

9. Developing a Woodlot Stewardship Plan

By Peter Smallidge

The planning that you do for your woodlot or forest is not a difficult process and provides numerous benefits for woodlot owners. If you have planned a vacation or a wedding, then you are capable of the planning necessary to get the most from your woodlot.

The planning process will involve some thinking on your part, discussions with your spouse, children, or co-owners, collection of resource materials, and working with a forester for technical and professional assistance. These are easy but necessary steps; the good news is that much of this can be accomplished for free or with minimal expense. The expenses you do incur may be tax deductible depending on your situation and will be offset by gains in the efficiency of management and the benefits you receive from your property.



Before you begin developing your plan, think about why you own your woodlands and what you value most about them.

The starting point for a management plan is for you to identify your ownership objectives. These objectives describe what you want to get from your property, either the material goods such as timber or the

opportunity for experiences such as privacy, recreation, or hunting; maybe all these and more. A good starting point is to ask yourself a few questions: Why do you own the property? What do you like? What do you dislike? What do you need (or want) in 5, 10, or 20 years? When you discuss the answers to these questions with your spouse or others, you will be able to identify what you want to accomplish. A forester can help you evaluate your objectives and whether they are compatible with the resources on your property.

A plan for your woodlot provides benefits that are aesthetic, economic and logistical in nature. A plan allows landowners to integrate seemingly complicated objectives such as timber harvesting, habitat enhancement for specific wildlife species, and recreational trails. Planning ensures that management activities move towards and include the landowner's objectives and provide the optimal variety of desired benefits. For landowners who seek IRS recognition as an active participant or proof of the intention of an activity, a management plan can document the role of the landowner in the management process or the intent of certain activities. Examples include fencing to exclude deer from regeneration, and thus allow the landowner to enjoy certain tax provisions not otherwise possible.

A typical management plan has four sections. The first section is a statement of the landowner objectives. It's important that these are the objectives of the landowner and not the objectives of the forester helping the landowner. The second section describes the property. This would include: a legal property description; an assessment of the condition of the different areas or management units for timber, wildlife, recreation, or other uses; characterizations of the soils, especially any limitations of use such as poorly drained or stony soils; The third section

would be a work plan or calendar of scheduled events. You'll likely want a fairly detailed plan for the current and next year, but then more general targets for the following 5 and 10 year time frame. Each year you can check the tasks completed and revise the current year plan. Part of the schedule might include the tools, equipment, or resources you'll need to complete some task. The fourth and final section is an appendix that includes any number of things from maps, to historic records, aerial photographs, old pictures, list of trees or birds seen on the property, etc.

You have likely recognized that the planning process will be easiest with some outside assistance. Fortunately, there are numerous tools, people, and organizations you can access. One useful tool is a computer software program called "NED" that is available for free from the US Forest Service web site or by phone. NED helps you visualize the relationship among your objectives. Another tool is the Cornell Cooperative Extension bulletin, "Wildlife and Timber from Private Lands: A landowner's guide to planning", available through your local county extension office as #147-IB-193. People who can help include a corps of trained forest owning volunteers, the Master Forest Owners, who you can reach through your local Cooperative Extension office or at the MFO web site. The NYS Department of Environmental Conservation has a program called "public service foresters" who will visit your property and prepare a stewardship management plan with you free of charge. Also, you can contact a consulting forester or an industrial forester for assistance with a plan, though they may charge a fee or expect some future relationship for their services. Organizations that can assist include the New York Forest Owners Association and the Catskill Forest Association whose

membership includes regular publications focused on the need of landowners. The websites for these organizations and others for maps, aerial photos, and web-based private landowner resources are provided as links from the Cornell University Forestry Extension web page.

Once you have your plan, use it to your full advantage. Use the schedule of activities to plan the yearly events, perhaps when children are home for the summer or in-laws come to visit.



Use the description of the different management units to think about places to put hiking trails, picnic areas, or potential bird watching locations. Take the advice of your carefully chosen forester to help you evaluate offers from someone who shows up at your door and wants to buy your timber -- if your plan doesn't call for a timber sale then you're likely better off to let the offer pass.

A management plan is a useful tool that will serve you for years to come. It's a critical starting point for the long-term stewardship of your wooded acreage.