

Writing a Forest Management Plan

Ben Jackson, Kris M. Irwin, David Dickens, James Shelton, and Mark McConnell
Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources
University of Georgia

What is a Forest Management Plan?

Think of a forest management plan as a “How to Manual” that guides you toward producing the greatest number of benefits from your property. A plan describes the management activities and indicates when they need to be implemented. The management activities prescribed by a resource professional, in direct consultation with the landowner, will lead to enhancing, conserving, and protecting the natural resources while achieving short- and long-term objectives. Creating a plan provides the opportunity to identify and quantify the natural resources and opportunities available on your property. A comprehensive plan takes into account the management of not only trees, but all aspects of the forest ecosystem including wildlife, water and soil. A forest management plan is also an educational tool, providing you and your family the opportunity to learn about the natural resources found in your forest.



Components of a Forest Management Plan

A complete forest management plan includes four major sections:

Section 1 – Goals and Objectives: Your goals and objectives should be clearly described in writing. Goals are general statements that express your long-term (broad) desired outcomes for the property. They are your vision for your property. On the other hand, objectives are more specific statements, and are measurable. They describe the actions required that lead to attaining your goals.

EXAMPLE

Goal 1. Protect the health of the forest.

Objective 1. Create a prescribed fire plan for entire property.

Objective 2. Inspect property for presence of invasive plant species.

Objective 3. Inspect property for harmful insect and diseases outbreaks.

Section 2 – Site Description: This section contains a detailed physical description of your property and available resources. This includes the legal description, tax parcel number, and USDA Service Center number also known as farm number (if available). In addition to the written legal description, this section must contain maps of various types. At a minimum, a property map (includes the property surveyed plat and an outlined aerial photo) must be included and clearly delineate the property boundary, access points, any waterways, and a physical address or latitude and longitude (often to a main gate). Additional maps include a soils map, stand map (if available), and topographic map. If possible, include historic information known about the property such as ownership records, current and expired hunting leases, expired leans/easements, and most importantly, a description of all previous forest management activities.

Section 3 – Prescribed Management Activities: The majority of any plan will be comprised of detailed descriptions of prescribed management activities (silviculture) and their timing. Based on your goals and objectives, these activities may include timber harvests, reforestation, herbicide applications, burning, fertilization, thinning, timber stand improvement, wildlife habitat improvement, pond maintenance, and road/trail construction and maintenance following best management practices to protect water quality. All management activities should be correlated to one or more objectives. A healthy forest ecosystem is the result of proactive forest management, and this means there is always something to do. Therefore, it is imperative you review your forest management plan annually to ensure your objectives are being satisfied.



Section 4 – Protection and Maintenance: Protection against wildfire should be a priority for all woodland owners. Installing new fire breaks and maintaining existing breaks should be at the top of the activities listed. All property lines and corners should be properly marked on the ground, and clearly indicated on your property map. A plan should address access and trespass concerns by identifying where gates need to be installed and “No Trespassing” signs need to be posted.



Advantages of Having a Management Plan

The greatest advantage of having a management plan is that it serves as your map to success. Success is achieved when your goals are attained. In addition, there are advantages to having a plan. The most common advantages are:

1. **Environmental Regulations:** Forest management activities must comply with local, state, and federal regulations. Because you are liable for all activities occurring on your land, you need to be aware of how environmental laws impact your selection of management activities. Therefore, you are encouraged to obtain professional advice prior to conducting any forest operation such as a timber sale or pond building.
2. **Financial Considerations:** Survey results reveal that timber and estate taxation are the leading management concerns among woodland owners. Careful planning and accounting practices will save you money and help preserve your estate for future generations. Tax laws pertaining to forest management are not simple, can be subject to interpretation, and can frequently change.
3. **Cost Share:** Most forestland-related federal programs are administered by the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Services Agency (FSA). State-level Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) also provide assistance. Popular FSA programs like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) offer cost-share and technical assistance to landowners who convert environmentally sensitive agricultural to more environmentally friendly vegetation. Multiple CRP practices include financial incentives for forest establishment and management. In addition to cost-share, CRP also provides annual rental payments for agricultural land converted to forestry uses. NRCS's Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) provides landowners with financial and technical assistance to implement environmentally friendly practices in working forest and agricultural land. EQIP provides cost-share assistance for approved practices after they are implemented. The collective goal of these programs is to increase environmental quality by reducing soil erosion, improving water quality, and increasing wildlife habitat. An approved management plan outlining the conservation activities to be implemented is required to qualify for any federal cost-share program.
4. **Certification:** If you have a management plan and are implementing forestry practices, you might want to consider having your forestland certified. Certification is a voluntary process that recognizes sustainably-managed forests. The personal advantage of having your land certified is recognition for practicing forestry in an environmentally responsible manner. The financial advantage of certification is potential of access to markets that seek wood from certified forests. American Tree Farm System-certified forestlands are recognized by the Sustainable Forestry Initiative's (SFI) chain of custody certification program. Contact either program for information on how to certify your woodland.

Creating Your Management Plan

There are at least three options one can take to create a forestland management plan. The first option is to hire a professional forester to prepare the plan. The benefit of this option is that a forester is trained in the sciences that guide management decisions. Also, they can provide technical assistance to assure all prescribed management activities are fully implemented correctly. Professional foresters work for state agencies (e.g., Georgia Forestry Commission), federal agencies (e.g., USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service), or are private consultants. A second option is to prepare the plan yourself. Unless you have adequate knowledge of the fields of forestry, wildlife biology, soil science, hydrology, and recreation this option is not advisable as most landowners need assistance with the finer details of a plan. Working with a professional forester during the process of preparing the plan is highly encouraged. A third option is for the landowner(s) to start the forest management plan by (1) collecting all available property maps and putting good, clean copies (or originals) in a notebook, 3-ring binder and/or as scanned pdf (or other format) files, then (2) write down your priorities and goals on the property, thinking near (next 5-15 years) and long-term (15- to 30+ years or more), and figuring the areas where you will need help and getting that help to further develop and fine tune your forest management plan.

Helpful Resources

An excellent template for preparing a forest management plan has been produced by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and is available on their website at:

http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1075619.pdf.

Another plan template offered by the American Tree Farm System is available at:

https://www.treefarmssystem.org/stuff/contentmgr/files/1/811656e8116af1c86571cbbf51851fac/files/managing_your_woodlands_10.1.2015.pdf



Outreach

Warnell School of Forestry & Natural Resources

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA