

When Loggers Come to Call, Understanding the Timber Sale - Don Schaufler

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Introduction

As a forest owner, the time may come when you need to know some basic guidelines pertaining to the sale of timber from your property. Many people acquire woodland with absolutely no intention of ever selling any timber. Most of these landowners will be solicited eventually by someone interested in purchasing some of the trees on the property. Occasionally circumstances develop which lead to the realization that it's important to know the value of your timber to make a responsible decision based on stewardship concerns for the forest. In any event, it's important to be aware of the numerous players out there who have an interest in your woodland.

Who's Who?

There are three main classifications of people who purchase trees, referred to as stumpage, from private forest owners. There are timber buyers that work for a sawmill, timber brokers that work for themselves, and independent logging contractors. Each of these has a vested interest in buying the highest quality timber at the lowest possible price. They all know current log markets by species, grade, and location. Most are not as concerned with the long term effects of a timber harvest on your woods as you are. This is not to say they will do irrevocable damage to your property. Not at all, as most are well versed in proper harvesting technique and will do a credible job much of the time.

The question is whether their desired goal matches your objectives for your woodlot. This is why a thoughtful, written management plan is such a vitally important part of the stewardship responsibility entrusted to you. The harvesting of timber should never be a hasty action. It should always be planned well in advance of the actual operation and be compatible with your reasons for owning forested property.

Knowing What You Have

A current inventory of timber by species, volume, and value is indispensable when making a decision that will affect the woods for many decades to come. Timber values vary immensely by species, size and location of trees, time of year, and many other factors. A black birch tree may be worth \$5 while the same size black cherry nearby perhaps \$300.

The choice to become involved in a timber sale is always up to the forest owner. You are in the driver's seat as long as you pay the taxes and continue to own your woodlot. What happens to that forest is also up to you. Presently, it's a seller's market. It's important to recognize this the next time a logger knocks on your door or sends you a letter inquiring about your plans for those trees that comprise your woodlot.

Remember also, some of the world's finest hardwood lumber is grown right here in the Northeast. Cherry, oak, maple, and ash are exported to hundreds of countries around the globe. Prices continue to climb for high quality logs and lumber. Unfortunately, many times this demand leads to selling just the very best trees for timber and leaving the poorer quality stems for the future. What's left will continue to grow and becomes the next forest. This is why foresters should be included in a timber sale process, the type of forester that will recommend that some low value trees be cut along with higher quality ones.

Since New York has no 'official' definition of a forester, it's worthwhile to realize who the forester works for. State foresters, employed by the Department of Environmental Conservation, offer unbiased advice to forest owners. Consultant foresters work independently for clients while timber brokers, or 'self-appointed foresters' answer primarily to themselves. Procurement or industrial foresters often manage company forestland and purchase stumpage from state and privately held forests. Any of these people may be determined to be a 'Certified Forester' if they meet special criteria developed by the Society of American Foresters, the organization which represents the forestry profession in the USA.

Types of Timber Sales

The common types of timber sales locally include the lump sum sale, the scaled sale, and the percentage sale. In a lump sum sale, all trees sold are paid for prior to being harvested. The scaled sale and percentage sale depend upon measuring material during harvest or after logs are delivered to the sawmill. The logs are usually 'scaled' or measured on the landing in a scaled sale and at the sawmill for a percentage timber sale where the landowner is paid a percentage of the mill tally by the timber harvester.

Based on my experience of over twenty years in New York forestry, I believe these guidelines will be most helpful. Secure as much unbiased forestry information as possible. Good sources include Cornell Cooperative Extension, Master Forest Owner Program in New York, and DEC foresters. Consultant foresters and procurement foresters can offer valuable suggestions also, just remember who each works for. It's always a sound practice to interview a number of hopefuls and carefully check references and credentials. The ones you want to deal with will have no problem sharing names and addresses of previous clients. The DEC maintains a list of Cooperating Consultant Foresters to get started. Both Cornell Cooperative Extension and the DEC should have sample timber sale contracts which will cover the basics.

In summary, a timber sale can be a very rewarding step in the forest stewardship process as you guide the growth and development of your woods. At the same time, it is an activity fraught with peril for the uninformed woodlot owner. Therefore the time and energy invested before the first tree is cut will pay off immensely. A well administered timber sale can add greatly to the value of your property and provide you with a sense of accomplishment and stewardship pride for many years to come.

References

Timber management for small woodlands. Goff, G.R., J. P. Lassoie, and K. M. Layer. 1994. Cornell Cooperative Extension Information Bulletin. Bulletin No. 147IB180. Resource Center, Cornell University, 7 business & Technology Park, Ithaca, NY 14850. (order from the World Wide Web at www.cce.cornell.edu/publications/catalog/html)