

A count-down to planning: nine reasons why you need a forest stewardship plan

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Countless forest owners and their New York forest land have already benefited from the development and implementation of stewardship plans. However, there is still a need for more forest landowners to develop a useful document for the management of their property. Although time and effort is needed to prepare a forest stewardship plan, the benefits of a well-written plan far outweigh the costs. Let me share several good reasons for you to contact the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation for assistance with forest stewardship planning.

Reason 1) A forest stewardship plan will help you get to know your forest. Plan development is an intensive process all the way from field data to finished document, and includes a plethora of information. Even if you are not the person directly collecting field data, you will still be involved in the process of carefully examining resources you have for management. By the time your plan is complete, you will know, for example, if you have any unique habitats or perhaps uncommon plant or animal species dwell on your land. As a result of the plan building, you will become more familiar with your property boundaries and general topography. And if you are really involved in the process of field data collection, you'll familiarize yourself with every nook and cranny of your land.

Reason 2) A detailed inventory of your property will provide you with valuable knowledge. An inventory records the resources available on your property. This is a necessary step before writing a stewardship plan. For example, what if your land doesn't offer the resources you need to meet your landowner goals? What if your land does offer a unique resource about which you didn't already know? A detailed property inventory will answer these questions and more. By determining the species, sizes, and health of all your trees, for example, you will be able to determine if your woodland can be harvested in the near future. Perhaps you hope to manage your property to increase wild turkey habitat or cross-country ski trails, a forest inventory will reveal to you whether or not your land can support that goal. An inventory defines the capacity of the resources to meet your objectives.

Reason 3) A plan includes soils information. This is actually a required part of any forest stewardship plan, largely because soils information is critical for management decisions. A description of the soils on your property will offer how the soils may affect the ease with which you obtain your landowner goals. Soils information can inform you of what you can do and where you can do it. For example, you may have hoped to create a trail system at a specific location, but the general location you have chosen is susceptible to erosion because of characteristics in the soil surface.

Reason 4) Property maps are a fun and useful feature in a forest stewardship plan. Many landowners without an existing plan probably do not have aerial photos or detailed topographic maps of their property. Any map included in a stewardship plan should reveal property boundaries, management unit (also called stand) boundaries, management unit identification labels, physical features such as roads and ponds, and of course a north arrow.

These requirements generate a useful property map, which helps a landowner become further acquainted with their property and the surrounding area.

Reason 5) A forest stewardship plan requires you to write down their ownership objectives. This is the most important component in any stewardship plan. All management decisions should be based on whether or not they meet the objectives established by you, the landowner. Constructing three or four main objectives you wish to accomplish on your property will force you to examine what is important to you. Whether your primary goal is high quality timber production or wildlife habitat management, you and people who help you manage your property will benefit from an explicit statement of your interests.

Reason 6) A plan helps you to build a relationship with your local professionals. If you choose to prepare a forest stewardship plan, you will likely not be the person actually preparing the plan. At some point you will need to contact a professional forester, possibly through your local NYS Department of Environmental Conservation or a private forester. Your forester will help you by offering their scientific knowledge about the resources on your property. They can help you to more clearly articulate your goals based on your available time, interest, money, and energy (TIME). After communicating with them and other landowners, even your own spouse, you will once again have a better idea of what your land has to offer. In order for your forest stewardship plan to become an official legal document, it must be registered with the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation.

Reason 7) A carefully written forest stewardship plan is a legal document. With this legal document you may qualify for cost share and potentially to utilize the variety of benefits available through the Internal Revenue Service as an active forest landowner. Your land is your investment! Having a solid plan can also help you in the unfortunate event of a legal conflict. This is a good way to be prepared for anything that may come your way as you manage your land in the future.

Reason 8) Every plan includes a plan—future management activities. Another of the components for any plan is a ten-year schedule of work activities. The work schedule summarizes the recommended management activities and their priority for the next decade of managing your property. Such an outline of events will help to keep you on task in meeting your objectives. A work schedule helps you to plan activities for optimum efficiency and in the best sequence to help you accomplish your objectives.

Reason 9) The plan is all about you! Every part of a forest stewardship plan relates to your landowner objectives, which is why these are the most critical part of any stewardship plan. So start today: think about your reasons for owning land. What do you want to get from your land--firewood, hunting opportunities, or just the satisfaction that you are contributing to open-land conservation? Whatever your reasons are, make them count!

For additional information on forestland activities that will benefit your objectives, visit Cornell's forestry website at www.ForestConnect.info, contact your local office of Cornell University Cooperative Extension, or join the New York Forest Owners Association through their website at www.nyfoa.org

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