

Small-Scale, Private Lands Forestry In The Lake States

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Of the approximately 750 million acres of forests in the United States, approximately 46 percent is classified as “nonindustrial private forest” (NIPF). These are lands owned by private individuals, jointly or through family partnerships. According to the most recent USDA survey, there are 10,565,000 private woodland owners in the United States, collectively owning 392,731,000 acres of forest. The numbers also show that of these 10.5 million landowners, the vast majority own less than 50 acres. Specifically, 6.3 million own less than 10 acres and nearly 3 million more own between 10 and 50 acres (USDA 2003*).

**Note: these are preliminary data results; as the National Woodland Owner Survey progresses, results with increasing geographic accuracy will be developed. The goal is to have reliable State estimates by the time the full survey cycle is completed in 5-10 years.*

However, while the majority of landowners own few acres, a small population of large landowners own a large percentage of the total acreage. Specifically, about 2,000 individuals or families in this country own 28 percent of the Nation's private forest land (USDA 2003).

Approaches for Influencing Management on NIPF Ownerships

One challenge facing foresters and practitioners of silviculture is to find ways to facilitate forest management on private forest lands of varying sizes. A debate often arises over which lands and landowners to focus efforts on. There are at least two schools of thought on this. One emphasizes the scale of on the ground impact that is possible if efforts are focused on large landowners. The logic is that by reaching just 2,000 people, over one million acres can be affected. Management on this scale of ownership can accomplish many ecological goals, as well as help provide reliable sources of wood and fiber to support local and regional

Table 1.—Area and number of privately owned forests in the United States by size of forest landholdings

Size of forested landholdings (acres)	Area acres	Owners number
	<i>Thousands</i>	<i>Thousands</i>
1-9	20,033	6,343
10-49	63,295	2,965
50-99	43,287	641
100-499	99,216	556
500-999	24,290	38
1000-4999	31,678	20
5000+	110,933	2
TOTAL	392,731	10,565

Source: USDA Forest Service, Forest Inventory & Analysis, National Woodland Owner Survey, June 2003.

industries. Another school of thought is that efforts to assist private landowners should be focused on the small landholdings, such as those of less than 500 acres. The logic is that this represents the greatest numbers of individuals, citizens, voters, and community members. By reaching “the masses,” the benefits are dispersed over a larger geographic area and more likely to create a domino effect. Additionally, due to their scale, these landowners often face more challenges in terms of commercially viable operations and access to traditional markets.

This debate over strategies to increase management on private lands is not a new one. There is no single easy solution or universally effective tactic when it comes to promoting forest management with private landowners, but we hope foresters are coming to realize there are many diverse and worthwhile approaches to consider.

Management Trends on NIPF Ownerships

Why is it important to promote forest management on private lands? Because NIPFs represent 46 percent of the total forestland in the country, they can exert significant influence on the forest product market and the availability of wood and fiber supplies. This same acreage represents 46 percent of the Nation’s forest habitat and can exert a significant influence on wildlife, water quality, air quality, and other ecological and aesthetic considerations. Through appropriate forest management, NIPF lands are able to support local industries and jobs while also protecting environmental attributes that are strong determinants of community health. With this in mind, foresters don’t have the option of ignoring NIPF lands. Clearly, as forest management practitioners, we need to be cognizant of how our science is made available and applied to private lands, as well as large industrial and public landholdings. However, current information shows that less than 5 percent of the country’s NIPF owners, representing less than 15 percent of the NIPF acres, have a written management plan (USDA 2003). Although a much greater number of private landowners have “sought advice” from a variety of sources, without a written management plan it is difficult to

imagine that this management includes clear objectives, a silvicultural prescription, effective implementation, and appropriate follow-through. Without adequate professional assistance, private landowners are unlikely to receive maximum benefits, in terms of income potential, asset value over the long term, social and aesthetic values, and minimized negative environmental impacts.

Given the potential impact of forest management on private lands, we must ask ourselves why private landowners aren’t more engaged in forest management. If we focus only on the northern region, defined as Maine to Maryland and west to Minnesota and Missouri, some interesting information comes out of the recent USDA survey.

This northern region includes about 5 million private landowners owning a total of nearly 130 million acres of forest land. For almost 2 million people, forest land is either part of their farm or their primary residence. The average landowner in the northern region has owned his or her land for about 25 years and is 60 years old (USDA 2003). From this information, we can already see that for many forest owners, the forest is their home, it has been their home for a large part of their adult life, and they most likely look at it out their kitchen window nearly every morning.

Further survey questions reveal that the primary reason for owning forest land is fairly evenly split between enjoying aesthetics, protecting nature, and having it as part of their residence. The lowest ranked reason, in the list of eight possible reasons, is nontimber forest products and just above that is timber production (USDA 2003).

These responses would appear to imply that landowners tend to be focused on the ecological and aesthetic benefits of forest ownership. However, of all the possible activities occurring on their ownerships, the most common is timber harvest (USDA 2003). About 10 percent of private landowners representing about 35 percent of the NIPF lands in the northern region have had a timber harvest in the past 5

years. Still, nearly one-third of the forest landowners in the northern region categorize their future plans as “no activity” or “minimal activity” (USDA 2003). These mixed signals tell us that while forest owners might not have timber harvesting on their list of things to do, when the markets are good or the opportunity or financial need arises, they are very likely to harvest their land, even if they don't always plan ahead for it.

Engaging the NIPF Ownership

With more than 10 million private forest owners in the Nation, it is unrealistic to think there is a one-size-fits-all answer to effectively reaching and meeting the needs of all those landowners. Instead, it is becoming increasingly important that landowners have a wide range of resources to choose from, including public agencies, private businesses, environmental organizations, community groups, and non-profits. It is more likely that landowners will find a source that they trust and are willing to work with to plan and implement their forest management. Although it is advantageous to have a wide range of resources available, the downside is the perception or reality of contradictory information being provided. Landowners may get conflicting advice or confusing information when they consult with more than one resource. Some landowners may simply pick one to believe over the others, while others may throw their hands up in confusion and give up. With the range of landowners needs and the range of resources available, it is increasingly important that natural resource professionals make every possible effort to fully explain their advice, provide landowners with adequate information to make an informed decision, and avoid undermining the efforts of other service providers. Although it is appropriate and fully expected that resource managers will disagree about forest management options, the basis for these disagreements should be explained to the landowners so that they understand that it is a matter of tradeoffs and not a clear cut case of only one right answer.

Various surveys over the years have illustrated the fact that trust is a major factor in determining what activities landowners are willing to engage in on their forest land. Landowners take their cues from what they see neighbors doing across the fence line and what they hear friends talk about at the café in town. For example, a recent survey of Minnesota's forest landowners found that getting advice from another landowner or neighbor was the second most common source of assistance, coming in just behind the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (Baughman 2002). Resource managers should not underestimate or undermine the value and credibility of these methods of information exchange. There are four major areas of emerging opportunities, summarized below, for engaging the NIPF owners and improving management on their lands. All four of these rely at least in part on the development of trust and community-based information exchange.

Forest cooperatives

There is a renewed effort around forest landowner cooperation in the form of new generation cooperatives and landowner associations. These groups are not an attempt to replace or compete with existing and established forest landowner groups; instead, they represent a renewed interest in the values and motivating factors that were likely the origins of these other groups as well. In light of rapid community change and economic pressures and opportunities, forest landowners are seeing increasing opportunities and incentives for working with other community members to identify common interests, needs, and solutions. Cooperatives and landowner associations provide a variety of opportunities for increased forest management on private lands, a new avenue for delivering technical assistance and education to private landowners, and an additional point of contact between policymakers or researchers and forest landowners.

Forest certification

The evolution of forest certification systems represents a potentially revolutionary opportunity for forest landowners. If the development of certified organic agriculture is any indication, in 20 to 30 years we may have both a thriving certified forest industry as well as regional and local “forest

farmers markets” where consumers are able to identify products that are grown and manufactured locally and are third-party certified through programs that challenge consumers to explore their values and make critical purchasing judgments. Certification provides some opportunities to improve private land management, but more importantly it provides an important tool for educating consumers, making them more aware of the impact of their purchasing decisions, and connecting them to their local forest resources.

Utilization standards

For a variety of reasons, the forest product industry has been changing its utilization standards fairly rapidly and significantly in recent years to accept a greater variety of species and grades. With changes in what the industry can utilize, what the market is demanding, and what customers are willing to pay, there are new opportunities for landowners to pursue more economically viable management alternatives and to help facilitate use of more diverse silvicultural methods. Specifically, with the development of more diverse hardwood markets, landowners in the Lake States are in a better position to apply management techniques such as crop tree management or uneven-aged management in some northern hardwood stands. Combined with increased nontimber forest product opportunities, these diverse markets will help more landowners recognize opportunities to participate in forest management activities that fit their values and ownership goals. However, like the other opportunities available to landowners, taking advantage of emerging markets is frequently a community effort relying on partnership and collaboration because of the economics of market access and operational feasibility.

Community identity

There is an increasing social and policy-level recognition of the value and community contribution made by healthy nonindustrial private forest lands. Community leaders, policymakers, and neighbors are increasingly recognizing that much of their local identity and sense of place relies on efforts made by private landowners to protect and enhance their forests. In some regions

and countries, this recognition has resulted in innovative incentive programs that help reward and ensure that private landowners are able to maintain these resources. For example, Costa Rica has a program that provides direct payments to private landowners for environmental services such as air and water purification, carbon sequestration, and recreation (Snider 2003).

Silvicultural Needs on NIPF Ownerships

The critical silvicultural needs of the small private landowner relate less to identification of specific silvicultural tools and outcomes but more to the delivery of these tools and the availability of the expertise necessary to achieve desired goals. The management goals and, consequently, silvicultural needs of NIPF owners are inclusive of the full range of goals and needs outlined elsewhere in this volume, including management for quality wood products, management for fiber, and conservation and restoration of habitat and ecosystems. Knowing how to access information, implement prescriptions, and monitor the success of actions is the primary silvicultural need for NIPF owners.

Sometimes landowners are simply unaware of forest management options, sometimes they are unaware of the sources of assistance available to them, and sometimes they just don't know where to start. Additionally, the lack of available technical assistance is a growing concern; even when a landowner is ready to get started on management, the service providers are not readily available to provide assistance. We need more foresters on the ground providing services, and resource managers need to get more creative in finding ways to reach landowners. Field days, tours, Web sites, videos, and other methods will need to be used better in the future to both expand the impact of a limited number of resources and also try to reach the growing landowner population.

Resource managers also need to diversify the messages we give to landowners to enable us to reach a wider range of landowners and get

them thinking about new ideas. To overcome the knowledge barrier, a renewed and continued effort is needed to develop educational materials and opportunities for private landowners. From brochures to booklets to workshops and training sessions, as much information as possible should be made available in as many formats as possible. To have the most impact, these educational resources should try to focus on actions, activities, and next steps that landowners can take to get involved or learn more.

To overcome the limited availability of technical assistance, efforts should be made to help landowners figure out what activities they can plan and execute themselves. Creating instructions for do-it-yourself projects or family projects related to forest management planning and providing training sessions on the necessary skills can help get more work done with fewer professionals. Examples might include chainsaw safety training, crop tree release, timber stand improvement marking and cutting, invasive species control, and direct seeding of hardwoods. These activities cover a range of skill levels, but most landowners are likely to have at least one area of interest and skill that they can apply with a little bit of direction.

Finally, a note needs to be made about silvicultural research. Too often, forest management research is conducted at a scale and intensity that is largely irrelevant to most private landowners. To engage landowners in the current science of forestry, efforts should be made to use citizen science for various monitoring projects, including gypsy moth, invasive and exotic plant species, and other forest health issues, as well as growth, yield, and stocking information. Efforts should also be made to actively utilize NIPF landowner partners in research. Using private lands and private landowners to contribute to the practice of forestry will emphasize the role these lands play in the landscape.

Throughout this discussion, the recurring theme is doing whatever it takes to engage a landowner and thereby making it possible to

do more with less. An engaged landowner is much more likely to continue to tend the forest over the years and think of new projects over time. To create an engaged landowner, resource managers need to provide complete and accurate information and make sure their recommendations fit the scale of operations and needs of the landowner. In addition, guidance should be efficient in that it be fully developed and it must be effective in that it will result in recognizable changes or indicators of success. Finally, the costs and benefits should be accurately disclosed or estimated.

Private landowners exert a strong influence over the health of our forests, our forest-dependent wildlife, and our forest-dependent industries. The challenge we face now is working to ensure that the full range of management options and silviculture tools become available to the landowners of the region. The best way to keep forest management in the mix is to recognize the needs of private landowners and give them the tools to address those needs.

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