

The Virgin Islands Consortium

USDA to Resume Forest Inventory on St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John

Forest Inventory and Analysis Program aims for sustainable ecosystem management

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Scenic panorama captured during a hike of Goat Hill hike in St. Croix, USVI. By. GETTY IMAGES

The USDA Forest Service Forest Inventory and Analysis Program (FIA) announced Friday that it will soon resume the inventory of the forests of St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John this year.

The program is part of a federal effort started in 1930 to collect, analyze, and report information on the status and trends of America's forests. The remeasurement began in 2020 but stalled during the pandemic.

The inventory will be coordinated by Belinda Ferro, an ecologist with the Southern Research Station's FIA program. The work will be done by an expert team of biological scientists in collaboration with the International Institute of Tropical Forestry (IITF). Information from the inventory will be useful for assessing the sustainability of ecosystem management practices, evaluating wildlife habitat, and supporting forest planning and decision-making.

According to the release, the team will collect information on how much forest exists, where it exists, who owns it, and how it is changing, as well as how the trees and other forest vegetation are growing and how much has died or been removed in recent years.

The Virgin Island's fourth inventory will be followed by remeasurements every year to track changes in forest cover, land use patterns, biological diversity, and hurricane damage and recovery, FIA said.

The inventory in the USVI is changing from a 5-year remeasurement cycle to an annual cycle to make it more efficient and effective in capturing forest dynamics.

"Our goal is to help residents, legislators, and agencies understand the uniqueness of island ecosystems and the significant ecological changes they have been experiencing recently," said Ferro. "Reports on forest conditions will distill information about the current situation and recent trends along with what the future might look like if trends continue unchanged. With better information, resource managers can make more informed decisions based on the most current state of the forests, including damage from hurricanes, loss to development, the effects of climate and invasive, non-native species."

FIA said that after the forest surveys are completed, the information will be analyzed and published in a 5-year report by the Southern Research Station. The information will also be available for downloading from the Forest Inventory and Analysis website:
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/research/programs/fia>.