RTI FACT SHEET **#18**
Rural Forest Community Issues

The Use of Forestry Education Programs by Small-scale Family Forest Landowners in Washington State: Does Ownership Size Make a Difference in Their Educational Needs?

The management challenges facing small-scale family forest landowners are unique. Forest fire danger, ecosystem fragmentation, and wildlife conflicts are among the issues facing forest landowners at the urban-rural interface. Many of these landowners are new to forest ownership, and although they may have small individual holdings, collectively they control a substantial amount of private and public resources (Blatner et al. 1991; Bliss et al. 1994). Washington State University Natural Resources Extension faces the increasing educational challenge of forest fragmentation and parcelization as more people move from the cities into the rural/urban interface. Rural communities are growing in population, resulting in an increase of forest landowners with smaller sized forest parcels (Sims 2000). This shift in forest landowner demographics, along with the significant political influence this group enjoys, underscores the importance of the small-scale forest landowner in Washington State. A recent study at Washington State University compared Washington small-scale family forest landowners owning forested properties in metropolitan counties to those with properties in rural counties. Using data from a 1999 survey of landowners, researchers identified the use of educational programs by forest landowners in metro and rural counties and the potential significance of acreage size on participation.

The results of this survey indicate that the county location of forestland (either in rural or metropolitan) has little to do with Non-industrial Private Landowner (NIPF) use of forestry educational programs. However, the survey does suggest that those educational programs currently available may be of more interest to larger acreage landowners than smaller acreage landowners, which implies the programs may not be meeting the needs of all the forest landowners in the state of Washington. Respondents in both large and small acreage classes had similar reasons for forestland ownership but indicated several different management interests and land-use activities, regardless of county classification. Moreover, landowners who had attended an extension educational program were more likely to actively manage their forestland for multiple uses, regardless of acreage size or county of ownership.

It is generally believed that forest landowners with larger acreages take a more active management approach, and with a more multi-use philosophy towards their forests than do landowners with smaller acreages (Blatner, et al. 1991; Jones, et al. 1995). The results of this study suggest that when provided with information and education, small acreage landowners are *just as likely* to actively manage their forests for multiple use, as are larger acreage owners. However, larger ownerships appear to use extension-based forestry programs and materials more often than do small ownerships. There are some possible explanations for this.

One reason is that natural resource and forestry extension programs have traditionally focused on impacting acres rather than individuals. For example, the coached planning classes are often advertised to landowners with 20 or more acres, although landowners with fewer than 20 acres are welcome to take the course. Also, many state run cost-share and incentive programs require a minimum of 20 acres for eligibility. However, with the increased parcelization of forests, targeting people instead of acres may provide the "biggest bang for the buck."

Respondents owning less than 20 acres were less interested in active management of their forests. These landowners may not have a significant volume of timber available for harvest because of the relative size of their holdings. Or their forests may be in a young age-class immediately after reforestation. Nonetheless, even if they are interested in alternative management programs, few are offered.

A second explanation may be that non-timber management educational programs of interest to small urban landowners, such as managing for songbirds and other wildlife viewing opportunities or non-timber products such as mushrooms, are not being offered.

A third reason may be unfamiliarity with available educational and technical programs. There has always been a feeling of disconnect between rural and urban communities regarding natural resource management, especially relating to forests. Forest owners that live in urban population centers and travel to their forestlands may feel they don't fit into the traditional forest landowner demographic. However, this demographic is changing as the boundaries between rural and urban landscapes becomes hazy. Indeed, this study supports the concept of the blurred rural-urban boundary, as there were no differences seen in landowner attitudes and interest between rural or metropolitan counties. The face of the forest landowner in Washington State is changing, possibly due to an ever increasing number of regulations and tough state Forest Practice rules. Many industrial forests are subdividing and selling off their forestlands in response to the "…increasing economic difficulties of meeting state and federal land-use regulations" (Thorud, 2000). People who desire a more rural lifestyle may be unaware of available forestry and natural resource extension programs. Forestry Extension needs to expand its strategies and formats to meet the challenges of the changing environment. The increased number of people moving from city centers into rural communities and the subsequent expansion of the rural-urban interface suggests that an effective approach in reaching more forest landowners in the state may be through partnering with traditionally urban associations. Organizations such as garden clubs, neighborhood associations, local non-profit groups, Master gardeners, and local libraries have existing information delivery systems that should be explored.

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