

THE IMPACT OF LANDOWNERS ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS -
MORE TREES, YES! BUT MORE THAN TREES
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July 28, 1988

ABSTRACT: Over twenty-five years ago the forest industry began a program that has collectively been referred to as "lap" (landowners assistance program). This program is vital to the continued prosperity of the forest industry **in the south**. It is vital because it offers a means of promoting reforestation, intensifying the management and use of the NIPF lands and informing the voting public of the impact on the forest industry of the good and bad features of proposed governmental regulations and laws.

Declines in net annual growth of softwoods in many of the southern states are being reported in the most recent USDA Forest Service surveys. Growth drain ratios of less than 1 are showing in more and more counties and parishes throughout this region. The soon to be published "The South's Fourth Forest" states that the decline in net annual growth of softwoods will continue into the first decade of the twenty first century. All of these and more are the concerns about the state of the pine resource.

A second area of concern is the increase in public intervention into the use and management of privately owned forest lands. The Environmental Protection Agency is pressuring the states to develop controls on the use of pesticides that are toxic to endangered species of flora and fauna. The EPA and the US Corp of Engineers are demanding that controls be placed on the use of wetland areas. Counties and communities are restricting activities as diverse as truck weights and clearcutting.

These are two broad areas of concern in which industrially sponsored landowners assistance programs are having an impact on the future of forestry. This impact comes by virtue of the one on one nature of the relationship that develops between the lap forester and the landowner client.

There are three advantages that lap programs have that promote reforestation. First, these programs offer professional expertise. For those landowners who have cutover lands the professional can suggest the least cost method of reforestation. In addition, assistance can be given in applying for financial assistance that may be available. For those landowners who have standing timber the lap forester can plan the silvicultural activities prior to harvest that will reduce the cost of reforestation following the harvest. Proper management of the existing timber stand can mean a better quality final product that will bring a premium when sold thus providing a greater profit margin between sales income and reforestation expense.

A second advantage is that an expeditor is provided. For many landowners the motivation to reforest is there, however, it does not translate into

action. These landowners are uncertain as to where to start, what contractors are available and the timing of each of the activities. The lap forester assists in making all the arrangements plus providing supervision to insure that the work is done in a proper and timely way. Many landowners who would have otherwise lost their motivation to reforest because of not knowing when or how to begin are able to carry out their desire to see their lands productive.

A third advantage is that the services of the lap forester do not require an out of pocket expense. Many landowners that lap foresters have as their clients are unwilling or unable to retain the services of a consultant to provide this assistance. Since landowners receive professional services at no cost, they are encouraged to manage and reforest their lands that would not have been done otherwise. Lap programs therefore bring forest lands under professional management that otherwise would not have been managed at all.

Now let's turn to the second area of impact that lap programs have. This involves the education of the public as to what forestry is all about so that they are informed and better able to make decisions relative to proposed legislation and regulation.

This education begins with the relationship that is developed between a lap forester and his/her client. These relationships are ones of respect and trust. Often they become as strong as familial ties.

In this type relationship silvicultural activities are proposed for the landowner and explanations are given for why and how. Should legislation be proposed later to restrict one of these activities then the landowner will be better able to judge its impact on forestry management.

Secondly, this relationship provides a source for answering questions that the landowner might have because of some piece of legislation. It is more likely that these people will trust their lap foresters response more so than an industry spokesperson being interviewed on television or by the news media. The trust has been developed prior to the issue and thus is more credible.

Thirdly, the owners of forest land are often the thought leaders in their communities. Many are natural leaders and many are highly respected because of their landownership. This means that the impact of the lap forester on the public is a multiple of the clients served.

In conclusion industrial lap programs have an impact in two broad areas of concern. First they provide MORE TREES. They effectively promote reforestation and forest management. They do this through the professional expertise they provide, the assistance to implement the plan of reforestation that the landowner has and best of all they promote reforestation and forest management among many landowners that would not otherwise seek professional assistance.

Secondly, the lap programs provide MORE THAN TREES. They provide an interface between the general public and the forest industry. This interface provides a means to educate the public so that as issues arise that threaten the efficient management of forest lands the public can make better informed

decisions. It also provides a credible resource that can be called upon for information on controversial issues.

Landowners assistance programs are making sizable contributions to the present and future of the forest products industry. The impacts they have are valuable enough to warrant every forest products company having one even if it has only one or two employees.