

Working Forests – A Key to Local Sustainability

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As Director of the Newfound Lake Region Association, I have recently received several calls from residents concerned about damage to woods and streams by timber harvesting in Hebron and Groton. In particular liquidation harvesting, or clear cuts, can add heavy sediment loads to brooks and streams while their visual impacts are startling and long-lasting. Because both responsible forestry and high-quality water are mainstays of our local economy, the NLRA takes these concerns seriously. This article explores the importance of forestry to our local economy and how to protect the land and water so forestry will be sustainable.

The NH Timberland Owners Association (NHTOA) estimates that more than 64 percent of the forest lands within the Newfound watershed towns of Alexandria, Bridgewater, Bristol, Danbury, Dorchester, Groton, Hebron, Orange and Plymouth are in current use. On average, each acre of timberland annually provides \$475 of economic activity: \$252 from forest-based manufacturing, \$221 from forest-related recreation/tourism, and \$2 from Christmas trees and maple products. In addition, the “economic multiplier” is 2.95 for timber harvesting and 3.83 for sawmilling, which means that the economic benefit to the local economy can be multiplied 2.95 or 3.83 times for these operations.

Note that income-per-acre from recreation/tourism (\$221) is similar to forest-based manufacturing (\$252). For this reason alone, managing our land in a sustainable fashion makes economic sense. Add the irreplaceable values of wildlife habitat and ecosystem services such as water purification and carbon sequestration, and thoughtful forest management rises from common sense to a vital necessity.

Last fall the NLRA hosted a public workshop with experts in forestry, water quality and wildlife habitat. We learned that forests are like gardens, harvested over periods of decades. How many and what types of trees are cut will dictate what grows back. The pattern and timing of cuts create different environments that attract various animal species. The interplay of these factors happens in slow motion over periods of years.

We learned that foresters and loggers are required to follow Best Management Practices (BMPs) to prevent soil erosion and sedimentation of streams, ponds and wetlands. BMPs are a flexible approach for meeting the intent of the law (“don’t pollute”) while allowing the forester to adapt to site-specific conditions. Unfortunately, the results of an extensive audit of BMPs by NHTOA and the UNH Cooperative Extension Service indicated that roughly 25 percent of job sites visited were not employing BMPs. In addition, as rainfall becomes more frequent and heavier, even standard BMPs may not prevent soil loss or protect water quality on steep hillsides. Sadly, once the soil is gone it can not be replaced and the trees will not return. Upland ponds and bogs will not recover from a massive influx of sediments. Streams and lakes will become less clear and more prone to weed infestations.

What can you do if you are concerned about a pending or on-going forestry project? First, contact your local Selectmen. They are authorized to sign Intent-to-Cut forms for forest harvests and are the “front line” enforcement authority. The State Division of Forests and Lands regulates forestry operations, including water quality and wetlands issues, and can be contacted for additional assistance. Last but not least, speak directly with the forester or landowner so that they can take steps to remedy a problem quickly and with minimal business interruption.

Benefits of responsible timber management include healthier forests, wildlife habitat and water supply, and continued recreational opportunities that in total provide substantial economic value to the landowner and surrounding community. By understanding and caring for our forests we can expect to be rewarded with these benefits for years to come.