SunGrant Abstract
Draft 1: 12 December 2014

John Schelhas, USDA Forest Service
Sarah Hitchner, University of Georgia
J. Peter Brosius, University of Georgia

"Weaving Straw into Gold": Perceptions of the Social, Ecological, and Economic Sustainability of Wood-based Bioenergy in the Rural U.S. South

Recent development of bioenergy industries in the U.S. South will potentially reshape forest landscapes, rural land use, and small towns. Over the past five years, existing commercial-scale wood pellet production for the European renewable energy market and a nascent liquid biofuels industry using wood and grasses as feedstocks have been enthusiastically embraced in many sectors of this region for their potential contribution to energy independence and rural development. At the same time, the promise of this new bioeconomy has also garnered opposition and concerns about social, ecological, and environmental sustainability. Although it is not clear exactly how and to what extent the bioenergy industry will proceed in the U.S. South, it will certainly utilize forest and agricultural lands in new ways and have different effects on a number of stakeholders. Understanding how bioenergy development may change economies and land use, and how it is viewed by and may affect various stakeholder and interest groups, is critical to enhancing the long-term social and economic sustainability of the bioenergy sector.

Using a complementary array of qualitative social science methods, we are conducting ethnographic research in several communities throughout the southeastern U.S. with different types of bioenergy facilities. Here we will report results from our research with (1) farmers and forest landowners about the potential adoption of new technologies, harvesting and transport processes, and feedstocks/crops, and (2) community members and local leaders, representatives of existing forest and agriculture industries, and other stakeholders about social, environmental, and economic impacts of bioenergy development.