



New Mississippi Initiative Will Combat Leading Cause of Involuntary Land Loss Among Black Families

October 14, 2021

The Center for Heirs' Property Preservation™ and the Mississippi Center for Justice, with support from World Wildlife Fund and Kimberly-Clark, will provide legal services, assistance and resources to help historically underserved Mississippians keep generational land and conserve working forests.

JACKSON, Miss., Oct. 14, 2021 /PRNewswire/ -- The Center for Heirs' Property Preservation™ and the Mississippi Center for Justice today announced the Mobile Basin Heirs' Property Support Initiative, a two-year program designed to help historically underserved families in Mississippi protect and keep their forestland; build generational wealth; and promote productive, sustainably managed forests. With support from World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Kimberly-Clark, the new initiative will provide a combination of legal services, information, and assistance accessing financial resources to help Mississippians resolve land title issues that disproportionately affect Black families and often lead to loss of land, wealth, and forest resources.



Heirs' property is land passed down informally from generation to generation, often because landowners died without a will. In the absence of a will, the land is considered jointly owned by all heirs, split between multiple people regardless of whether they live on the land, pay the taxes, or have ever set foot on it. This fractured land leaves owners vulnerable to developers and timber harvesters, tax sales, and forced partition sales. Owners are faced with the decision to either give up their land or go through the complex and costly legal process of resolving title issues. In Mississippi, this also contributes to an increasing rate of forest loss, compromising the region's important freshwater habitats and drinking water supply.

"Families and individual landowners with title issues clouded by undetermined heirs or absent heirs can result in loss of land held for generations through tax sales, court-ordered partition sales, or even a 'taking' of the land by adverse possession," said Mississippi Center for Justice President and CEO Vangela M. Wade. "These harmful effects—which have persisted for decades—have been particularly acute for families of color and low-income families in Mississippi. It is currently estimated that heirs' property accounts for 1.6 million acres valued at \$6.6 billion across the southern Black Belt."

The new initiative is based on a successful model developed by the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation™ in South Carolina. This model has helped South Carolina families resolve more than 275 titles, building family and community wealth and ecological restoration in marginalized communities.

"We are delighted to entrust our heirs' property resolution knowledge and expertise to a well-established public interest law firm to address the complex problem of land loss by increasing access to the tools and resources these landowners need to resolve title issues and develop working landscapes," said Jennie L. Stephens, chief executive officer, the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation™. "This partnership will help build and sustain a landowner movement that has the power to unleash the cultural and natural resources of land in marginalized communities toward family wealth creation and to ecological restoration."

The initiative will also provide landowners with forestry education and access to additional funding for forest conservation and responsible forest management. This support can help families make income from their lands while protecting wildlife habitat and water sources.

"There is no sustainable future without addressing racial and social injustice," said Kerry Cesareo, senior vice president for forests at WWF. "Only by preventing the exploitation of families and their land can we prevent forest fragmentation and loss in this country and mitigate the worst effects of climate change. Forests are a source of health and wealth, but the burdens and benefits of caring for forests have not been shared fairly. We need to do everything we can to address injustice and support people who have helped all of us by caring for forestlands for generations and who are themselves more likely to bear the brunt of nature loss and climate impacts."

The initiative will be piloted over two years with property owners across the Mobile Bay watershed. In addition to providing direct assistance to Mississippi's underserved landowners, the program's goals include raising broader awareness about the benefits to both people and nature that can come from removing barriers for historically marginalized communities to secure land rights in the southern United States and beyond.

"Southern U.S. forests that Kimberly-Clark relies on to make our essential products are being lost to unsustainable development at an increasing rate, and heirs' property is particularly vulnerable to that trend," said Lisa Morden, vice president of safety, sustainability & occupational health at Kimberly-Clark. "Helping heirs' property owners secure clear title to their ancestral land enables them to protect, care for, and benefit from that land, and we are

honored to support the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, the Mississippi Center for Justice, and WWF in advancing this important work."

Morden added: "We know the issue of insecure land tenure and its links to forest loss and degradation is not unique to the U.S. southeast. As the world continues to address the climate and biodiversity crises, we must also look to support the land rights of Indigenous and other marginalized communities who steward many of the world's most carbon- and biodiversity-rich forests. To that end, this initiative supports our ambition to improve the lives and well-being of 1 billion people in underserved communities around the globe by 2030, with the smallest environmental footprint—and is part of how we deliver our purpose of better care for a better world."

About the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation™

The Center for Heirs' Property Preservation™ has been protecting heirs' property through legal education and direct legal services since 2005. In 2013, the Center began promoting the sustainable use of land through forestry education and services to provide increased economic benefit to low-wealth family landowners. The Center provides legal and forestry services in Allendale, Bamberg, Beaufort, Berkeley, Calhoun, Charleston, Clarendon, Colleton, Darlington, Dillon, Dorchester, Florence, Georgetown, Hampton, Horry, Jasper, Lee, Marion, Marlboro, Orangeburg, Sumter and Williamsburg counties.

To date, the Center has provided 3,260 persons with free, one-hour "Advice and Counsel" (A&C) with 777 clients receiving direct legal services to clear title. A total of 1,225 simple wills have been drafted at free, community Wills Clinics; more than 451 families (who collectively own in excess of 26,000 acres) have benefited from various levels of education and expert resources to develop and implement sustainable forestry management plans and 286 titles have been cleared on family land with a total tax-assessed value of \$16.7 million. Visit www.heirsproperty.org to learn more; follow [@Heirsproperty](https://twitter.com/Heirsproperty) on Twitter and <https://www.linkedin.com/company/center-for-heirs-property-preservation/mycompany/> on LinkedIn.

About the Mississippi Center for Justice

Now in its 18th year, the Mississippi Center for Justice continues to be one of the most well-respected civil justice organizations in the South, known for the strategic nature of its advocacy and the high impact of its work. MCJ is a non-profit, public interest law firm committed to strengthening racial, social, and economic justice in Mississippi by dismantling the systems that strip opportunity away from historically disadvantaged Mississippians. MCJ does this through a potent combination of direct legal services, strategic policy advocacy, targeted community education, and media outreach.

MCJ works to create a better future for Mississippi through dedicated legal campaigns centered around health and public benefits, fair housing, consumer protection, education, immigration, disaster recovery, and impact litigation. MCJ works across such a diverse array of issues because addressing the root causes of poverty and inequity are inherently intersectional. MCJ confronts a wide range of challenges facing low-income Mississippians and has an exceptional track record of making real and positive change. Learn more at www.mscenterforjustice.org.

About World Wildlife Fund (WWF)

WWF is one of the world's leading conservation organizations, working for 60 years in nearly 100 countries to help people and nature thrive. With the support of more than 5 million supporters worldwide, WWF is dedicated to delivering science-based solutions to preserve the diversity and abundance of life on Earth, halt the degradation of the environment, and combat the climate crisis. Visit worldwildlife.org to learn more; follow [@WWFNews](https://twitter.com/WWFNews) on Twitter to keep up with the latest conservation news; and sign up for our newsletter and news alerts [here](#).

About Kimberly-Clark

Kimberly-Clark (NYSE: KMB) and its trusted brands are an indispensable part of life for people in more than 175 countries. Fueled by ingenuity, creativity and an understanding of people's most essential needs, we create products that help individuals experience more of what's important to them. Our portfolio of brands, including Huggies, Kleenex, Scott, Kotex, Cottonelle, Poise, Depend, Andrex, Pull-Ups, GoodNites, Intimus, Neve, Plenitud, Sweety, Softex, Viva and WypAll, hold the No. 1 or No. 2 share position in 80 countries. We use sustainable practices that support a healthy planet, build stronger communities, and ensure our business thrives for decades to come. To keep up with the latest news and to learn more about the company's nearly 150-year history of innovation, visit kimberly-clark.com.

[KMB-S]

MISSISSIPPI
CENTER
FOR JUSTICE



View original content to download multimedia:<https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/new-mississippi-initiative-will-combat-leading-cause-of-involuntary-land-loss-among-black-families-301398451.html>

SOURCE Center for Heirs' Property Preservation; Mississippi Center for Justice; World Wildlife Fund; Kimberly-Clark

Patrick Taylor, Senior Communications and Donor Outreach Specialist, Mississippi Center for Justice, ptaylor@mscenterforjustice.org, 601-473-4309;
Jeff Winget, Director of Communications, Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, Jwinget@heirsproperty.org, 314-608-9351