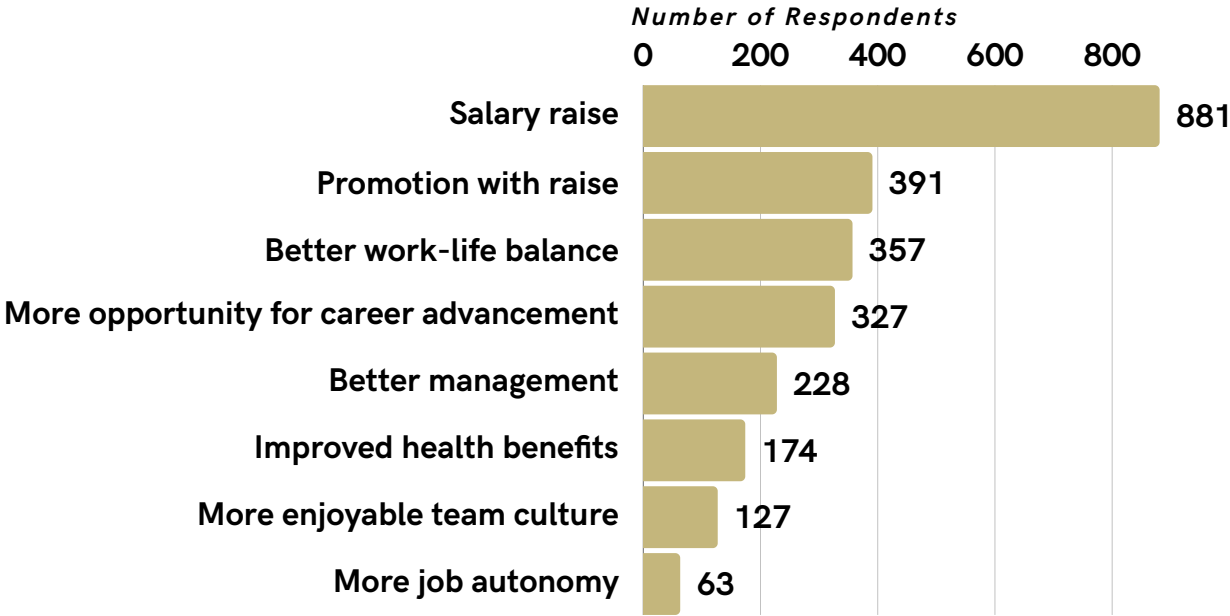
JOB ASPECTS RANKED BY IMPORTANCE



HOW LONG
RESPONDENTS
WOULD LIKE TO
STAY IN THE
FORESTRY
SECTOR, IDEALLY



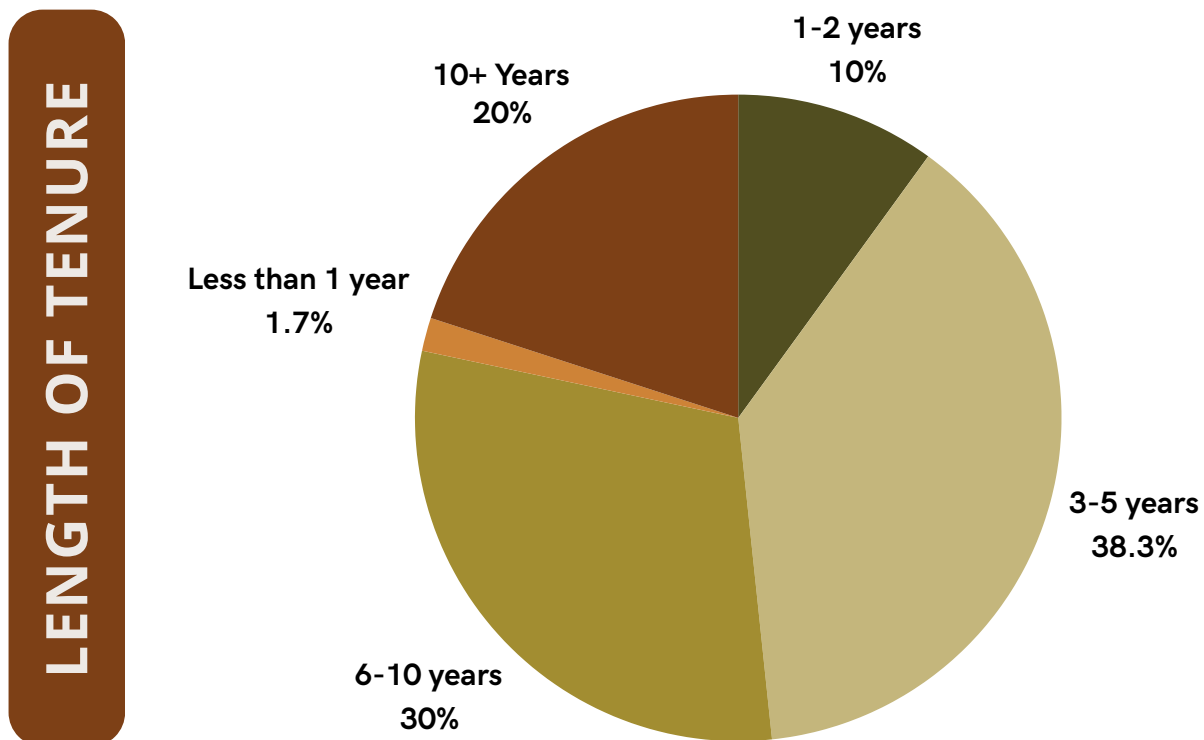
MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS WHEN
CONSIDERING ACCEPTING ANOTHER
JOB OUTSIDE OF STATE FORESTRY



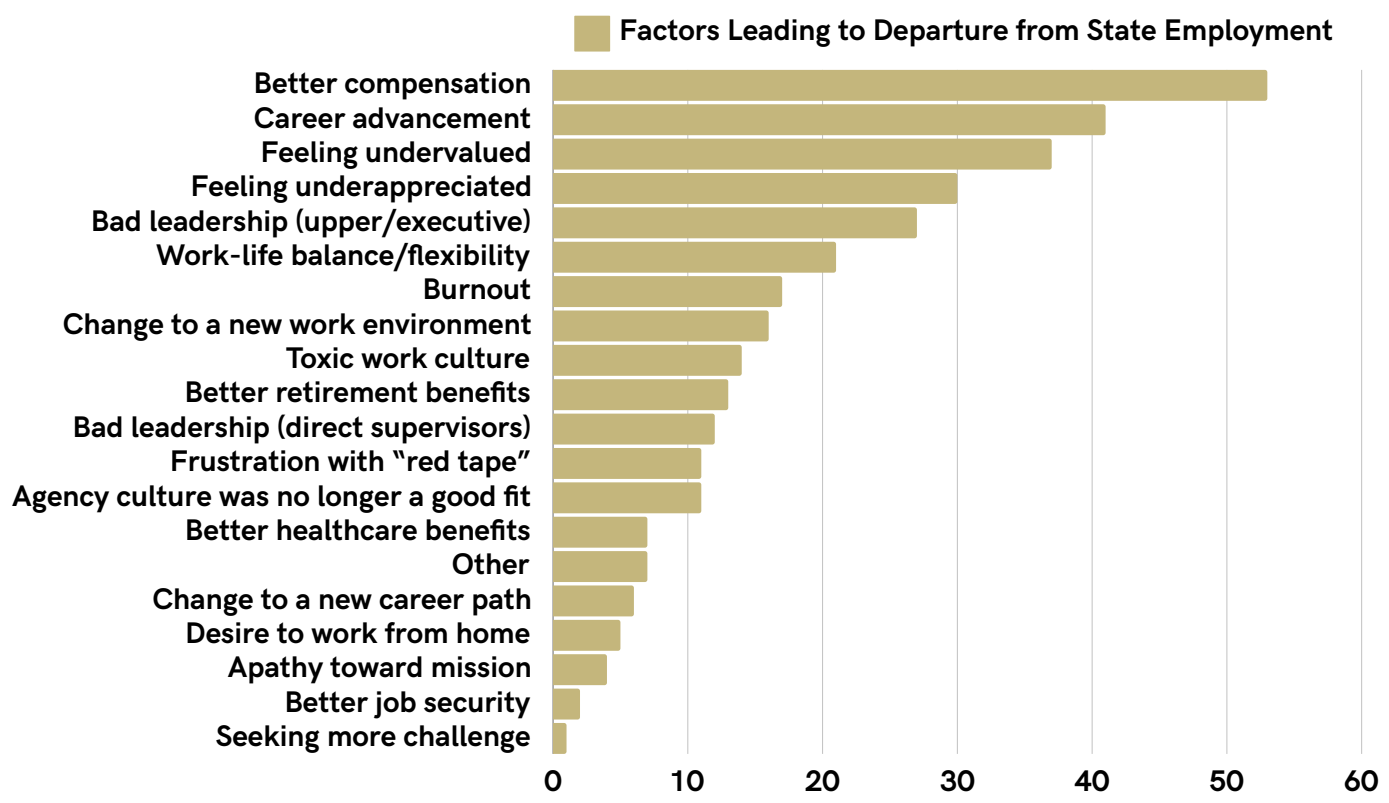
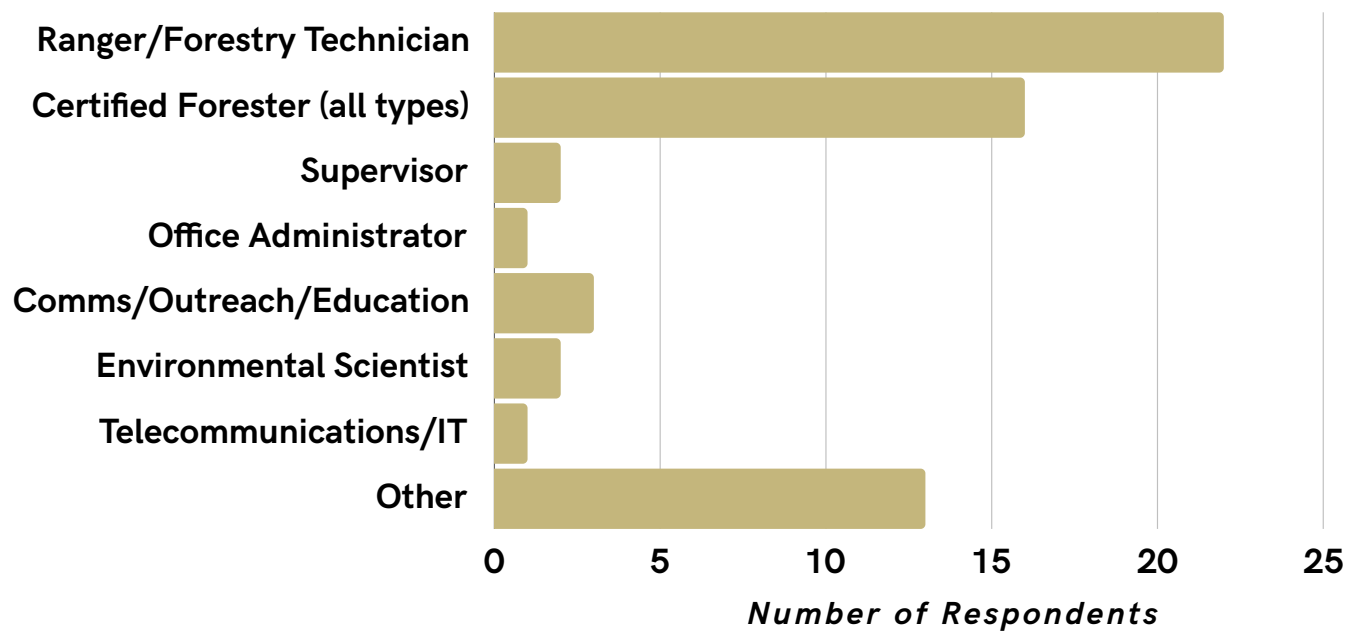
FORMER EMPLOYEES SURVEY

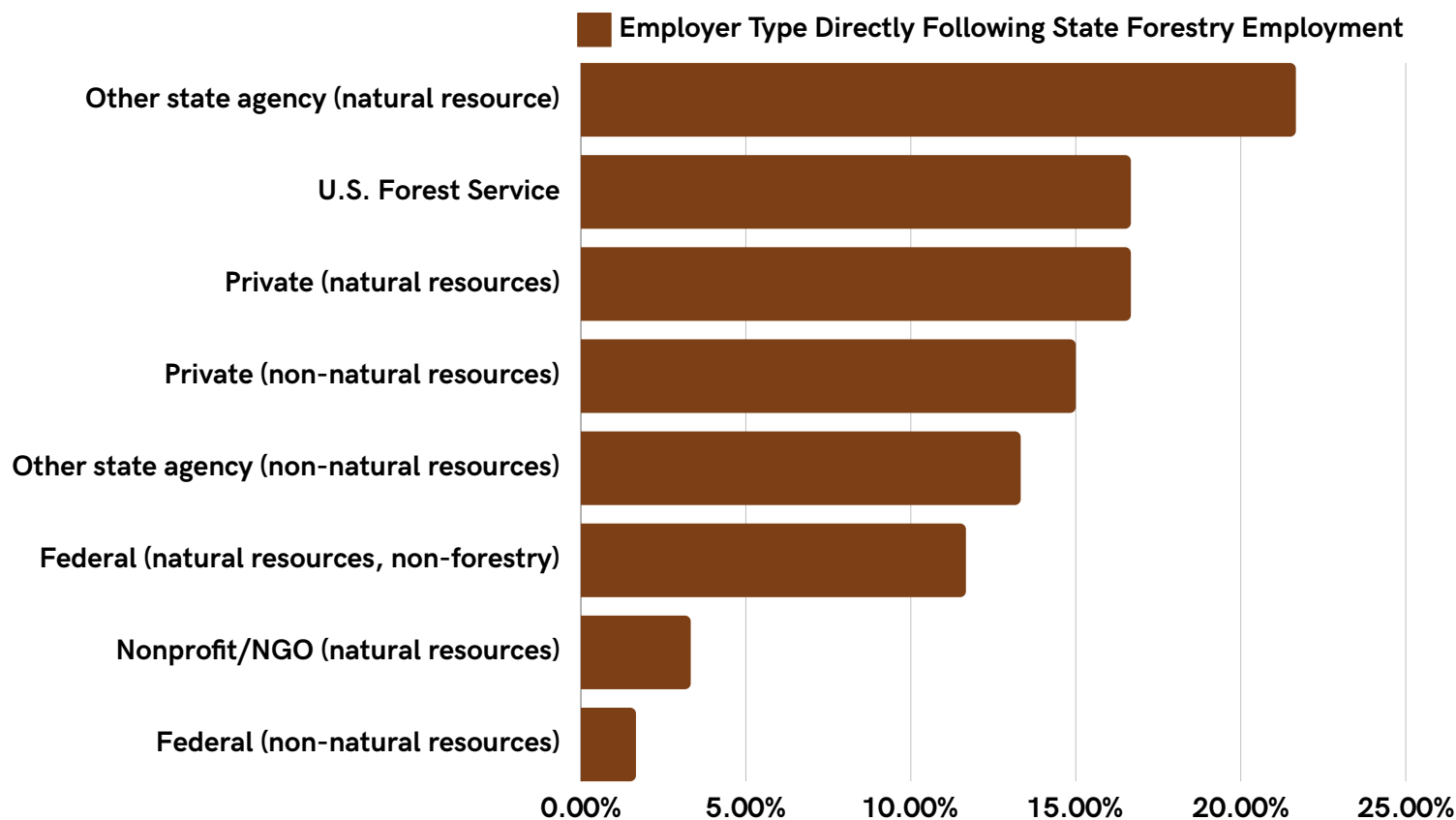
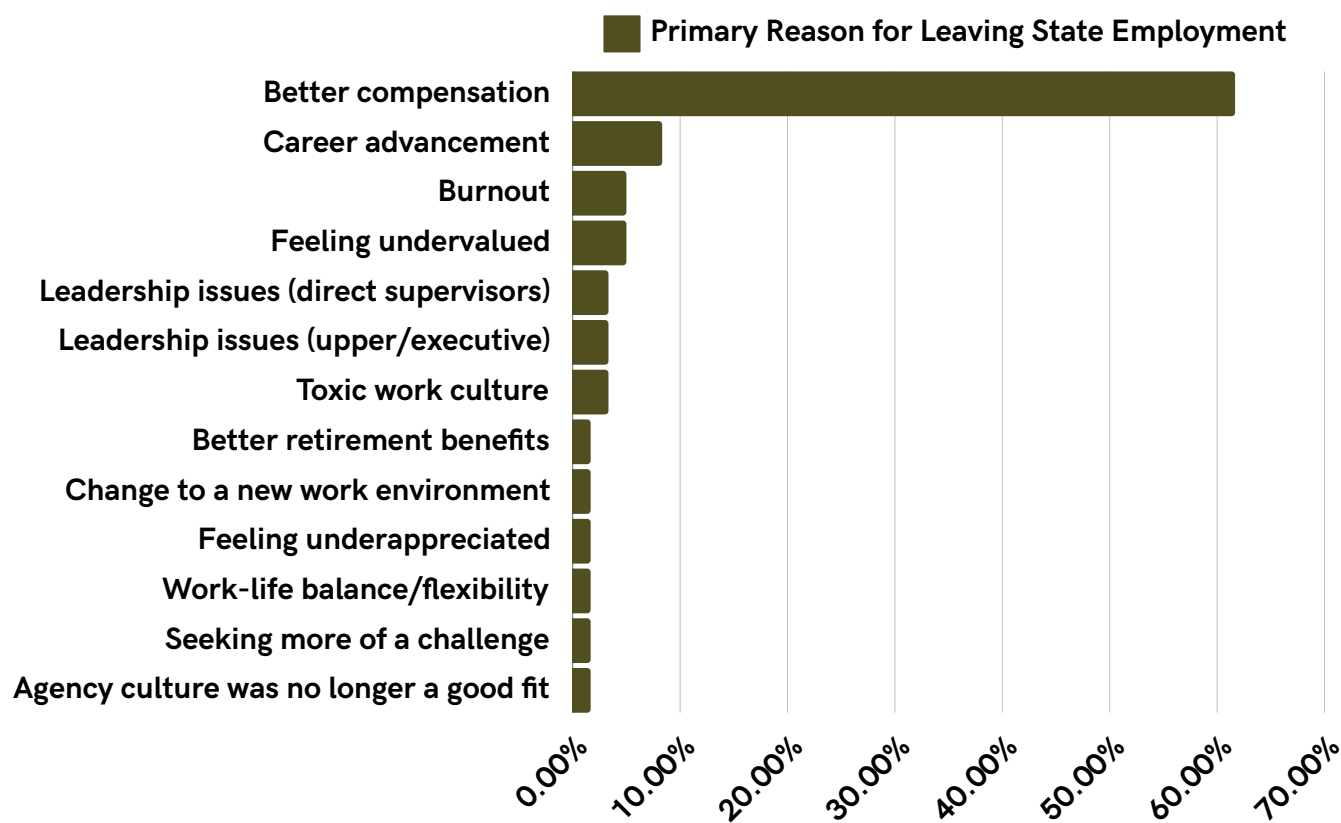
DEMOGRAPHICS

- The survey was completed by 60 eligible individuals who were previously employed by a southern region state forestry agency, but who left prior to retirement (total responses, 128).
- Overall, former employees surveyed reported serving a state forestry agency some time within the years 1989 - 2024. On average, respondents have worked with the state forestry agency/agencies for a period spanning from 2010 to 2018.



JOB WORKED AT THE TIME OF SEPARATION FROM STATE FORESTRY





RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The Big 3: Issues with Salary, Career Ladders & Work-life Balance**
 - Both current and potential employees ranked pay as #1 and #2 most important, respectively. Make adjustments where applicable and feasible.
 - Respondents also indicated that the absence of clear career pathways was seen as a deterrent to long-term commitment. Implementing formal position career ladders and providing long-term guidance could provide employees with achievable goals and aspirations to work toward, incentivizing retention within the state forestry agency.
 - Work-life balance was highly important to all survey groups, and most potential employees said they prefer a hybrid work environment. For employees who have on-call duties, having more work-life balance support measures in place could help retain good employees. Additionally, understaffing was a common concern among both current and former employees. Addressing these topics, and making an effort to avoid burnout, could keep more employees with state forestry.
 - Additionally, job security also ranked within the top five most important job benefits to potential employees. Highlighting the permanence of jobs in recruitment efforts could improve recruitment and retention.
- **Decrease Reliance on Word-of-Mouth Recruitment**
 - While word-of-mouth and networking within common circles can be an effective way to find candidates, it can lead to workforce homogeneity, limiting the pool of candidates and missing out on qualified candidates from untapped diverse population sets. By increasing efforts to pull from candidates outside of common circles, state forestry agencies could find a wider range of qualified candidates.



- Also of note, 65% of potential employees use job search websites, but only 20% of current employees found their state forestry role this way. This indicates that a large swath of the population of potential employees is not being reached. By increasing presence on job search websites and professional networking platforms like LinkedIn and the student-focused Handshake (providing access to more than 15 million active college students and recent alumni), state forestry agencies could significantly expand and diversify its pool of job candidates.
- **Highlight Premier Health Insurance Offerings**
 - Health insurance ranked as the #1 most important among all job aspects for potential employees. This represents a clear opportunity for state forestry agencies, who often offer highly competitive health insurance benefits, to appeal to the most important preference among potential employees aged 18-35. Highlighting the state agency's premier health insurance offerings at career recruitment events, and on recruitment marketing materials, could make the agency more competitive in the market.
- **Feature State Forestry Mission & Impact**
 - Making an impact, environmental responsibility and climate issues were important to respondents. By promoting the compatibility of state forestry agency work, potential candidates might be more inclined to take interest in working for a state forestry agency.
- **Promote State Forestry Culture of Camaraderie**
 - Survey responses and focus groups demonstrated a strong sense of camaraderie among state forestry colleagues - something potential employees report they want in a job. Highlight positive and supportive work culture when recruiting new employees. Avoid, however, referring to your agency as a "family" as this can be interpreted as a "red flag" among job seekers.

- **Focus Less on Retirement Benefits**

- For potential employees, retirement benefits ranked relatively low in importance when compared to other job aspects. This indicates that focusing or relying on the promotion of retirement benefits in recruitment messaging may not be overly effective in generating initial interest. Once a job candidate has started the interview process, this may be a good time to discuss retirement benefits and other perks to create added appeal.

- **Recruit from Local Vocational & Technical Schools**

- Trades men and women, who often receive their training from technical and vocational schools, have compatible skill sets and salary expectations for employment at state forestry agencies, are entry-level ready and enjoy team-based environments.

- **Outreach to Military Veterans**

- In survey responses, military veterans exhibited the greatest interest in state forestry employment among all audience segments, have compatible values, desirable qualifications, and a range of degreed and trade qualified individuals.
- NOTE: pay expectations could be prohibitive for these candidates.

- **Tap in to Local Environmental Volunteer Groups**

- With 66% of surveyed “potential employees” having volunteered for an environmental or natural resources non-profit or activist organization, there could be opportunity to reach a larger contingent of passionate, compatible candidates, who may have forestry-adjacent skill-sets and experience by targeting recruitment outreach efforts to these types of groups.

- **Less Effective Target Audiences**

- Based on the responses to the potential employees survey, it may be less effective to focus recruitment efforts on those who are already employed within the industry for non-state employers. Respondents within this audience segment demonstrated the lowest level of interest in state forestry employment, and have higher salary expectations that could be prohibitive.

CONCLUSION

The 2024 Workforce Recruitment and Retention Study for the Southern State Forestry agencies has highlighted critical insights and actionable recommendations. The data gathered from potential, current and former employees provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities within state forestry. Recruitment and retention strategies must address key areas such as competitive compensation, clear career pathways, and improved work-life balance to attract and retain a diverse and dedicated workforce.

The study underscores the importance of enhancing communication and marketing efforts to broaden the pool of potential candidates, particularly through online job search platforms and professional networks. Additionally, emphasizing the strengths of state forestry agencies, such as excellent health insurance benefits and a supportive work culture, can make these positions more appealing. Ensuring that recruitment messages align with the values and career aspirations of younger generations is crucial for long-term workforce stability.

Implementing these recommendations will require a coordinated effort across regional and state levels. By addressing identified pain points and leveraging the strengths of the forestry sector, state agencies can build a resilient and capable workforce ready to meet the demands of forest management and conservation in the southern States. This study serves as a roadmap for future efforts to ensure that state forestry agencies can effectively recruit and retain the skilled professionals needed to conserve, protect and enhance southern forests for generations to come.

