

Ecosystem Management and Non-industrial Private Forest Landowners in Washington State

Washington's non-industrial private forest (NIPF) landowners control 3.1 million acres, or nearly 20%, of the forestland in Washington State. Results of a mail survey suggest that educated and informed NIPF landowners are more likely to show interest in ecosystem-based management programs. NIPF respondents in Washington State indicated an appreciation for the temporal vision and landscape perspective crucial to understanding the foundation of ecosystem management. NIPF landowners must be actively involved in the decision-making so that the process, for them, is one of self-governance. Providing landowners with opportunities for education and assistance may offer the best prospects for achieving ecosystem management objectives across diverse ownerships.

Washington's NIPF forested holdings total 3.1 million acres or nearly 20% of the state's total of commercial forestland. Landowners harvested nearly 1.2 billion board feet (Scribner scale) in 1998, accounting for 29.3% of the timber harvest in the state on a volume basis. However, the growing interest in Washington's NIPF lands goes far beyond their role in providing raw material for the state's solid wood and pulp paper products sectors. NIPF lands provide critically important environmental and recreational values to their owners and to the people of the state. These lands are also often highly sought after by developers for a wide variety of purposes and individuals seeking more a rural life style.

Both private and public landowners are facing challenges regarding society's view of forests and traditional forest management practices. Issues of water quality, forest fragmentation, endangered species and sustainable resource use are at the forefront. Ecological considerations of preserving biological diversity, and restoring ecosystem functioning, while providing a sustainable resource base are challenges for both professional natural resource managers and NIPF landowners.

Ecosystem management (EM) is a concept born from the challenge to develop forestry practices that are "...scientifically sound and socially acceptable..." (Salwasser 1990). Although the basic principles of EM have been a part of natural resource conservation since Aldo Leopold, the specifics were somewhat indefinable (Nelson, 1996). Government agencies have adopted many of the principles of EM in directing their land management activities, but there is still debate regarding the goals of EM and how they should be met (Yaffee 1996 b). A definition widely accepted by natural resource managers is, "...knowledge and technology can be used in actions to encourage desired conditions of ecosystems for environmental, economic, and social benefits, both now and for future generations" (Salwasser 1994). This definition has its limitations; the meaning of "desired condition" differs between individuals and among society as a whole. Nonetheless, there are some major elements of EM that are important. The first is that the scale of EM takes place over the long term, with a greater geographical expanse than do traditional management activities (Yaffee 1996 a). Second, management is centered around the relationships between the biotic and abiotic factors of an ecosystem, rather than on managing specific populations of organisms (Irland 1994; Salwasser 1994; Barnes 2000). Third, EM transcends the boundaries of geography, administration and ownership (Grumbine 1994). EM has yet to be officially applied to non-industrial private forestlands (Rickenbach et al. 1998) for a number of reasons. Because of its "across boundaries" approach and the implications of regulatory increases and loss of control, many NIPF landowners perceive EM as a means for the government to take away their private property rights (Brunson et al. 1996). Past studies indicate that many NIPF landowners in the US agree that, if necessary, private property rights should be limited in order to protect the environment (Jones et al. 1995). Under an ecosystem-based management regime, however, property rights issues may become a more significant deterrent to participation by private landowners (Rickenbach et al. 1998). Distrust of government by private landowners makes potential partnerships between private and public interests difficult. In order for EM to be successful both private and public forestlands must be involved.

In 1998 and 1999 a random sample of NIPF forestland owners was drawn from all forested counties in Washington. Sample sizes for each individual county were based on the proportion of NIPF lands in that county. A total of 800 names from western and 800 names from eastern Washington were drawn. Questionnaires were mailed to landowners during early fall of 1999 by the Washington State University Social and Economic Sciences Research Center (SESRC). The overall completion rate was 49%.

Survey results indicate that Washington's NIPF landowners have a strong sense of stewardship towards their forestlands. Although a variety of ownership objectives were presented, a large proportion of landowners identified several non-



monetary values of land ownership, including privacy of a rural setting, the satisfaction of owning land, the opportunity to contribute to fish and wildlife conservation, as well as income opportunities from commercial timber sales. These results are consistent with similar studies completed for other regions in the United States (Blatner et al. 1991; Brunson et al. 1996; Rickenbach et al. 1998). This suggests that NIPF landowners view their forests as a multi-use resource, such that they can achieve environmental, economic, and social benefits from their lands. However, recent studies suggest that voluntary participation by landowners in ecosystem management programs is often stalled by a fear of increased regulations (Raedeke et al. 2001).

Most respondents recognized the role of their forests in local communities and the region. They indicated an understanding that their forests operate in the larger system. Although a large percentage of respondents indicated a willingness to manage their forests across ownership boundaries, it is difficult to determine who would actually participate in such a program (Rickenbach et al. 1998). Cynicism towards public agencies, potential economic risks, and a distrust of neighbouring landowners may affect participation. However, most respondents indicated an appreciation for the temporal vision and landscape perspective crucial to understanding the foundation of EM. Many of these landowners are working professionals with above average incomes, are well educated, and although they may have small individual holdings, collectively they control a substantial amount of natural resources. Education can provide tools to help NIPF landowners meet management objectives while at the same time providing them with information necessary to make land-use decisions that are ecologically sound, economically sustainable and socially acceptable.

Intermingled ownerships make ecosystem management difficult and if the loss of decision-making power by an individual is potentially a result, this may dissuade even the most willing NIPF landowner from participating. Public agencies need to involve private landowners in ecosystem-based projects by using a more "place" based cross-boundary management approach (Cantrill 1998). NIPF landowners must be actively involved in the decision-making so that the process, for them, is one of self-governance (Weber 2000), and trust is created between both private and public stakeholders (Raedeke et al. 2001). This study, and similar ones carried out across the USA, suggests that better educated and informed NIPF landowners are more likely to show interest in ecosystem-based management programs. These objectives can be met through educational and assistance programs, and may provide the best opportunity for achieving ecosystem management objectives across diverse ownerships (Irland 1994; Sample 1994; Campbell et al. 1996; Raedeke et al. 2001).

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