



Cooperation and Communication: Benefits for Non-Industrial Private Forest Landowners¹

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Private forest land ownership covers over 360 million acres in the U.S. (Cooperative Development Services, 2002). The number of private ownerships is increasing, and the sizes of woodlots are decreasing. Seventy-two percent of the ownerships are 10–999 acres; most of those are actually between 10 and 50 acres (Geoff et al., 2007). Owners of these smaller parcels sometimes have a variety of hurdles to confront in managing their forests. Owners may find themselves limited by lack of financial or human resources, or they may have difficulty becoming certified or engaging in various market opportunities. These challenges can be met by forestry education programs that are sponsored and delivered by volunteers, cooperative Extension, landowner associations, or management cooperatives. Topics may include cost-share programs, tax benefits or technical assistance for creating forest management plans. We will discuss various opportunities available to landowners needing resources for land management.

Who provides information on forest management?

In most states, Land Grant Universities provide educational assistance through Extension programs offered through county offices. These services are coordinated by Extension specialists at the universities, who then provide county agents with up-to-date natural resource information. Extension programs can familiarize landowners with federal and state agencies and resource programs that are available to them. Programs like this also give landowners the opportunity to mingle with other landowners and natural resource professionals. These workshops are designed to foster better forest management through education based on research. Some examples of common workshop topics are: enhancing and managing wildlife habitat, fire management, forest management practices, forest health, native trees and plants, property succession and estate planning, and many more. Many Extension programs offer full- or half-day field demonstrations and workshops, as well as intense mini-college courses taught by Extension specialists and local resource professionals that cover a variety of topics in one full day.

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In addition to Extension programs, state forest agencies also provide technical assistance in management planning, water quality and soil protection, wildlife habitat protection, and sustainable forestry practices. Federal agencies have programs that landowners can enlist for conservation and management assistance. Together, Extension agents, state and federal natural resource professionals, and private consultants teach forest landowners about the latest techniques in natural resource management using both hands-on activities in the field and instructional workshops.

The result of attending workshops is a better comprehension of forestry terms and activities, and landowners discover the many values their properties contain. In a 2005 survey conducted in the south-central United States, 45% of landowners indicated that they had previously hired a forester and considered foresters to be an unnecessary cost. However, after attending Extension workshops, 90% said they planned to use a forester in the future and considered foresters to be an asset (Hughes et al., 2005). Post-workshop evaluations showed that participants planned to put into action the things they had learned. While there is a distinction between planned behavior and actual behavior, there is a strong association between the two (Ajzen, 1991).

Fellow landowners have information and experiences to share

Forestry terms are often perceived as confusing, and industry jargon can present an obstacle to inexperienced landowners when talking to forestry professionals. Talking with neighbors or a more experienced colleague can be a better alternative for some landowners. This type of communication can clarify some of those unfamiliar silvicultural phrases and ease landowners' apprehension about creating a management plan. The information exchanged and strength of social ties can influence landowners' behavior. Communication that is more "peer-to-peer" than top-down has great potential to increase information outreach about forestry methods that can benefit private forest landowners.

Peer-to-peer learning can also occur through informal social networks such as landowner

associations. This type of communication between two or more fellow landowners is particularly valuable because everyone can be both an instructor and a learner. Voluntary involvement, trust, equality, and the duration and intensity of the partnership help build closeness among peers who share information and their growing expertise (Eisen, 2001). For this type of learning to be most effective, it is best if it is community based, with participants from the local area sharing what they have learned with other landowners.

The reason that peer-to-peer learning can be a more beneficial form of communication compared to a more traditional lecture workshop is that fellow landowners are more likely to feel a sense of trust in someone similar to them. The people sharing the information are seen as unbiased, with concerns similar to those other landowners are experiencing. Their advice can help guide a landowner to a professional regarding forest management. Informal conversations during peer-to-peer communication can produce confidence and dedication between landowners and a sense of camaraderie (Hujala and Tikkanen, 2008). Landowners who are new to land management are more willing to trust a more experienced woodland owner with basic questions or concerns about their land. There is much less fear of a "dumb" question when asking for guidance from a neighbor. Another important benefit is that neighbors are often easy to contact because of their proximity to other landowners and their schedule may be less of a hurdle to work with than an expert's. Moreover, it is a cost-effective method of teaching, compared to other learning strategies (Levine et al., 1987) because it provides a network of people within the community that can assist with the forest management needs of woodland owners. However, some drawbacks to this method of teaching, like the passing of misinformation or biases being stated as fact, could lead to the mismanagement of woodlots. It is recommended that landowners get information from a variety of sources (ie: both informal and formal programs).

Peer-to-Peer Examples in Oregon and New York

Two examples of peer-to-peer assisted learning are the New York Master Forest Owner Volunteer Program (MFO) provided by Cornell University and Oregon State University's Master Woodland Manager Extension program (MWM). Programs like these were created to allow Extension personnel to focus their time in areas other than assisting individual private woodland owners with contacts. These programs train forest landowners in the principles of forest stewardship to help other forest owners become more aware of better management choices and connect them with additional sources of information if further assistance is needed (Goff and Muth, 2006). Each volunteer dedicates approximately 40 to 80 hours of their time (depending on the program requirements) to the classroom and field practice before they relay what they have learned to the community.

Peer-to-peer visits have helped many landowners. Experience shows that meeting with a MFO or MWM, increases the number of written management plans. Landowners who meet with volunteers are shown how to search for additional forest management information and encouraged to do so on their own. Moreover, landowners were able to save or earn more from forestry activities after an MFO or MWM visit. Also, the number of consultations with forestry professionals grew. Approximately one third of NY woodland owners said they benefited economically from a Master Forest Owner (MFO) visit. Most of the savings or earnings came from timber and non-timber products, and becoming enrolled in tax-saving programs (Broussard Allred et al., 2009). Other states have similar programs, but it is best to check with your state Extension officer or Forestry Department to find more information on how to get involved in programs like these.

Landowner Association Opportunities

Landowners who attend Extension workshops are also informed of, and sometimes encouraged to join, landowner associations. These are voluntary

organizations comprised of private forest landowners, Extension agents, natural resource professionals, the forest product industry and anyone interested in forestry issues particular to a region. The associations are conduits for landowner-focused natural resources education and Extension programs. Landowner associations offer up-to-date information, advice, educational opportunities, and the exchange of ideas with peers on good forest management for their woodland properties. Whether landowners are interested in conserving the aesthetics of their land, harvesting timber, enhancing wildlife habitat, or maximizing other benefits from their forestland, landowner associations can help them gain knowledge, make decisions and implement their new skills for those purposes. Landowner associations often have tours, information sessions, workshops, and field days where new and veteran woodland owners can take advantage of the opportunity to network with each other and forestry professionals in order to learn about local market trends, income and management options of timber, non-timber forest products, natural stand management, timber taxes, estate planning, wildlife management, hunting leases, conservation easements, green certification and more. The sheer number of different forest management methods that could be applied to a given woodland can overwhelm both new landowners and veterans at the beginning of the research journey, but landowner associations can help. Associations are able to foster landowner education and assistance because their memberships generally include both professional forest managers and private landowners who already have experience in a variety of practices.

Landowner associations also keep private landowners informed about current legislative and regulatory issues on the local, state or national scale. There are two national landowner associations: the National Woodland Owners Association (NWOA) (www.woodlandowners.org) and the Forest Landowners Association (FLA) (www.forestlandowners.com). These organizations also publish their own woodland management magazines. The Florida Forestry Association (www.floridaforest.org) serves the interests of forest landowners and the forest products industry at the state level.

Woodland owners who belong to a landowner association are more likely to engage in forest management activities and are more willing to consider the implementation of cross-boundary cooperation with neighbors than are non-members (Rickenbach et al., 2006). Landowners involved with associations are also more aware of regulatory issues and are more likely to use Silvicultural Best Management Practices to maintain water quality on their property. Associations can also be great vehicles for collaboration.

Cooperating with Neighbors

Forest land ownership is changing, with a trend towards more owners possessing smaller parcels. This can lead to fragmentation and the loss of opportunities for economically sound forest operations. Cooperation across private ownership boundaries can have both economic and ecological benefits for all woodland owners involved. Environmental quality and ecosystem management are becoming more important when considering landscape level impacts. Landowners can coordinate with each other where cross-boundary management can be beneficial. For example, invasive species removal, wildlife habitat improvement, fire hazard mitigation, prescribed burning, soil and water protection, and timber harvests can be planned for and carried out across ownerships to maximize environmental or economic benefits. Landowner collaboration can also be beneficial for landowners who wish to adapt their silvicultural practices to mimic natural disturbance regimes in order to restore habitat function. For a management activity to encompass multiple adjacent properties, landowners must maintain good communication and impacts to both the landscape and other landowners must be addressed.

The benefits of landowner cooperation can be financial: landowners can jointly purchase or contract harvesting equipment; they can coordinate prescribed fire and herbicide treatments; and they can cooperate to hire professional consulting services. A New York survey asked landowners how likely they were to cooperate with other landowners to accomplish forest management activities. The study found that they were least likely to jointly lease land with

surrounding neighbors to a hunting organization. However, neighboring landowners are very likely to watch for trespassers or allow each other recreational and hunting access through their property (Broussard Allred et al., 2009). Owners and potential purchasers of smaller parcels of land who are considering logging opportunities should be aware that small woodlots must have an abundance of high quality trees in order to make a harvest financially feasible for the forest products operator. For these landowners, a formal cooperative might present a solution.

Formal Cooperatives

Another way that forest landowners can collaborate is by joining or creating a forest cooperative or co-op. Traditionally these are incorporated businesses. In this type of organization, landowners collectively purchase property, or buy into an existing cooperative. They also can give a percentage of their own property if the landscape does not allow for a large purchase. This would occur in areas with highly fragmented forestland. This type of cooperation allows landowners to share profits and expenses based on the amount of land they provided as a resource. Cooperation is beneficial because, working alone, smaller woodland owners are at a disadvantage in the timber market. They may lack the resources and marketing experience necessary to obtain a high return in timber sales and other activities. However, in a cooperative, the costs of forest management, processing, and marketing are shared through the cooperative business. By collectively marketing, members may command higher prices for raw and processed forest products. Forestry co-ops can provide services and benefits to their members such as educational activities, assistance in creating management plans, tree planting, joint purchasing of equipment or other forestry services, and many more. Management cooperatives are common in some regions of Europe. In the U.S., forest cooperatives have been formed with some success in the mid-western states. In Wisconsin, the Kickapoo Woods cooperative (www.kickapoowoods.org) and The Living Forest Cooperative (www.livingforestcoop.com) benefit forest landowners and their communities by providing a local market for sustainable timber and

non-timber products. For more information on forming cooperatives, please see <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fr244> and the Community Forestry Resource Center at <http://www.forestrycenter.org/library.cfm?refID=73624>.

Summary

As forest product markets and land ownership trends change, so does the science, practice, and regulation of forest management. For landowners, accessing the latest information about forest management practices and opportunities can be daunting. Peer-to-peer learning can help landowners gain access to information and a network of landowners, professionals and resources. Educational programs delivered by Extension agencies and landowner associations can provide the latest management and market information as well as contact with professionals and other landowners. Collaborating with other landowners across adjoining property lines or being involved in a cooperative can ensure that management across the landscape provides the greatest benefits for both the landowner and the environment. All of the methods mentioned above are tools that landowners can use for successful long-term forest management.

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