

# Management plan first step in forest stewardship

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Forests are complex systems. If a tree falls in the woods, many reactions take place. Light streams through the newly opened hole or "gap" in the canopy and hits the forest floor. Seeds that have fallen from trees and other plants over the years – now struck by full sunlight – germinate and take root.



While plants on the forest floor grow rapidly because of the additional light, the crowns of the trees adjacent to the fallen stem begin to expand into the newly created gap. The gap shrinks until once again crowns touch, the gap disappears, and the same direct light no longer falls to the forest floor but is captured by the forest canopy. This example only begins to describe the complexity, actions, reactions, and processes of forests. With such complexity, how can one manage a forest system to produce sustainable benefits?

*By developing a forest management plan, this woodlands owner is protecting an asset that he'll pass on to his heirs.*

In West Virginia, there is enormous potential for private landowners to manage their

own complex forest ecosystems to produce diverse products and amenities. Some of these include increasing personal income through sales of forest products, enhancing visual quality, creating access for hiking, improving wildlife habitat, and investing in the woodlot as an asset to pass on to heirs.

One of the first steps in managing a woodlot is to develop a forest management plan. A management plan is key to improving the efficiency of forested property. These plans typically include landowner objectives, maps showing property boundaries, a forest inventory, and a series of planned operations over a period of five to 10 years. The plan provides focus through an activity schedule to help landowners achieve their objectives. A plan is also a prerequisite for participating in the Managed Timberland Tax Program, a state-sponsored program that provides a tax incentive to owners for managing their woodlands.

Landowners who possess at least 10 acres of forestland in the state can get professional assistance in developing management plans from the West Virginia Forest Stewardship Program. This program helps landowners manage their forests in a productive, sustainable, and environmentally sensitive manner. Over the past decade, the West Virginia Division of Forestry (WVDF) has administered this federally funded program that provides up to 75 percent of the cost of writing a plan. Nearly 4,000 private landowners have participated in the program, and the combined forest area in these management plans exceeds 600,000 acres.

Developing a management plan is the first step toward sound forest stewardship. By specifying their personal objectives and identifying their forest resources as they plan, landowners acknowledge that they are indeed the stewards who control the destiny and future condition of their woodlots and the products and amenities they produce.

For more details about developing management plans, contact Steve Milauskas or David McGill at the WVU Appalachian Hardwood Center by calling 304-293-2941, ext. 2465. For information about the Forest Stewardship Program, contact your county WVDF Service Forester listed in the phone book or call 304-558-2788.

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