

FACT SHEET

No. 25

Timber & Timber Harvesting in West Virginia

December, 2002

THE VALUE OF FOREST MANAGEMENT PLANS

The forests of WV have evolved in many ways over the last 150 years. At the time of the first settlements, the forests were an obstacle to agriculture and were cleared and burned. At the time, no one thought seriously about future wood supplies or about the non-wood values of forests. There were no trained foresters in the country. Somewhat later, in 1908, a few classes in forestry were taught at WVU, but these were short lived. Some foresters came to the State with the CCC camps of the 1930's and WVU started a forestry school in the mid-1930's. The first trained consulting forester in the State began work in 1946 for several large landowners in southern WV. From these activities, which have increased greatly in the last few decades, the practice of professional forest management as an art and science was started in West Virginia. However, even though such work is increasing, it is estimated that less than 10% of the timber harvested each year in WV is done on the basis of forest management planning. Thus, the future is not being considered.

A managed forest begins with a quality forest management plan. Forest management planning allows the forest landowner to practice good stewardship of the property and its resources. The planning process identifies the resources and opportunities that are available and blends them with what the forest landowner would like to realize from the property in terms of financial gain and long-term enjoyment. It is a means of identifying what can be done to enhance and protect the values and aspects of the property that are most important to the forest landowner and his descendents.

A trained forester is necessary for forest management actions and planning because forest planning is based on current scientific knowledge and the landowner's objectives. Trained foresters have the specialized knowledge needed to best judge total asset management in regard to the landowners ideas and desires. This involves determining the optimal harvest age for each timber stand as well as the economics of recreation opportunities, wildlife, water, herbaceous plants, striking aesthetic features and other items seldom priced or evaluated in markets. These latter values are inextricably linked in any multiple-use management plan.

In order to prepare a multiple-use plan, it is necessary to first collect a lot of vital data which are used in preparing biological and economic analyses which in turn are used

to guide critical thought and future actions. Such information includes the history of the forest; tree species on hand and their distribution across the tract or tracts; the average tree age; tree diameters, heights and volumes; health and quality of the trees; tree and stand volumes; soil types, drainage, overall topography, access; potentially sensitive areas such as springs and seeps; the presence of valuable, but also rare or endangered species such as ginseng and yellow root; forest pests such as gypsy moth and oak wilt; and the exact boundaries. Landowners that harvest timber without a written management plan are more or less playing Russian roulette except that they are threatening their forests life instead of their own. Or to put it another way, a football coach diagrams plays which his players memorize. Each play is calculated to score a touchdown. Not all do, but it would be a mess on the field if the players did not have them as guides to try to follow? To some extent, this is forestry, with the forester as the coach.

Its important to emphasize that forests are no longer seen as simply a provider of goods. They also provide environmental services and they are deserving of science-based care. Forest ecosystems are a complex of interconnected processes that need to be well understood. For example, a regeneration plan is one of the most important parts of a timber harvest. Without it, a landowner is again playing Russian roulette. In preparing the sale, consideration must be given to resulting light intensities, effects on air and soil surface temperatures, control of competitive vegetation, soil moisture, aspect, leaf litter, abundance of deer, genetics of advance regeneration and the planned residual stand, etc. Only well trained professional foresters are trained to do so.

There are several ways that forest landowners can get forest management plans. They can insist that the company asking to buy their timber furnish one in advance of cutting the trees. They can hire their own consulting forester to prepare a plan and any subsequent sales. They can ask government forestry agencies for assistance. One way to insure quality is through the West Virginia Forest Stewardship Program (FSP). The FSP assists forest landowners in actively managing their forest resources, in maintaining the lands in productive and healthy condition and in increasing the economic and environmental benefits of these lands. In some instances, financial assistance is provided to have a forest management plan developed by a certified professional forester. This service is open to non-industrial private forest landowners who own between 10 and 1,000 acres of rural woodland with tree cover or suitable for growing trees. Call 304-558-2788 for specific particulars.

(Prepared by Jim Warren)

This publication is distributed free by the Timber Committee, West Virginia Forestry Association, P. O. Box 718, Ripley, WV 25271. Please call (304-372-1955) or write for additional copies, topics or for a list of speakers and their availability.