

Landowners and the Forest Landcare Industry: Managing Private Forest Land

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Given the unprecedented loss of forest land (Virginia has lost more than 26,000 acres annually since 2001) and the undiminished demand for forest goods and services (including clean air and water), the need to service the forests that sustain our quality of life has never been greater. Undesirable growing stock needs to be culled; invasive species need to be controlled; desirable wildlife species and habitats need to be encouraged; stream banks need to be stabilized and revegetated, and increased volumes of storm water runoff need to be managed as part of development activities.

But once a landowner has learned what work is needed to manage his or her forest, the question of who will do this work remains. Who will service the forest to provide perpetual forest benefits for generations to come? Who will service the forest characterized by smaller, more fragmented parcels? Who will service the forest for a suite of landowners with evolving value systems? Who will service the forest in a market with lower-than-average stumpage prices? Who will service the forest when the benefits are intangible (i.e. erosion control, aesthetics, clean air and water) and no money changes hands?

In some cases, the landowner can and does service his or her own forest. Creative, industrious and passionate, these landowners have acres of well-managed forests to show for their efforts. Organizations, such as Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia's Resource Conservation and Development Councils, the Virginia Department of Forestry, and the Master Tree Farm Program, continue to actively promote peer-to-peer learning where seasoned veterans of forest land management share their experiences with new landowners. State and private forests that demonstrate the many benefits of active forest management keep landowners excited about the management of their own forests. It is quite possible that decreasing forest parcel size and the renewed interest in hobby farms and forests will result in more hands-on management by landowners—a silver lining to the cloud of forest fragmentation and parcelization.

In many cases, though, the landowner isn't the "little red hen" and requires a specialized labor force of willing and able woods workers to manage forest resources. In some parts of Virginia, these forest service providers are hard to find, and many service providers have more work than they can handle. Earlier this year, the New River-Highlands RC&D Council hosted a networking session for forestry service providers that documented gaps in the local supply of certain forestry services, such as timber stand improvement, weed management, fencing, and a variety of others services for absentee forest landowners or landowners with small forest parcels (<5 acres).

To meet the current demand for forestry services (and the expected demand as land ownership and land-use patterns change), Virginia Cooperative Extension, the RC&D Councils, and the Virginia Department of Forestry can help communicate the supply and demand for forestry services. Demonstrating specialty equipment used to manage small forest parcels, remove invasive weeds or add value to low-value wood may help increase the productivity of these forestry service providers in an environment where the in-woods labor force is shrinking.



Forestry service providers participate in landowner education programs. Here, a New River Valley FSP, demonstrates how to age a tree to landowners in Tazewell County. Photo by: Jennifer Gagnon.



A MeadWestvaco forester talks about the Cooperative Forest Management Program which assists private landowners with forest management. Photo by: Jennifer Gagnon.

One challenge in particular may be that these forestry service providers lack a clear identity to the general public. Although these forestry service providers may harvest some timber, they're not exactly loggers. They may remove a few trees from around a woodland homeowner's residence, but they're not exactly arborists. Some forestry service providers clear and grade wildlife food plots, but they aren't exactly excavating contractors. An increased awareness and identity may especially benefit forestry service providers with obtaining insurance and / or marketing forestry services. Perhaps a term such as forest landcare industry (think lawn care industry) can strengthen the identity and raise awareness of the industry that is increasingly needed to service our invaluable and indispensable forest resource.

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