

Consulting Foresters Bring Value and Peace of Mind

By FRED SPERRY, CF, ACF

Woodland owners tend to be independent types. How's that for an understatement? There is much satisfaction in managing your tree farm by yourself. Nobody knows your property like you do. Nobody knows your goals and objectives better than you, and nobody cares about your property more than you do. Why then, would you want to spend precious money on a consultant when you can do it yourself?

There are many answers to that question and sometimes the right answer is that you don't. The knowledge, experience, and available time of woodland owners are as diverse as their tree farms. For many the answer is that your objectives can be achieved more effectively, cost efficiently, and more profitably with the help of a professional that has the education, experience, and expertise of a consult-



ing forester. You do not give up control when you hire a consultant—you add their skills, their resources, and their relationships to your tool box.

Management planning: Doing it right the first time

Forest management decisions have long-ranging impacts. One of the greatest benefits of hiring a professional forester is their ability to assist you in identifying alternative strategies with a long-term and broad picture perspective. The confidence and peace of mind that comes from knowing the decisions you make are made from a position of knowledge, and that the implementation of your plan will be done with the benefit of a professional consulting forester's experience and expertise has value in itself.

Yet the question remains: "*When all is said and done, will I end up with more money in my pocket if I employ the services of a consulting forester?*"

Logging: The greatest financial return on your investment

When it comes to timber harvest, studies have shown that woodland owners that used a professional forestry consultant did in fact realize significantly greater profits from the sale of their timber than those that did not. A University of Georgia study showed that landowners received as much as a 50% greater return on their timber with fewer trees harvested. That could mean *several thousands of additional dollars* per acre from the harvest of a nice stand of timber! The reasons for this include marketing, relationships, experience, and accountability.

Marketing. Knowing the markets and how to analyze the options to get the right log to the right place is critical. Many dollars have been lost, often unbeknownst to either wood-

land owner or logger, by not optimizing log deliveries. For stumpage sales, where the purchaser incurs the cost of logging, hauling, taxes, and other costs, a consultant can generally tap into a much broader pool of potential buyers.

Relationships. Unlike a woodland owner that harvests timber infrequently, consulting foresters make their livelihood from timber harvests and other forestry services. Over their careers they have built relationships with log buyers, contractors, and other forest managers, which often pay off in terms of better log prices and lower logging costs. Log buyers and contractors like known entities with known track records.

Experience. Every job is different. The most efficient way to log one unit may be different than another. One size does not fit all. Consultants have had the opportunity to see a variety of units and logging systems during their careers. What might be most convenient for the logger may not be the best approach for the landowner. The right logging plan and the right equipment for the unit are key components of profitability.

Log and Load Accountability. Mistakes happen. Load tickets get misplaced, scale tickets get assigned to the wrong seller, loads can be sent to the wrong destination, and value can be lost. A thorough and robust accountability system identifies these mistakes in a timely manner so they can be corrected. Theft is always a concern. With the use of reputable contractors that know they are being effectively monitored, the risk of theft becomes negligible.

Reforestation: Investing in your future

Not immediately evident is the potential to increase short-term as well as long-term profitability through effective reforestation and plantation maintenance. There is not a consultant or stewardship forester out there that has not visited an underproductive site and thought to themselves with frustration: "Why



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didn't they contact me or another professional before they logged?"

Timber is often sold by hiring a logger to harvest and replant or by selling the standing timber to a buyer that agrees to reforest. The logger or buyer may do an excellent job of getting the logs from stump to mill. They may do a good job of replanting. Most times they have done exactly what they agreed to do. It may even meet or surpass the minimum requirements of the forest practices act. But often that is where it starts and ends.

Effective reforestation starts before the first tree is cut and ends long after the last seedling is put in the ground. Site preparation (which may include a pre-logging treatment of understory vegetation), quality planting stock, and follow-up brush control should all be considered prior to harvest.

There may be an understandable temptation to say: "I won't be around to log this the next time. Why should I invest any more than necessary into reforestation when there are so many other good places to put my money?" There are many good answers to this question including that it is simply good stewardship of the land.

But it also makes good sense economically. One day you will either be passing this land to your heirs or selling it. From personal experience as a broker of forestland I can tell you that underproductive, poorly reforested land is difficult to sell, and when it does, you are likely to be very disappointed in the price you receive. Plenty of buyers want to buy well-stocked and productive reprod. A well-managed stand of reprod is almost always much more valuable, at any age, than one that was planted and left to grow.

Other services: Much more than timber

Consulting foresters provide many other services. Some consultants are specialists. Many are generalists. When you hire a consultant you will

want one that has expertise in the area where you seek assistance. Find one that you are comfortable with and that understands and respects your goals and objectives. Never hesitate to ask for references.

How much do consulting foresters charge?

Fees vary among forestry consultants and with the service provided. The most common method is to charge on a time and expenses basis. Depending on the service, charges could also be on a per acre, per plot, per MBF or percentage basis. A professional consulting forester will be able to discuss the pros and cons of each method.

How do you find a reputable professional forestry consultant?

None of the Northwest states require foresters to be licensed, so how do you find someone qualified to help you? One criteria for choosing a consulting forester is forestry credentials. Here are a couple of the most common terms related to forestry credentials in the U.S.:

The Association of Consulting Foresters (ACF): ACF members collectively offer a complete range of professional forestry expertise, including forest management, forest products marketing, evaluation and acquisition of forestland and timber, economics, forest engineering, and environmental analysis. Every member meets high standards of training and professional ethics. Each possesses a degree in forestry, maintains continuing education, and has practiced for at least five years. In addition, members are independent of any business that may create a potential conflict of interest in serving clients, such as a timber procurement entity. To learn more about the ACF or locate an ACF forester near you, go to www.acf-foresters.org.

Certified Forester: A certificate administered by the Society of American Foresters available to individuals who: have a bachelor's degree

or higher in forestry or a related degree with forestry coursework; have five years of professional forestry experience; adhere to state and federal forestry laws; and complete 60 hours of forestry professional development every three years. To learn more about the program or to find a Certified Forester in your area, see www.safnet.org/certifiedforester/index.cfm.

Other good places to find a consultant is with your state forester or extension agent. In Oregon, the Oregon Forest Industry Directory (www.orforestdirectory.com) lists contact information for consultants. Talk to other woodland owners that have employed a consultant.

Professional consulting foresters play an important role in the effective management of our forests. They provide a wide variety of services to forest landowners of all types and sizes and with all sorts of objectives. Whether you know each of your trees by name or barely know where the property is, your consulting forester will help you add value and gain peace of mind by adding their experience and expertise to your tool box. ■

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