



Timber Harvesting on State, Federal, and Other Public Forest Lands

A Position of the Society of American Foresters

Originally adopted by SAF in December 2001 and last revised in June 2019. This position statement will expire in 2024, unless, after subsequent review, it is further extended by the SAF Board of Directors.

Purpose: Responsible timber harvesting serves a critical role in achieving social, environmental and economic values on publicly-owned forested lands.

Scope: Public forestlands include a broad array of ecosystems and landscape types, successional stages (age classes), ownership structures, management objectives, and historic origins or legal mandates in the public domain. As such, this position statement applies to the vast majority of public lands but cannot be 100% inclusive.

Position

The Society of American Foresters (SAF) supports responsible commercial and non-commercial timber harvesting as the primary means for maintaining and restoring resilient and sustainable forests and for providing financial returns from managed public lands. Timber harvests should be conducted in the most efficient and economically-viable manner possible while taking into consideration biological diversity and social factors. SAF believes that the use of renewable, recyclable, and biodegradable forest products from public lands is necessary to sustain functional ecosystems, meet societal material needs, and achieve public revenue objectives.

Scientific and social analysis shows that responsible harvesting using Best Management Practices (BMPs) is an effective mechanism for maintaining and/or restoring healthy, diverse forested landscapes that provide robust and mutually supportive complements of environmental, economic and social values. Although the relative emphasis of these values varies among public land ownership types and locations, it is essential that all values be considered as legitimate options in the management of public forestlands. Timber harvesting needs to be implemented at a scale large enough to address the myriad of current threats facing overstocked public forests. Most public forestlands are governed by laws and policies that allow or mandate sustainable timber harvesting with appropriate resource management planning. When planned and supervised by foresters with input from the public and other resource specialists, responsible timber harvesting supports, and often enhances, attributes such as fish and wildlife habitat, improved water quality, reliable water supplies and recreation.

Issue

For many decades, timber harvesting on public lands in the United States was an important source of socioeconomic benefits to society and a key means for foresters to meet diverse resource management objectives. However, public policy, litigation, and budget restrictions have greatly reduced public timber harvests in recent years. For example, harvests on our National Forests declined by 78% between 1987 and 2011, from 11.3 to 2.5 billion board feet (bbf) (USFS 2011)—a figure that is far below the long-term, renewable capacity of these lands (12.2 bbf cited in Fedkiw 1998). The uncertainty surrounding the long-term availability of, and access to, fiber from public forestlands is a barrier that limits new investments in logging equipment and capacity, manufacturing facilities, and innovative product sectors. Consequently, forestry and wood products manufacturing employment continues on a downward trend (Headwaters Economics EPS). As a result, in many locales, the infrastructure and capacity needed for emergency response efforts following natural events such as wildfires or blowdowns is inadequate to provide for public safety or forest restoration. The constraints placed on timber harvesting can impede forest managers' abilities to achieve forest plan objectives of: (1) maintaining forest health and resiliency; (2) controlling epidemic levels of insect damage; (3) mitigating the likelihood of catastrophic wildfire, including hazardous fuels reductions; (4) improving habitat for special-status plants and animals; and (5) producing sufficient revenue to pay for necessary forest infrastructure, ecosystem services and payments to local communities/schools.

Despite such concerns, some groups and political leaders continue to advocate major restrictions, including diameter limits on trees to be harvested, or even total bans on commercial timber harvest on public forestlands (RESTORE: The North Woods). These individuals perceive commercial activity on public forests as inappropriate, costly, and in conflict with multiple-use principles. However, deteriorating forest health and wildfire problems in many public forests indicate that continued or expanded restrictions may exacerbate environmental and socioeconomic concerns in affected areas. Similarly, demands for forest products continue to increase, and environmental impacts from the use of alternative materials or imported products can be significant.

The scope and severity of the wide-scale changes that American forests are currently experiencing highlights the need for active forest management in order to restore our forests and reverse the trend of these lands becoming an environmental risk. The economic prosperity, even viability, of many communities depends directly on revenue generated from timber harvesting on public lands. Given this link, harvests must be conducted efficiently and with close attention to economic factors, biological diversity, ecological conditions and social issues. Of critical importance is the scale of harvesting on public lands. Timber harvesting has critical restorative purposes, supports the concepts of sustainable development, and can go far to mitigate destructive pests, pathogens and catastrophic fires.

Background

Our Extensive Public Forestlands are Mandated to Meet Diverse Objectives

The United States has approximately 322 million acres of forestlands in public ownership (Oswalt et al. 2017), an area comparable to nearly all the states in the Eastern Time Zone. About a quarter (75 million acres) of these lands are designated as wilderness areas, parks, and other major reserves where harvest of commercial products is normally prohibited. A similar proportion are unproductive lands as classified by forest inventory data. Approximately 158 million remaining acres of public forestlands are eligible for commercial use, including timber harvesting, under the current policies and laws governing the management of these lands. About 113 million acres of these productive forestlands are in federal ownership, and 45 million acres are state, county, and municipal lands.

The 158 million acres of unreserved, productive public forestlands in the US have been established and managed under laws that typically allow or even mandate sustainable harvests. For example, the Organic Act of 1897 directs federal forest managers “to improve and protect the forest, [secure] favorable conditions of water flows, and to furnish a continuous supply of timber for the use and necessities of the citizens of the US” In the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960, “multiple-use” is defined as “the management of all the various renewable surface resources of the national forests so that they are utilized in the combination that they will best meet the needs of the American people”. Legislation also direct a significant proportion of the revenue from such harvests to local governments. Similarly, many state and local policies require that public forestlands be managed to produce sustainable revenues to counties, schools, and local taxing districts.

Timber Harvesting Yields Considerable Economic Benefits Across Multiple Sectors, Yet Capacity Constraints Exist

America’s wood products and paper manufacturing sector employs approximately 950,000 workers, representing nearly 4% of manufacturing jobs in the US with over \$300 billion in products annually (AF&PA, 2019). The industry meets a payroll of approximately \$50 billion annually and is among the top 10 manufacturing sector employers in 45 states (AF&PA, 2018). This includes hundreds of thousands of jobs in logging, trucking, road construction, and forest and management services. Additionally, timber harvesting provides products with relatively minor environmental costs relative to products from nonrenewable resources and economic benefits to local communities. Harvesting fosters extensive, resilient forests that attract both visitors and businesses.

Many rural communities in the western United States have lost forest products infrastructure and are challenged with minimal access to forest markets. Transportation costs to mills are prohibitively expensive, which deters renewed active forest management in many rural areas. In order to achieve management goals (e.g. wildfire management or ecosystem restoration) and economic benefits, investment in renewed infrastructure is needed. Recently, successful Farm Bill Authorization Programs provide examples. End-Result Stewardship Contracting, Joint Chiefs, Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, and Good Neighbor projects have all enhanced effective management by empowering agencies through collaboration and by leveraging the collective capacity and resources of diverse partners. Project life extensions are providing more certainty and consistency of timber supply to sustain and attract/entice new investments in forest products infrastructure.

There are opportunity costs to not harvesting our public forests

A strong historical, worldwide demand exists for forest-related products. We require in contemporary society such things as paper, wood furniture, warmth from heat, lumber, etc. This demand can be met by harvesting here in the U.S., or elsewhere. If the latter, the result is an increase in harvesting from other ownerships, regions, and countries, many that have far less stringent environmental standards or are much less productive (i.e., more acres must be harvested for similar yields). The demand can also be met by alternative materials, principally steel and concrete. These materials pale in comparison to forest products in terms of embodied energy/carbon emissions (Glover et al. 2002) and sustainability. Reduced harvesting presents a substantial opportunity cost and eliminates one key method of reducing carbon emissions, a critical worldwide issue affecting economics, human health, migration, etc. Further, these alternatives have no capacity to filter particulate emissions, are expensive to recycle and slow to biodegrade, all major economic/environmental costs to society.

Timber Harvesting is a Proactive Restorative Tool that Fosters Multiple-Use Objectives

Timber harvesting has a critical restorative purpose that is increasingly needed for promoting forest resilience. Public forests are constantly changing. Trees and other vegetation grow, shed branches and foliage, compete for space and nutrients, and eventually die from crowding, insect or disease infestations, or wildfire. Many public forests in America are currently susceptible to fire, disease, pests, blowdowns or are not meeting resource management objectives. Timber harvesting is a tool that can move or expedite a forest towards a desired condition while capturing economic value in the process. Revenues from timber harvests help to fund a wide range of resource management activities such as infrastructure, safe and accessible public recreational areas, reforestation/regeneration measures, watershed and water quality protection, wildlife conservation and habitat enhancements, and biological diversity. These activities are made possible because of the equipment and skilled personnel provided by local commercial operations. Resource professionals recognize that harvest plans and locations must vary according to site conditions and management objectives. The process of planning and implementing silvicultural prescriptions is grounded in an ever-increasing accumulation of research and data. Furthermore, their decisions are vetted through a layered tier of supervisors, interdisciplinary colleagues and resource specialists, and public stakeholder review/comment periods to arrive at balanced, optimum results.

Although the concept of sustainable forestry is widely endorsed in the US, this approach for integrating environmental, economic and social values (e.g., sustainability pillars) is not consistently applied in public forest management. Timber harvesting is often excluded or greatly curtailed due to negative public sentiment, despite laws and policies that provide strong protections for social and environmental values in conjunction with economic goals. Timber harvest planning and practices continue to respond to evolving knowledge, public concerns and laws for protecting diverse resource values. Efficient planning and avoidance of unnecessary litigation and administrative delays will improve the environmental, social and economic benefits of harvesting activities. Where major concerns for other values are identified by site-specific assessments and collaborative planning, timber harvests can be minimized, adjusted or even locally restricted on public lands. In contrast, broad prohibitions provide no flexibility and do nothing to address concerns such as America's rapidly declining forest health and increasing wildfire hazards. Such prohibitions would trade manageable, short-term risks for the largely uncontrollable, unyielding forces of nature, with potentially far greater costs (e.g., Mason et al. 2006) and environmental damage to the values that are the focus of such "protection" measures.

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