

Forest Stewardship

Planning Your Forest's Future

Many people plan for the important things in life, such as choosing a career, buying a house, taking a trip, and retiring. Their plans consist of written and unwritten objectives, some of which are more specific than others. Planning helps people focus their ideas so they can reach their goals sooner or more completely than they could without planning. If you are a forest landowner, you should have a plan that organizes your personal objectives into a comprehensive strategy for attaining what you want from your woods. You should have a forest stewardship plan.



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What Is Forest Stewardship?

Forest stewardship is the wise care and use of forest resources to ensure their health and productivity for years to come. Forest stewardship entails looking after your woodlands responsibly and taking action in a manner that recognizes both your rights and the rights of others, as well as the potential impact of activities on various natural resources. Stewardship is an ethic that challenges people to look beyond their immediate personal needs and leave a living forest legacy for future generations. Decisions you make today will affect the environmental, aesthetic, and financial potential of your own and neighboring forestland.

Why Is It Important to Have a Forest Stewardship Activities Plan?

Your forest can offer many benefits, including financial, environmental, aesthetic, and recreational resources. Do you know what mix of benefits is best for you? How do you achieve

the best combination? A forest stewardship activities plan will help you answer these and other questions by identifying what you want now and in the future by plotting a strategy for meeting those objectives.

Consider for a moment another kind of plan, one for a trip you have always wanted to take. Suppose your dream destination is Alaska. Do you go by car, plane, boat, or a combination? Where do you stay? What activities are available and what is it all going to cost? You could investigate all of the possibilities yourself or have a professional travel agency plan your trip. Both approaches will get you to Alaska, but the results could be different. You could pick the cheapest way to get there, but this might be the most uncomfortable way to travel. You can spend your time reviewing travel brochures and motel guides to figure out what to see and where to stay. Depending on your experience and luck, you might satisfy all your trip objectives. But you also might encounter unanticipated travel costs or overbooked accommodations. Attractions you wanted to visit might be too crowded or even closed.

If you let a travel agency do the work (write your plan), they will want to know why you are making the trip (overall goals), what you



want to do along the way (immediate objectives), and what you would like to accomplish in the end (long-term objectives). The agent will develop several alternatives, all designed with your wishes in mind, and will outline a complete itinerary that you can follow. Based on the agent's experience and knowledge, the travel package will focus on meeting your needs and will minimize the chance of unpleasant outcomes, making your trip more rewarding.

A travel package is simply a plan prepared by a competent professional who understands your objectives, knows the available resources, evaluates the alternatives, and recommends the best options for achieving your overall goals. Your forester (or other appropriate natural resources professional) is your forest travel agent, and your forest stewardship activities plan is your itinerary. Together they help you meet your objectives.



What Is a Forest Stewardship Activities Plan?

A forest stewardship activities plan is your road map to effectively implementing a forest stewardship ethic. It is a guide that tells you what your resources are, what condition they are in, and what can be done to help you achieve your goals. It considers your short- and long-term objectives; analyzes the capabilities, limitations, and unique features of your land; looks at how your land fits into the surrounding landscape; and evaluates a wide range of environmental and financial benefits and consequences of various activities.

Many types of forest stewardship activities plans are available. The most common is a traditional forest management plan prepared by a consulting forester, which usually focuses on timber resources and how to maximize returns while meeting desired short- and long-term management goals for your forest. Other types include a wildlife habitat plan, a forest recreation plan, or a Tree Farm plan. In some areas of Pennsylvania, service foresters can provide a woodland reconnaissance plan that briefly identifies your goals, resources present, and options for management in reaching your goals.

In addition to timber and wood products, a forest stewardship activities plan should consider other resources and aspects of long-term forest care and use, such as soil and water quality, riparian and wetland values, wildlife and fish habitat, outdoor recreation and aesthetics, maintenance of biological diversity (the numerous varieties of and differences among plants and animals), and threatened or endangered species. If you are interested in all the benefits



your forest has to offer, you will need a multidimensional plan. If you have only a few goals for your property or if your property is very small, a brief management plan or woodland reconnaissance plan may work well for you.

As of 2013 federal cost-share funding is available for Forest Stewardship Plans and NRCS CAP 106 Forest Management Plans. To learn more about these programs, ask your service forester or check with your local U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency office. You may also be interested in enrolling in Tree Farm or other recognized forest program management such as Common Waters. Each of these opportunities requires you to provide information about your property and your goals. A well-developed stewardship activities plan is a good starting place for exploring further options that will help guide and inform future decisions.

The best plans will clearly define your goals for your woodland, document your forest's present condition, list recommendations, and describe the desired forest condition, or how the forest should look in the future. The plan will consider the types and sizes of trees, wildlife habitat, transportation layout, recreational opportunities, and financial returns.

The written plan is straightforward and easy to follow, but the issues with which it deals are complex, considering the number of resources and potential conflicts involved and the values you possess that direct your own goals. Although a natural resources professional will write the plan, you are the most important part of the planning process.

The five basic steps in developing a forest stewardship activities plan are:

1. Seek professional assistance.
2. Determine what you value about your land and your objectives and goals.
3. Inventory and evaluate resources.
4. Formulate a ten-year schedule of actions or deliberate inaction.
5. Review your plan.



Seeking Professional Assistance

The first step in developing a stewardship activities plan is to contact your local Bureau of Forestry service forester. He or she will assist you in gathering background information about your property and will explain the different types of plans available in your region, the natural resources professionals available in your area to write the plan (though they cannot make specific recommendations about which professionals to hire), and if cost-sharing funds are available. Service foresters can provide a list of professionals and explain the various qualifications and services each professional provides, as well as give information on the types of professional credentials foresters can attain, such as memberships in the Association of Consulting Foresters or SAF (Society of American Foresters) Certified Foresters. In addition, consider reaching out to fellow landowners who can recommend or share their experience with professionals who may assist you in this process. Remember, before hiring someone to do work for you, you should determine his or her qualifications by checking credentials and requesting references from former clients.

Determining Your Objectives and Goals

The service forester or a trained forest stewardship volunteer will help you complete a questionnaire about past management of your land and your current interests, abilities, and commitment to managing your property. By design, the survey will help you explore why you own forestland, what you value about your

land, and what you might consider in your plan for the future of your land. Why do you own your forest? The list of possibilities is long and might include the following:

- The forest has been in the family for years and you want to continue the tradition.
- You like the beauty of the woods.
- You enjoy the feeling of peace you get from walking through the woods.
- You like watching or hunting animals in your woods.
- You are looking for income now or in the future (e.g., for retirement or college education).

Your long-term goals should reflect your reasons for owning the land. Some goals might conflict, while others are mutually achievable. You also will be asked what kinds of activities you will allow on your property. Are you willing to conduct a timber sale, or will you keep the trees and market other products, such as maple syrup? Will you allow public recreation on your land? Will hunting be allowed? What tradeoffs are you willing to make to reach certain goals? If you have never considered your forest values and goals before, answering the questionnaire

will help you focus your thoughts. What do you want your forest to produce? What do you want your forest to look like? What would you like to leave behind? The service forester and natural resources professional(s) need to know these types of things to develop the best stewardship activities plan recommendations to fit your needs.

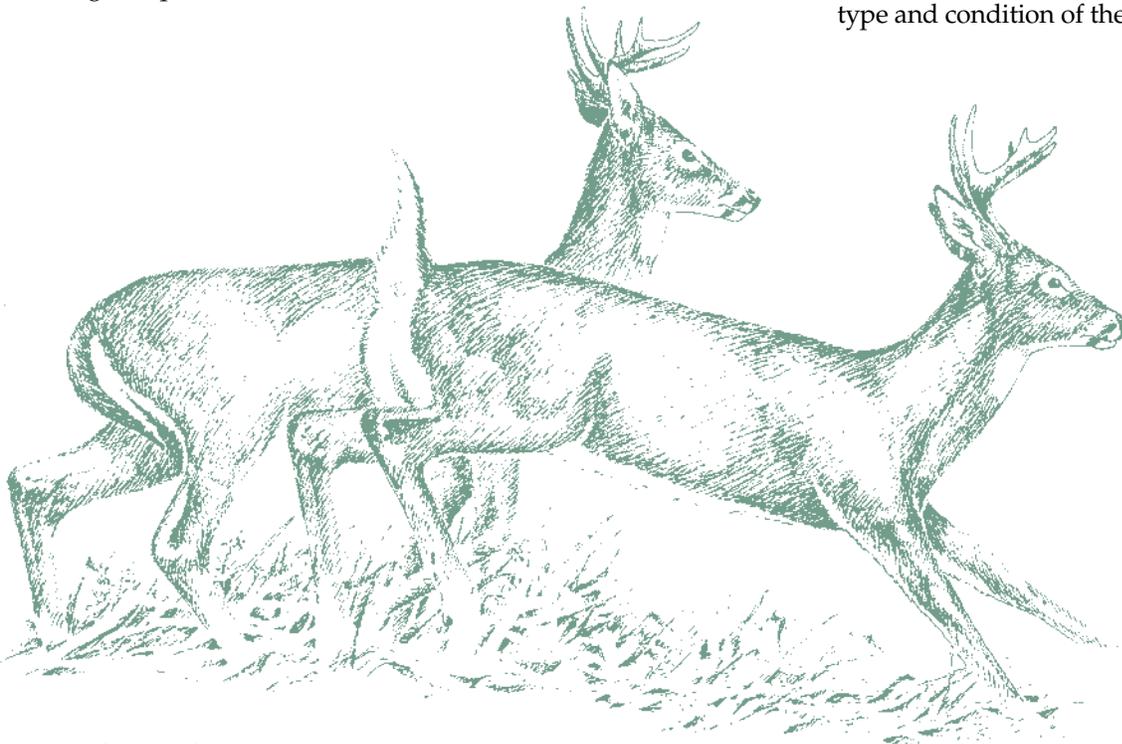
After reviewing your values, goals, and objectives, the service forester will suggest the type of natural resources professional you should contact to write your plan. You are free to hire any natural resources professional you choose, including someone already working with you. As with hiring any professional, get recommendations and references. Once you have hired your natural resources professional(s), it is a good idea for everyone involved in writing your plan to visit any portion of the property that has special meaning for you, such as sites with massive trees or trees with unusual branching patterns, nesting/denning sites, a secluded cove, existing desirable or undesirable views, or places that are important and special to you for whatever reason. Discuss what you want to accomplish, such as protecting the area, creating a view, or letting an open area grow over.

Resource Inventory and Evaluation

You may need to supply the natural resources professional(s) you hire with a topographic map (U.S. Geological Survey map) or plat map with your land and its boundaries clearly marked. It also is quite helpful if you have aerial photographs of your property. The Farm Service Agency (FSA) office in your county often has aerial photos for you to view and order. Service foresters also have aerial photos for each county.

A stewardship unit is a term we selected to encourage landowners to consider their current needs and future opportunities as they work with their forests. It is similar to a forest stand that considers tree age, size, and species composition, but it may involve other values and may not be solely defined by a set of forest boundaries. A stewardship unit could involve wildlife species, scenic views, or personal values.

Using the maps and aerial photos provided, the natural resources professional(s) will delineate stewardship units that reflect vegetation types, land-use history, and unique features. The natural resources professional(s) will then systematically walk through each unit noting (inventorying) the type and condition of the resources.



SIDELINGER

What Exactly Gets Inventoried?

Here are some examples of resources noted:

- Vegetation: types and sizes of trees, woody shrubs, herbaceous plants
- Landscape features: soils, amount of rocks, slope
- Wildlife: species present, what they eat, where they nest
- Water: streams, seeps, temporary ponds

Similar information will be collected in each stewardship unit. By knowing your objectives, the natural resources professional(s) can evaluate the data in the context of your goals.

At this time, the service forester will also check the Pennsylvania Natural Diversity Inventory (PNDI) to see whether any threatened or endangered species have occurred in the past on your property. If a species of concern could be present on your property, a field check might be required and management recommendations will be provided. These will be incorporated into the stewardship activities plan. The presence of a species of concern probably will not preclude any available activities, but it will require considering approaches to protect the species for you and others to enjoy.

The resource information forms the basis of the recommendations. These are the best steps the natural resources professional(s) can suggest to meet your goals with your available resources.

Formulating a Ten-year Schedule

Because you probably will not achieve all your goals right away, you need a step-by-step schedule, starting with a ten-year outlook. This is an action-oriented schedule of projects to meet your goals. The projects will depend on your goals and your resources. They might include restoring an eroded streambank to improve water quality and fish habitat; leaving an old pasture to grow up and provide habitat for songbirds; or harvesting timber to increase the health and vigor of your forest, generate cash, and improve habitat for certain wildlife species.

Each project will weigh the environmental consequences. As with every choice, there are positive and

TEN-YEAR ACTIVITY SCHEDULE

The following example is a shortened version of an activity schedule based on a landowner's objectives to improve wildlife habitat, provide occasional income, and improve access.

YEAR	MANAGEMENT UNIT	ACTIVITY	WORK DONE BY LANDOWNER
2014	All	Design and lay out recreation trails, roads, and stream crossings.	
	3	Stabilize eroding shorelines of stream and revegetate banks.	
2015	1	Pre-commercially thin selected crop trees based on timber quality and mast production.	yes
	5	Create vista near cabin; plant opening with conservation wildlife mixture.	
2016	4	Girdle five trees per acre to create snags (dead trees) for wildlife.	yes
	5	Erect bluebird houses in vista and bat houses near cabin.	yes
2017	3	Commercially thin, leaving buffer strip along stream; create brush piles for wildlife from cut tree tops.	
	3	Smooth timber access road for use as hiking/snowmobiling trail; revegetate with shade-tolerant grass seed.	
2018	2	Kill all grapevines and barberry plants in anticipation of regeneration harvest in 2018.	yes

2023	2	Regenerate unit using shelterwood method.	

negative impacts. If you take a trip to Alaska, you might not have the resources to go to Florida that year. If you choose to harvest only small trees on your property to maintain a component of big trees for aesthetic reasons, you probably will not have those wildlife species on your property that live in brushy areas (a negative consequence if you want a variety of wildlife). The effect of each project on the surrounding landscape also will be considered. The natural resources professional(s) should note or explain the pros and cons of each recommendation to you.

You will have to agree with the recommendations. If you do not like them, say so. This is your land, and your goals and values determine what will happen. Give specific reasons why you do not think a particular suggestion will work or meet your objectives. Tell the resource professional(s) your concerns because the plan can be modified to benefit both you and the forest. After all, this is your plan and you are paying to have it done to your satisfaction. However, no recommendation should violate sound resource management practices or stewardship principles. When you are ready to work on any specific project, specific detailed prescriptions and project outlines can be developed.

Depending on your intent for creating a stewardship activities plan, you may want to seek cost-share funding for some of the work. If this the case, once you have agreed to the plan and both you and the natural resources professional(s) have signed it, the natural resources professional(s) will send the plan to the service forester to review and determine whether it follows stewardship guidelines. Since the plan contains recommendations and activities that you intend to carry out, it should not collect dust after it is approved.

Reviewing Your Plan

Just as road maps need to be updated periodically, so does your stewardship activities plan. Each year, you should review your plan and the scheduled activities. You also need to monitor the success or failure of the recommendations. After you have completed several activities, you need to ask yourself, "Is it working? Are the woods what I expected?" Perhaps the plan recommended a timber sale to improve grouse habitat by encouraging aspen to sprout. If, a few years later, there are still no aspen seedlings, then timber harvesting did not help you meet your objective. But to find this out, you must inspect the site. If the planned activities do not work, you should revise the plan with the help of the service forester or natural resources professional(s).

The monitoring process can be both formal and informal. After a regeneration cut, you (or a natural resources professional) can examine the regeneration and see what type of trees were established, or whenever you walk in the woods, you can look for the results you expected to find. For example, are you seeing more songbirds, wildflowers, or other wildlife you want to inhabit your land?

Change is a constant in life, so the stewardship activities plan is flexible. Damage caused by an insect infestation or a sudden need for extra cash might require you to change the activity schedule. Contact the service forester to rearrange the activity schedule to meet your needs while adhering to stewardship principles.

Conclusion

Every landowner has different reasons and needs for owning woodland. Without a concise strategy, your forest resources might not meet your long-term needs. A forest stewardship activities plan will help you have a rewarding experience caring for and using your forest resources. By deciding to be a forest steward, you will maintain or improve the condition of your woodland. Forest stewardship begins with you. Leave a legacy—forests for life!

Forest Stewardship publications can be obtained from Forest Resources Extension, The Pennsylvania State University, 416 Forest Resources Building, University Park, PA 16802; phone 814-863-0401.



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