

**Cost-share assistance for forest landowners: is it worth it?**

**By: David Richert, *Virginia Department of Forestry***

Last year, Congress passed the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, commonly known as the 2008 Farm Bill. Among other things, the 2008 Farm Bill invests in sustainable agriculture and forest production to strengthen America's rural economies, guarantee food and fiber production, and cultivate conservation benefits. One program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) offers forest landowners between 75% and 90% cost-share assistance for managing forest stands, planting trees, controlling certain invasive plant species, and improving wildlife habitat. For the forest landowner who has never participated in USDA Farm Bill cost-share programs, financial assistance for sustainable forest management sounds attractive, but is it worth it?

Mr. and Mrs. "Calloway," forest landowners with approximately 90 acres of woodland and 10 acres of pasture in the New River Valley, are familiar with conservation cost-share programs, even though they haven't participated in nearly 20 years. According to Mr. Calloway, "We participated in a program to develop a spring on our property back in the late 1980's, and we received high quality technical expertise, but we've never gone back for assistance, partly because we feared the administrative process would be too troublesome." In fact, many forest landowners share Mr. Calloway's opinion—relatively few forestry projects in the New River Valley were funded by the EQIP program under the previous (2002) USDA Farm Bill. But this year, as a result of a growing to-do list of forest management needs, an allocation of \$414,000 in EQIP funding for forest management projects within the state of Virginia, and encouragement from their Virginia Department of Forestry area forester, the Calloways have decided to participate in the EQIP program.



A forester marks a crop tree for release from unwanted competition. The tree with poor form on the right-hand edge of the photo will be removed to improve the timber value of the stand.

For the Calloways (as with any forest landowner), participation in the EQIP program starts with a Forest Stewardship Plan—a multiple-use plan that blends the landowner's objectives with a professional forester's assessment and recommendations, and includes a 5-year timeline for forest management activities. The Calloways' Forest Stewardship Plan describes forest conditions and recommends forest management activities for three stands: two mature cove-slope hardwood forests, and a younger mixed pine / hardwood stand, that was probably marginal pasture land left to natural succession. The Calloways have kept a current Forest Stewardship Plan for their property for more than 15 years, and are now working under the fourth revision, completed this spring.

The Calloways want to remove poor quality hardwood trees (forest stand improvement) to improve the growth and value of the desirable trees. This will be accomplished by applying herbicide to girdled trees (a process known as "hack and squirt" chemical treatment), and in other areas by simply felling undesirable trees with a chainsaw. In addition to this forest stand improvement, the Calloways want to manage troublesome populations of multiflora rose and tree-of-heaven (invasive species control), fence their livestock out of the forest (livestock exclusion fencing), and establish hardy, streamside shrubs on a steep bank that is eroding (critical area stabilization).

Once the Forest Stewardship Plan is up to date, the forester drafts a multi-year schedule of specific forest management practices (from a list of USDA-approved practices) and determines the per-unit costs by practice (also from a USDA-approved list). These specifics (along with detailed maps of where each

practice will be implemented) allow the USDA and the Calloways to enter into a participation agreement. Eventually, the Calloways and the USDA will enter into a multi-year contract; the Calloways will agree to complete these forest management activities, and the USDA will agree to reimburse the Calloways as these forest management practices are completed.

But first, the Calloways need to fill out their EQIP application and verify that they're eligible to receive federal cost-share funds. This involves a trip to their local USDA Service Center with their area forester (Virginia Department of Forestry). At the Service Center, the Calloways obtain a farm number from the USDA Farm Service Agency (the Calloways brought a copy of their deed to prove ownership). Additionally, the Calloways had to complete paperwork determining their financial eligibility—producers with an income of more than \$1 million per year aren't eligible. The area forester's recommendations were reviewed by USDA staff, and the application was submitted. The entire process took less than 2 hours, even with some complications establishing the tract boundaries from an old 1929 deed.

Application submitted, Mr. Calloway took time to reflect on the process. If approved, the Calloways will receive \$41 per acre to do forest stand improvement, and \$1.75 per linear foot to build livestock exclusion fencing. (These are standard cost-share payments. Had the Calloways qualified as "limited resource," "socially disadvantaged," or "new" farmers with less than 10 years of agricultural or forestry production, they would have received even more.) Once their participation is approved later this spring, the Calloways will visit their USDA Service Center again to sign the contracts, and then they'll be ready to start the work.



Mr. "Calloway" receives assistance from a helpful USDA customer service representative.

"I don't think this application process was anywhere near as difficult as I had feared," Mr. Calloway decided, "and for a small investment in time, the benefits will be well worth it."

Applications are still being accepted from forest landowners to participate in the EQIP program. If interested, forest landowners should contact their local area forester and/or their USDA Service Center to participate. This winter, we'll check back with the Calloways to see what they've accomplished in the first year of their EQIP program.

For more information on Cost-share programs, please contact David Richert, 276/228-2879 david.richert@dof.virginia.gov

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