

FACT SHEET

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Timber & Timber Harvesting in West Virginia

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Does a Forest Landowner Need His Own Forester?

In past decades, when West Virginia unemployment was high and the state was rapidly losing population, there was an overabundance of timber available for sawmills and loggers to purchase. Conversely, in many rural counties, the opportunity to sell even the highest quality timber in any manner other than “loggers choice” or “by the boundary” was seldom an option.

As recently as 1990, there were still areas of West Virginia where the normal way of selling timber was “by the boundary” where all trees of commercial size on a tract could be purchased for as little as \$100 per acre. At that time, most individual trees had a very low value and woodland owners were often extremely satisfied simply to find a buyer for their timber. In fact, in many portions of West Virginia, competition was limited for all but the highest quality timber until the mid 1990’s. The option of excluding high quality trees of harvestable size during a timber sale and retaining them for continued growth was rarely employed until the very late 1990’s.

Until recently, for many West Virginia property owners, the value of their timber appeared to be so low that management was an afterthought and the idea of retaining or consulting with a forester prior to selling their trees was often looked upon as an expensive or pointless exercise. Some landowners believed that timber growth would not even pay their property taxes.

During the late 1990’s, the value of timber rose to historically high levels. Today it is not uncommon for individual trees to be worth more than an entire acre of timber bought barely a decade ago.

As the West Virginia timber values began to climb, several processing facilities, product manufacturers and wood-using industries arrived on the scene to create competition where none had existed before.

With the advent of new methods of harvesting and processing timber from our forests, the profession and practice of forestry has become much more diverse with foresters often becoming specialists at the one or relatively few facets of forest management emphasized by their employer.

Also, by the end of the century, the business and practice of forestry in West Virginia had changed in many additional ways with registration and continuing education becoming requirements for foresters and forestry technicians and new laws related to forestry being placed on the books.

Today, West Virginia woodland owners considering a harvest or development of a forest management program have more options available to them than any time in our history. Generally, private forestland has been logged only once or twice by each generation with a majority of property owners selling timber only once in their lifetime.

Traditionally, free advice on timber and woodland management has been available through various government programs and some of the larger timber companies have maintained ongoing landowner assistance programs. However, with changing laws and evolving priorities, a decreasing proportion of public foresters' time is available for public assistance.

Many foresters in West Virginia are employed in the forest products industry in jobs related to log and timber procurement. Although procurement foresters can sometimes be a source of free information and advice on timber and forest management, obtaining raw materials (logs and standing timber) for their employer at the lowest possible cost is their primary duty.

In recent years, forest management advice has become readily obtainable from private consulting foresters. Consulting foresters, who charge for their services, traditionally work for non-industrial private property owners. The services offered by private consultants can be very broad in their scope of application and the type of expertise available from private foresters is as diverse as any profession.

In the past, when most West Virginians lived or worked on farms and the value of trees and timber was common knowledge, the typical sale contract was often no more than a verbal agreement between neighbors. A generation ago, when portable sawmills were common and a 100 acre harvest was often a project that could last a year or longer, there was often an opportunity for a property owner to oversee a harvest or change the terms of a contract. With the use of modern equipment and harvest methods, it is now possible for a relatively small crew working for a sawmill located a hundred or more miles away from the tract, to harvest as much timber in a month as a large crew used to harvest in a year.

The timber industry, like any other business, must be profitable in order to survive and prosper. As a rule, the greatest benefit and consequently the greatest profit goes to those that have the most information available to them before making decisions on the timber or resources on a given parcel of forestland. Accurate information is one of the most important keys to informed decision making. Because of rapid increases in the value of timber in recent years, most woodland owners are unprepared to deal with timber buyers who are trained to evaluate, measure and purchase trees from private property.

Today, as never before, woodland owners should not under appreciate or overlook the benefit of having their own expert “counting their chickens.” The vast majority of foresters in all facets of modern forest management are honest and ethical but their first duty is always to their employer. For woodland owners with an urban background or limited knowledge of timber values, the benefit of having your own forester look out for your best interests when selling timber has never been greater. For woodland owners whose interest in forest management extends beyond the harvest that may be their short term concern, the benefit of retaining your own forester may prove invaluable.

(Prepared by Russ Richardson)

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