

Foresters: A Guide to Choosing Someone to Manage Your Forestland

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Technical Memorandum No. 2

August 2006

What can a forester do for you?

Foresters are the professionals who practice forestry--the art and science of cultivating, managing, and maintaining forests and their associated resources for human benefit. Foresters typically assist landowners in identifying objectives for managing their woodland, write forest management plans, oversee operations, and link landowners to cost-share programs that give the landowner a financial incentive to implement management activities.

Landowners who use the services of a forester to manage their forestland and harvest timber may receive as much as 50 to 75% more money for their timber than those who try to conduct a harvest on their own as a result of the forester's professional advice and connections. Some benefits gained from a properly managed forest include income from the sale of forest products, improved wildlife habitat, improved recreational opportunities, conservation of soil and water resources, pride in ownership, and a sustainable flow of products and other resources from the land.

There are several types of foresters who work with private forestland owners. Most foresters have similar training and will hold a four-year forestry degree from a college or university program accredited by the Society of American Foresters. When you hire a forester, it is important to know the differences among the various types of foresters and the services that each type offers. In states like West Virginia that require registration, one way to ensure that the person is representing himself or herself appropriately is to ask if the forester is registered and licensed.

Public, private, and industry foresters: What are the differences?

Public foresters work for city, county, state, or federal forestry or natural resource agencies. They work primarily on public land, but in some cases they provide limited, free services to private landowners. Public foresters may assist landowners by writing forest management plans or helping coordinate management of insect infestations or disease-causing agents. In West Virginia, foresters employed with the West Virginia Division of Forestry (WVDof) are often called county or "**service foresters.**" These foresters provide landowners with information about managing their property. They can help write management plans, plan for woodland improvement activities, and assist with marketing timber.

Private consulting foresters are independent foresters whose services are available to private landowners for a fee. Consultants are knowledgeable about the forest industry, as well as about practices to help cultivate healthier, more productive forests. They are knowledgeable about local, state, and federal regulations that affect timber management practices, including property tax laws. They provide important services like measuring and marketing timber. Consulting foresters charge fees for their services, but they generally serve the interests of their clients in matters concerning the forest, particularly when selling timber. These foresters can also provide recommendations to improve the quality of the forest environment and to increase the production of high-quality, marketable timber products. The fees charged by a consultant may be based on an hourly or daily rate, a per acre rate, or a percentage of gross revenues from the sale of forest products.

It is common knowledge that timber purchasing “bids” offered to forestland owners for a tract of timber can vary substantially. Hence, the fees paid for the services of consulting foresters are usually well worth the value gained by their insight and marketing skills.

Industry foresters are employed by wood-using companies such as sawmills or paper mills, they are responsible for purchasing timber or logs for their employer. Industry foresters often offer their services for free, for a commitment of the timber, or perhaps the right of first refusal on future sales. Forest industry companies that employ industrial foresters typically have their own policies of operation. One company may offer services to improve their image, and not require any commitment on the timber. Another may develop management plans or other in-depth services and expect the right to purchase any timber harvested in return for those services. When deciding whether to work with an industry forester, remember that sometimes—depending on the type of industry forester they are—their primary directive is to procure wood for their mills. While they will likely offer fair prices for timber, they may not necessarily bring you the highest price.

How do I select a forester?

There are many factors to consider when selecting a forester, but probably the first layer of consideration is, public or private? While public service foresters can provide a limited amount of free services to landowners, it may take from one to six months for them to make it to your property to write a forest plan and help you decide if you should harvest timber. Many of the consulting foresters are willing to drive a significant distance for their work, particularly if the potential income, or the forestry relationship looks profitable. State foresters, unlike consultants, are limited in the amount of time they can work for a private landowner. They are required to respond to a landowner’s request within 30 days to determine the extent of assistance required. However, that does not necessarily mean that they will meet with the landowner and begin servicing the request at that time. They will, however, refer landowners to the list of stewardship-qualified consulting foresters if they are unable to provide service because of time constraints.

Both the WVDOF and the WVU Appalachian Hardwood Center have a list of consulting foresters on their Web pages (see: www.wvforestry.com or <http://ahc.caf.wvu.edu/foresters/index.asp>). While we recommend that landowners use either a service forester or consulting forester as their timber sale administrator, industry foresters can be found on

the WVDOF Industry Assistance Web site by locating local wood products companies.

Below is a checklist of some specific questions to ask potential foresters when you are interviewing them about working on your property.

- Do you have a bachelor’s degree in forestry from an accredited college or university?
- Are you a registered professional forester in West Virginia?
- How many years of experience do you have in forest management?
- What kind of professional or forestry-related organizations are you involved with? Some of these are the Society of American Foresters (SAF), the Association of Consulting Foresters (ACF), and the West Virginia Forestry Association.
- Are you familiar with local, state, and federal regulations affecting forest practices? These should include familiarity with road use permits or bonds, water quality issues, best management practices, endangered species legislation, and wetlands use restrictions.
- Are you familiar with local, state, and federal property tax laws?
- Are you familiar with the timber markets in the area?
- Can you recognize boundary and access problems and recommend other professionals to help with these issues?
- Can you provide references from other landowners you have worked for?
- Can you provide a contract for services outlining what is expected from both the landowner and the forester and detailing how fees will be paid and a payment schedule?
- Will you be available for follow-up work after a management plan is developed?
- How far away from the property do you live?
- Do you have other staff to assist you with forest management activities?
- Do you have any conflicts of interest that could affect your ability to offer unbiased advice for my property (active in buying timber, work for a mill or logger, etc.)?

Before selecting a forester, obtain a copy of their qualifications and check the references they provide you. Also, talk with them about your needs and wishes for the property. Once you have found someone you are comfortable with and he or she has agreed to work with you, have the forester draw up a service contract. The contract should list the services to be performed, who will perform them, in what time period, and cost of services.

What services can a forester perform?

A forester may carry out a variety of services ranging from developing a management plan to managing a timber sale. Below is a short description of these services.

A **forest management plan** describes the current condition of the forest, the species present, and the size, volume, and quality of timber. The plan should indicate stands of different tree species and a sequence of operations to reach management goals that have been selected by the landowner.

Timber stand improvement includes operations that improve the health and growth of quality trees. This may consist of removing fuelwood, culling less-desirable trees through chemical injection or girdling, or thinning the number of stems per acre.

Timber sales involve marking the boundaries of the sale area, painting the stump and trunk of trees to be cut, and recording the species, diameter, quality, and height of marked trees to be sold. A consultant, often working with an attorney, will prepare a sale contract detailing the specifics of the sale and protecting the landowner's interests. A consultant may also lay out skid trails and a log landing. Depending on the type of sale, the consultant may send out an invitation to bid on standing timber, supervise the viewing of a woodlot by potential buyers, and handle the opening of bids. If necessary, the consultant will assist the landowner in negotiating price and terms of the sale with potential buyers.

Boundary marking involves checking the deed registry at the courthouse, conferring with adjacent landowners, and identifying landmarks and boundaries on the ground. Boundaries are then flagged, blazed, or painted and mapped with bearing and length measurements, as a record for the landowner. *Unless licensed by the state as a registered land surveyor, the consultant cannot provide official surveying services.* If you are unsure of your property boundaries, have a professional surveyor establish boundaries before arranging a timber sale.

Timber appraisal is performed through a timber inventory, site inspection, and market analysis to provide the landowner with a value for the timber on a tract of land. The timber cruise involves sampling a representative number of trees, preparing forest-type maps, and calculating the volume and value of the timber. Results of the timber cruise can be used to make management decisions about when to harvest timber or when to thin or clearcut an area. They can also be used to make timber growth and cash flow projections or investment analysis decisions.

Regeneration encompasses all of the steps needed to encourage a new forest crop. It may include providing growing space for the desired tree species through harvesting, killing or removing all or part of the preceding crop, conducting prescribed burns, or mechanically preparing a site to plant. It also includes planting seeds or seedlings on a prepared site and providing protection for them if needed.

Fire protection may consist of constructing and maintaining a fire lane to serve as a barrier to the spread of fire or conducting a controlled burn to reduce fuel buildup in a forested area.

Other services provided by a consulting forester may include advising on plants to include in a wildlife food plot, planning for recreational use of the property, and providing information on cost-share programs, tax and estate planning issues, or road construction.

Next Steps

If you are ready to hire a forester, you can either contact your local West Virginia Division of Forestry Service Forester or look at the list of Stewardship Certified Consulting Foresters on the Web. Service foresters can usually be contacted via phone using the Blue Pages in your phone book or on the Web (www.wvforestry.com). A list of consulting foresters in West Virginia can also be found at that Web site.

One of the best ways to become informed about potential forest management practices you can conduct on your property is by attending workshops sponsored by the WVDOF, WVU Extension Service-Appalachian Hardwood Center, the West Virginia Forestry Association, the Woodland Owners Association of West Virginia, or the Association of Consulting Foresters of America. These groups sponsor workshops, training sessions, and property tours throughout the year.

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Funding for this publication was provided through a grant from the West Virginia Division of Forestry to the Appalachian Hardwood Center (AHC). The AHC is a unit of the West Virginia University Extension Service and the West Virginia University Division of Forestry and Natural Resources.

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