



## CONFESSIONS OF AN AVOWED 'TREE HUGGER' DECISIONS: WHEN DO YOU CLEARCUT?

Beth Richardson

It may sound silly to you that someone becomes attached to their trees, especially if you do not own timber, but it does happen. As an example, let's look at one of my demonstrations in Clarendon County, South Carolina. Those trees were planted in 1988. Sharon's grandfather planted the trees. At the time, Sharon looked upon it as something her grandfather did to get rental payments through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). These trees represented the hand planting her Grandfather did. It is the last part of the farm that has his mark on it. Her grandmother took part in the forest management and made the decisions up until she passed away. Sharon never thought of the trees as a valuable crop until I took her to the woods. At that point, her perspective changed. The trees had grown in value. For her, cutting those trees was like giving up a piece of her history.



Another landowner told me how heavy his heart was when he was clearcutting some timber that his father had planted. The trees should have been on the market 20 years prior to them being cut, but this was a part of his family heritage. Clearcutting was forced upon him when mortality started exceeding growth.

When we clearcut our forest in 2004, I knew I was going to have problems with letting go of the trees. My trees had become magnificent majestic timber. Ergo, before the loggers moved in, I ran through the woods going from tree to tree, hugging them and thanking them for growing. After that, I was proud to see my beautiful straight trees on the truck.

Most landowners don't consider their timber an economic investment. They have other ownership priorities such as aesthetics, wildlife, recreation, or just the peace of mind that comes with open space. Thus, people's healthy emotional attachment to their woodlands should never be discounted by foresters. There are millions of acres that are owned by just such individuals and, by and large, are left to let Nature take her course. The good news about forestry is, in many ways, you *can* have it all. A scientifically valid, well-conceived forest management plan can help achieve a variety of non-timber objectives, while simultaneously profiting from timber harvests. To optimize your investment:

**Don't wait to thin** – Thinning should be recommended within the stand as soon as it is operationally feasible. This is a good concept on several levels. First, waiting too long to thin impedes growth potential in the stand. Second, earlier financial returns increase the return on investments due to the time value of money. Also, research shows that diameter response is more pronounced and prolonged when the first thinning occurs earlier in the stand development.

**Consider Site Quality** – Stands on higher quality sites (productive soils) will grow faster and be ready to thin at earlier ages than stands on lower quality sites.

**Maintain adequate live crown** - Live crown ratio is a good indicator of the biologic need for thinning. Generally, thinning should occur when live crown ratio approaches 35%. Based on my experience, a good range to consider thinning is between 35-40% based on the landowner objectives. Err towards the higher live crown ratio if you want to maximize growth. Err towards the lower live crown ratio if pruning and knots are a concern. If live crown ratio drops below 33%, growth is negatively impacted.

**Thin Often** – Periodic thinning will be needed to maintain the health and vigor of the stand.

**Watch the Canopy** - Percent Canopy Cover should be considered when conducting thinning operations. Releasing the canopies of desirable crop trees should be a goal of your thinning operations.

**Leave the best** - Selection thinning techniques/methods should be used to reduce the number of desirable crop trees removed during the thinning operation. Also, research has shown that growth response is higher in selective versus straight row thinning operations.

**Get a good thinning crew** - Use quality logging contractors to perform your thinning operations. Quality operators will minimize damage to the residual stand giving the residual stand the best opportunities for maximizing its potential.



**Clearcut when the time is right** — Your stand is mature when all or most of the trees have reached sawtimber size. The quicker one can clearcut the stand, the higher the return for the investment.

Forestry is an art that uses science. That means a forester must consider the landowner's objectives and match them to the condition of the woodland they own. If their objectives are "doable" from a silvicultural and economic perspective, then the forester should be able to use his/her knowledge to practice a form of forestry that will satisfy the landowner.

Beth Richardson is an Area Forester for Extension based in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Reach her at [mrchrds@clermson.edu](mailto:mrchrds@clermson.edu).

Dr. Tom Straka worked with Steven H. Bullard & Clay B. Landrum (forest economists) and designed an on-line timber investment calculator called FORVAL (<http://www.cfr.msstate.edu/forval/>). I had to call him to find out how to put the data in and he was kind enough to walk me through it. The IRR for the 26 year rotation was 22.09% including the cost of annual taxes, mid rotation herbicide pine release, planting cost, with an alternative rate of return of 1.5%. One of the things I did was say, "Okay, crystal ball, I know that in two more years, I will get \$500.00 more per acre on the clearcut. What do you think happened? The internal rate of return (IRR) went down about 5.5%. In other words, waiting for timber prices to go up may make you feel better but that waiting time is lowering your IRR.

## Maine Chapter News

The "Historical First Quebec Meeting" of Maine ACF was held October 18-19 in St. Prosper & Lac-Echemin, Quebec.

Claude Dufour, ACF set up an excellent tour of the SBC mill in St. Prosper. Francis and Marco Belanger gave us a complete run through of their family's business, the 2nd largest white cedar mill in North America. They ship to 35 states and have 14 shingle machines in a facility rebuilt in 2004. Much of their furnish comes from Maine forests.



We spent Friday morning talking with Claude about the challenges in the maple sugaring business, and walking through family's operation. Updating equipment, working within a restrictive quota/legal system, best management practices, and reinvigorating worn down stands are issues that they face as they produce around 16,000 pounds of syrup per year.

Though we had a small group (5 ACF'rs counting Claude), it was a very memorable trip. Thanks again to Claude for her effort and time in making this an excellent chapter meeting.

Todd Caldwell  
*Maine Chapter Chair*