



WHAT'S A MANAGEMENT PLAN?

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A forest management plan is a simple idea, essentially. It has to do with putting your ideas down on paper, describing the forest, and recording practices that will help gain what you want. This plan is best written with the assistance of forestry expertise, usually a consulting forester. Some of the complexity comes in when a plan needs to satisfy the needs of various cost-share programs or property tax programs. Most owners will want a plan that satisfies the eligibility requirements for as many programs as possible, even if an owner is not currently interested in any of the programs. This leaves more options available for the future.

Of course, a forest management plan does not need to be used for any program. Nor is cost-share required to obtain a plan. For many owners, hiring a consulting forester to write a plan that serves the needs of the forest owner is enough. Relationships between owners and consultants can be lifelong friendships with great benefit to the owner that is interested in working with their forested property. Forest ownership and management can be an incredibly rewarding experience that can be shared with family and friends. Owners can establish family legacies that extend generations into the future.

Forestry Assistance Programs

Enrollment in public programs, or private programs such as Tree Farm, requires an "approved" forest management plan. Approval is generally granted by an agency identified with a particular program. There are state and federal programs with checklists of what is needed in a plan. Most programs also have an approved list of consulting foresters, or other resource professionals, that have undergone training in what a particular program needs in a plan. For example, the Forest Stewardship Program has a list of "approved plan writers", or the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has a list of "technical service providers".

These various agencies work together, as best they can, to have common plan requirements so that a forest owner has one plan that will meet the requirements of almost all programs. This means that, sometimes, a forest owner may have a plan element included that they may not particularly be interested in. Consultants that have gone through program training sessions are aware that a plan needs to meet the requirements for as many programs as possible. This is usually in the best interest of the forest owner. A forest management plan can also help establish the most advantageous classification in federal taxation on timber sale income.

A forest owner interested in a cost-share or property tax program must recognize the goals of the program. If those goals are consistent with the goals of the owner, then agreement is usually beneficial to both parties. Forest owners that enroll only for the benefits, but have no interest in following through with the obligations, are likely to have an unpleasant experience. Of course, enrolling in a program is an option for an owner. Forest owners are not required to enroll in any cost-share or tax program.

Benefits of a Forest Management Plan

- Permanent record (with updates) of property characteristics and activity schedules
- Formal tool to help share owner ideas with spouses, children, other relatives, partners, friends, neighbors, and others
- Requirement for property tax reduction programs
 - Qualified Forest Property Program
 - Commercial Forest Program
- Requirement for resource management cost-share programs
- Evidence of "active involvement" for federal income tax treatment of timber sale income

Content Considerations

- Owner and property identification
- Maps of various kinds
- Resource descriptions & inventories
 - Forest stands
 - Wildlife habitat
 - Rare / unusual species
 - Cultural / interesting sites
 - History of property & past management
 - Recreation opportunities
 - Water resources, ponds, wetlands, etc.
 - Visual quality
- Recommendations for actions & activities
 - Timber harvest schedules
 - Habitat improvement schedules
 - Plantings
 - Roads, trails, bridges, etc.
 - Other practices
- Appendices as needed

Many forest owners begin with participation in cost-sharing the expenses of having a professional forest management plan written through the Forest Stewardship Program. This program is administered through the Michigan DNR. Private consulting foresters work with forest owners to develop an approved forest management plan. Completion of this plan is intended to satisfy eligibilities for most all other programs.

The NRCS currently administers most of the cost-share programs open to forest owners, although the bulk of the emphasis in Michigan is for agricultural properties. Two of the more popular programs are the "Conservation Stewardship Program" (CSP) and the "Environmental Quality Incentives Program" (EQIP).

Michigan has two property tax incentive programs for owners of forested property who are interested in timber management and meet eligibility requirements, including an approved management plan. Forest owners need to think seriously about these programs because the commitment is long-term and withdrawal penalties are in place. More information can be found on the DNR website [<http://www.michigan.gov/dnr>] for the “Qualified Forest Property Program” and the “Commercial Forest Program”.

Who Should You Contact?

Sometimes the excellent recommendations come through friends and neighbors. However, homework will likely yield a wider range of information. Conservation districts are set up as a clearinghouse of information. Some districts employ foresters that can provide a one-on-one conversation. These districts have their own websites.

There are several on-line resources.

Michigan Forest Pathways Website

[<http://miforestpathways.net>]

The website was designed as a clearinghouse of forestry information for forest owners, including a roster of agencies and services.

Michigan DNR

- Forest Stewardship Program
- Qualified Forest Property Program
- Commercial Forest Program
- Forest Legacy Program

Information about these programs can be found on the DNR website [<http://www.michigan.gov/dnr>]. Click the link to “Forestry”, find the “Programs” drop-down window, and then “Private Forest Land”.

Forestry Assistance Program (FAP)

Funded in 2012 for three years by the Michigan legislature, through the DNR, MDARD, and Conservation Districts, the FAP provides fourteen foresters to encourage private forest owners to manage their property. Participating conservation districts have a page on their respective websites.

Natural Resources Conservation Service [NRCS]

[<http://www.mi.nrcs.usda.gov/programs>].

The NRCS has several cost-share programs that are funded at various levels from year to year. The NRCS has its own technical service providers (TSP) to work with forest owners on applicable programs. Many “TSPs” are also approved to write “Forest Stewardship Plans” through that DNR administered program.

Consulting Foresters

These are professional foresters that work independently for the forest owner and no other industry or agency. Their ranges of expertise vary and forest owners should shop around for the best fit. Additionally, many consultants are trained to work with particular cost-share programs and know the requirements to satisfy program needs. More about consulting foresters can be found in MSU Bulletin E-3188.

- Association of Consulting Foresters [<http://www.acf-foresters.org>]
- Michigan Forest Association [<http://www.michiganforests.com>]

Michigan Forest Association (MFA)

[<http://www.michiganforests.com>]

The MFA consists of forest owners that share common interests in forest management. Meetings, a magazine, and a newsletter help keep members informed about forests and forestry. The MFA also publishes a list of forestry consultants that are also MFA members.

