

THE ROLE OF WEST VIRGINIA'S DIVISION OF FORESTRY

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Abstract.--Trees are best suited for reclaiming stripped areas with a valuable product. Wildlife and forestry considerations should be the concern of operators, landowners, foresters, and wildlife biologists with an objective of returning the disturbed land to its most capable productivity. In West Virginia, trees are the most logical and realistic product of the land.

Mr. Moderator, members of the panel, dignitaries, ladies and gentlemen. As State Forester of West Virginia, the heart of Appalachia and the coal mining region, I must point out that this so-called pocket of poverty is very rich both in renewable and non-renewable resources. More than 75% of our 15 million acres is forest land. The Division of Forestry (DOF) of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has within its jurisdiction and supervision woodland areas, the protection of forest acres from damage by fire and other forces, the administration of compacts and agreements relating to forestry area management and husbandry and the administration and enforcement of all laws pertaining to the conservation, development, protection, use and enjoyment of all forest land areas of the state. Herein lies some of the reasoning for the DOF to be concerned in the reclamation work.

Much of the area has been surface mined and much more will be. It so happens that most of the area surface mined or could be, is, or has been forest land and is best suited for forest production. In fact, most of the mined areas have an unacceptable low value for any land use other than forest production.

In most cases, the philosophy of grass and legumes is not the best permanent surface cover for the area. The landowner should be helped to get his property back into production of a crop that will provide a monetary

return and still hold the soil. On the steep slopes, properly selected trees are the most reasonable and practical cover.

One of the problems encountered is the resistance of some operators to go further than the immediate quick cover route of grass with some seed producing sedges, etc. that appear to bolster the wildlife theory. Forestry has no quarrel with this. In fact, we support the quick cover procedure, but know that it is not adequate for the long range needs nor will it produce a crop commensurate with the capability of the soil.

The DOF believes that quick cover, followed by tree planting, is the most reasonable and equitable procedure. Immediate soil holding action can be effective and the long range production of a merchantable crop is launched.

Direct seeding can be successful with certain species on acceptable soils; however, each type and site should be evaluated by a forester to determine the best method of establishing the best land use. The DOF has that expertise.

Of course, the availability of the recommended species can be a problem, but with the results of research already published and/or currently in progress, the

only need is assurance that the trees will be bought and planted when they reach the proper planting age and size, usually 1-2 growing seasons in the seedbed. The cost of "gearing up" the nursery to grow three million seedlings is approximately \$200,000 per year and going up each year. Therefore, there must be a commitment before we can invest taxpayer money wisely. West Virginia experienced this unfortunate circumstance several years ago by seeding for approximately 5,000 acres of reclamation work without a firm commitment. When the time came two years later, direct seeding by helicopter was chosen and most of the investment to produce the needed seedlings was lost.

Under Public Law 95-87, it appears that trees will be required to meet the mandates of the law, but the required public participation, input, and additional work prior to establishing regulations are taking time.

In a way, there is a general acceptance of the philosophy that all the operator needs to do is get a green cover on the disturbed and regraded surface and the nice "manicured" appearance will be adequate. Any forest or tree cover needed will come in naturally from existing nearby seed trees.

Such procedures frequently establish an attractive scene for a few years, but usually deteriorates after the care and fertilize treatments are discontinued. Natural reseeding is very slow and frequently provides inferior species. The real need is halfway met, but a planned and professionally conceived permanent and productive cover should be established after the quick cover has stabilized erosion tendencies.

This permanent cover should be hand planted trees and shrubs known to be suitable for the area. Frequently, the controversy rages about wildlife planting versus forest tree planting. This conflict should not be. In this business, we need and can have both. Most landowners want wildlife on their property; however, wildlife does not bring any appreciable income to the landowner, nor does it help pay the taxes. Trees can. Pulpwood, fuelwood, lumber, veneer, etc. can be quite profitable when properly managed. The planting plan for a reclamation job should include the quick cover to hold the soil and the tree species best suited to the area interspersed with open areas designed for wildlife food and cover.

There is no place for the "tunnel-visioned" forester or wildlife biologist. In reclamation work where forest cover is required they should have as their number one objective to get that land developed into an economically productive tract. In most of the surface-mined areas of West Virginia such a program will require trees. Forestry and wildlife are compatible and should complement one another on a reclamation project.

Let us go back to the quick cover. Frequently, this becomes a temporary mat of grass and legumes that will smother any tree seedling or shrub planted with or soon after the original treatment of fertilizer and mulch. Therefore, the planting plan should consider the selection of species that can be compatible with the planned permanent cover, perhaps, even considering a "nurse-crop" for soil build-up purposes prior to the establishment of the final crop trees that ultimately will be harvested. Such considerations are for the professionals.

Soil scientists, foresters, and wildlife biologists should work together. Research in all fields concerned has been done and is continuing; however, we must avoid the pitfall of "re-inventing the wheel." There are indications of duplicating work already done. Perhaps, a study of all strip mine reclamation research projects completed and on-going would be in order to assure that new projects were not directed toward a problem already addressed.

I do hope we continue to approach the problem of reclamation wisely and I expect the several disciplines involved to be co-operative. In Appalachia, there are thousands, yes, even millions, of acres of disturbed land being or to be reclaimed with a vegetative cover. Already, "quick cover" of unproductive grasses, clover, and lespedza have been successful, but their conversion from a soil stabilizing nuisance to a productive forest with the by-product of wildlife and recreation must be accelerated. Steps must be taken not to re-create the problem in the reclamation of the abandoned surface mine areas now under consideration and the new surface mined areas of the future. Trees are our most valuable renewable natural resource and must receive their proper stature in the field of wise use of our natural resources.