

Doing Nothing

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For decades we've been dangling carrots in front of nonindustrial private forest (NIPF) landowners to inspire them to manage their forestlands. Federal and state cost-share programs and property tax abatements have been offered as incentives. State-run education programs, free technical assistance from county foresters, the private sector's Tree Farm Program, landowner associations, magazines, field days, direct mail appeals, public service announcements, home study courses, extension bulletins and pamphlets, events sponsored by the Society of American Foresters, cold calls by private consulting and procurement foresters—all are designed to motivate NIPF owners to be good stewards.

So where are we today? Forest Inventory and Analysis tells us that as of 1994, only 6 percent of all NIPF owners nationwide have management plans. Collectively, this group owns roughly 38 percent of the NIPF resource.

Why do 94 percent of NIPF landowners act so irrationally? Why don't they listen to foresters and manage their land? A few prefer a passive management style but let's face it: calls to stewardship are generally ignored. One reason is that landowners have lots of messages competing for their attention. They are bombarded by junk mail and telemarketing.

Perhaps they just have more important things to do. Sure, there are high achievers who manage their woodlots *and* their finances *and* their careers *and* their families. But in today's busy world, just getting the lawn mowed, the oil changed, and the kids to school is about all that some families can handle.

Well, you say, that's where foresters come in. Landowners need to find a forester. That means contacting two or three foresters and inquiring about their particular specialties, as well as getting estimates of their professional

expenses. It isn't simple—some charge by the hour, some by the acre, some by a percentage, and some by the thousand board feet (whatever that is). Some foresters don't accept clients with small properties or low timber values. Meetings with consultants, calls to references, and visits to a few completed timber sales to see the finished product of management—suddenly this is more time consuming than finding a plumber.

Is it any wonder that NIPF land goes unmanaged? Even with good intentions, how many landowners have the time and energy? Can the right slogan, bumper sticker, ad campaign, or television commercial cut through all the competing messages and resonate with landowners? Can landowners ever be inspired to Do Something? We think not—and we think that's just fine. We believe we should focus our efforts on those who do choose management. But what about the others, you say? If they only understood, they'd manage. To be blunt, in our opinion it is OK to Do Nothing.

Do-Nothing forests provide wildlife habitat, carbon fixation and sequestration, clean water, lovely landscapes, and a future potential source of wood.

There are worse choices than Do Nothing: highgrading that ruins the future potential of the stand, lousy harvesting practices that foul a stream and give our profession a black eye, the sale of frontage for residential development (which isolates the timber in the back land), or development of the whole property. A wonderful pine stand not far from our home was recently converted to a driving range. Do Nothing is sounding better and better.

Do Nothing is a completely acceptable alternative and we should include it in the list of options to promote, as long as landowners know what they have and understand their alternatives.

This, of course, is the role of a professional forester. A forester can inventory a property and make management recommendations. Ultimately, landowners decide what to do (or not do) on their property. We hope they'll opt to take care of it. We realize that selecting Do Nothing by default, without knowing the alternatives (i.e., without professional forestry input), can result in land conversion or abuse. This shouldn't mean, however, that Do Nothing should be ruled out as a management alternative.

We believe that foresters should be satisfied with a landowner's choice to Do Nothing, that they will in fact be credible if they list Do Nothing along with the other management alternatives. Instead of calling a Do-Nothing forest unacceptable because it harbors pestilence, creates fire hazard, wastes good timber, forgoes profit, and squanders wildlife habitat opportunities, perhaps we can make our efforts to promote forestry more palatable if we include Do Nothing as an acceptable alternative.

In fact, some day we may want a little Do Nothing out there on the landscape, as a refreshing alternative to the meticulously managed forests that will be needed to meet an increasing global demand for wood. As foresters, we believe acceptance of Do Nothing is an important first step toward getting the respect and attention of NIPF landowners. And isn't that what the NIPF problem is all about?

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