

I Have a Forest Management Plan . . . Now What?

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AFC Forester Tom Lang (right) looks over forestland with landowner Dr. Lee Youngblood.

An estimated 400,000+ nonindustrial, private landowners either own or control 79 percent of Alabama's forestland. The sheer number of family forest owners makes this ownership group the largest (by far) of any in the state. They also represent countless opportunities to manage their forests in ways that are as diverse as their backgrounds, experiences, and objectives. It cannot be overstated to say that how well these family forest owners tend their land holdings is crucial to the wise use and sustainability of Alabama's natural resources.

The key for each family forest owner's success is the same as for anyone owning something of value . . . good planning. For the forest landowner, this means having a written management plan. Yet according to the 2004 National Woodland Owner Survey, only 3 percent of family forest owners in the South have a written document to guide management activities. That's why a lot of effort has been placed on showing landowners how they can and why they should have forest management plans (see "Why You Need a Forest Management Plan...and Where to Get One" by Tim Albritton, *Alabama's TREASURED Forests* magazine, Winter 2000).

But, what happens when a family forest landowner receives their written management plan? How can they use the document? Answering these questions correctly can go a long way in

helping to make forest ownership more fulfilling and meaningful. It will also help our forest resource remain one of Alabama's greatest treasures.

Read It

Tom Lang is a 24-year career forester with the Alabama Forestry Commission. In that time, he has written landowner plans for cost-share assistance, the Stewardship program, Southern Pine Beetle, and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). He has seen some landowners use their plans, and he has seen others file them away never to be opened again.

Lang believes making a management plan work starts with the landowner knowing what is in their plan and why it says what it says. For Lang, this means the management plan should always represent the family forest owner's values, because it will give the landowner a vested interest in making sure he or she is motivated to read it and carry it out. To do that, the first step for the landowner is to sit down and go through the plan as soon as it is written, preferably alongside the professional forester who wrote it.

"It's good to sit down with the landowner and go over their plan with them," said Lang. "Let them flip through it and then answer their questions, especially when an absentee landowner is in town. The more they understand forest management, the

more they'll get out of their plan. If we're telling them to clearcut, but don't say why or how, they might think we want to do it for the wrong reason."

Mac Prince agrees with Lang that it is essential landowners read their plan, understand it, and then agree with it.

"First thing they need to do is to look at it and see if they like what's in it," said the 32-year veteran forester, 21 years with the AFC. "If there is something they don't like, they need to get with the writer and change it."

Work the Plan

In 1973, Malon Murphy inherited family property in Pike County. The first 10 years he and his father did very little to the land. And it showed. Not one to sit idle and let his property remain dormant, he knew he had to find help and that he needed a plan.

"I got Mac Prince to write me a plan and I have kept up with it since," said Murphy. "I began to harvest timber, thin every year, replant, and spray. I also managed for wildlife and it's moving along very well. Everything began to take shape."

Murphy credits his plan for providing a road map to put his property on track to produce income and personal enjoyment. He says that having a forester to talk to before and after the plan was written made all the difference.

"I asked Mac how to improve my land, and he said, 'you need a plan.' I did everything accordingly and it has worked."

Murphy's written plan also helped him become a lifelong student of natural resource management. He has used its contents to increase his own personal knowledge and to make sure he is actively engaged in managing his property. His plan is now a part of a huge binder filled with an increasing amount of information to help manage his forest.

"I make notes and keep a log of everything," said Murphy. "I put something in it once or twice a week so I can have a record. My plan is in the front of my binder. If I read a good article, I put it in the binder. Every December, I make a bullet list of things to do next year. It's a whole page and I check it off as I complete each item."

Be Flexible

A forest management plan is only as certain as the date it was written. Future events and unknowns will always throw a wrench into the best laid plans. The market may vary. Unexpected storms happen. Disease or insect pests may crop up. Landowner objectives can change. Forest management is never static. Family forest owners should always be prepared to adapt to these changes with new strategies, while maintaining their goals and objectives.

"A plan has got to be dynamic. It's not in stone," said Prince. "It's not like the Bible. Landowners must be ready and willing to always make changes."

Lang offered several ways for family forest owners to adapt their plans to change. He said they should keep themselves current and up-to-date on new technologies in forest management, attend forest management meetings, and learn from other landowners' experiences. But above all, he feels landowners show build and maintain relationships with professionals, especially consultant foresters.

"Call a professional if you have a question," said Lang. "Sometimes you may have more than one option, especially with hardwood stands. Go to the experts who are knowledgeable."

Celebrate Your Successes

There is great satisfaction when something works as planned. That's the reward many landowners experience with their family forests, especially when they see their investment, time, and labor pay off. That's also the beauty of family forest ownership where ordinary citizens from a broad spectrum of society use their goals and objectives to make Alabama's forests better.

Family forest owners should not only celebrate their successes, but be willing to share them with others. That way they can help guarantee that their landowner ethic and forest management planning will be passed on to the next generation of family forest owners.

Claire Murphy watched with keen interest as her husband Malon followed his plan to effect. Impressed, she and her brothers had a professional forester write a management plan for their 371-acre Pike County property.

Following their plan has created a new enthusiasm in the family, along with a greater appreciation for their forest.

"With a management plan, you know where you are with the land," said Claire. "We want the land to be there for our children and grandchildren." 🌲

Pike County landowner Malon Murphy discusses his written management plan with AFC Forester Mac Prince.



Photo by Charles Rawls