



ILLINOIS FORESTRY IN FOCUS

February 2017

Planning to harvest timber? Consider hiring a consultant

How many forest landowners have had a knock on their door from someone offering to buy their timber? How much timber in Illinois is sold with only a handshake deal? How many acres of forest are still being high-graded by poor logging practices? The answer to all three questions is *'a lot'*. Most forest landowners will conduct a timber harvest at some point, even if it is not their primary objective for owning the forest. In fact, a timber harvest, when done right, can improve a forest and increase wildlife value.

Forestry consultants can and should play an important role in private lands timber sales. Consulting foresters are forestry experts that landowners can hire to assist them in all aspects of forest management. In terms of a harvest, typically a consultant forester is not a timber buyer or logger. Instead, a consultant forester is paid to act on your behalf and in your best interest, facilitating all of the steps of a timber harvest for you. In return for this expertise, a portion of the proceeds of a timber sale will go to the forester.

There are plenty of great, responsible loggers and timber buyers out there in Illinois. However, even when using a responsible logger, it is still to the landowner's advantage to have a forestry expert representing their interest and helping to navigate the process of selling timber. A landowner may only sell timber one or two times in their life, but it is a major and recurring activity for a consultant forester.

Having an expert on-your-side seems like an obvious choice, but is it worth the expense? Let's take a closer look at the benefits of using a consultant forester to help conduct a timber harvest.

Marking timber with future forest conditions in mind and in-line with forest management plan

Timber harvest is usually a money-making venture, but if done right, it serves as management technique that can be used to improve your forest. A harvest should remove undesirable trees from the canopy to give more desirable trees room to go. Sometimes these undesirable trees have little timber value, so they may not be taken with just a hand-shake deal with a logger. Having a consultant forester choose and mark which trees will be harvested in your timber sale can help insure that lower value and less desirable trees are removed during the harvest and the species composition and genetics of your forest are improved with the cut.





Photo by Chris Evans

A timber harvest should focus on improving the quality of a forest by removing poor form and undesirable trees along with higher quality trees that are ready to harvest.

If you have a Forest Stewardship Plan (and you should have one!), the consultant forester will incorporate the sale into the other activities in the plan and other management goals that the landowner may have. For example, if wildlife habitat is an objective in the plan, the forester can leave den trees and snags, make sure wildlife-friendly tree species are left standing, and locate log yards in good locations for future food plots.

Competition for timber

Having multiple buyers all competing for the right to buy the landowner's timber will increase bid amounts and maximize profit for the landowner.

All buyers will not offer the same amount. Several recent timber sales in Illinois have shown bids for the same timber can vary by \$50,000 or more.

Data from a consultant forester on seven different hardwood timber sales from northern Illinois and Iowa found that bid amounts varied greatly. On average the highest bid was 83% more than the lowest bid. Clearly it pays a landowner to advertise their sale to multiple timber buyers. A consultant forester knows the current timber markets and will provide a realistic estimate of the dollar value of your timber. They will invite multiple timber buyers to bid on your timber, conduct site visits with potential timber buyers, and provide buyers with the necessary information for them to produce a bid. A recent study found that consultant-aided timber sales generated 78% higher prices for the landowner than non-aided sales.

Creating a sound contract that is fair to both the landowner and timber buyer

A sound contract brings piece of mind. A consultant forester can create a contract that incorporates all aspects of selling timber, including soil and water protection, clear delineation of boundaries, reimbursement for accidental damage, location of log yards and trails, post-harvest clean-up, and project approval.

There for you, in case anything goes wrong

As Robert Burns put it "The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry". No matter how thorough the plan, something may go wrong during a timber harvest. Having an experienced consultant forester there to manage the timber harvest can help navigate any unforeseen complications.

Avoid High Grading

High grading is simply cutting the best and leaving the rest. Only the best (highest-grade or most valuable) timber is removed during a timber harvest, leaving the undesirable species or poor-form trees to dominate the canopy. This type of cutting maximizes one-time economic profit at the expense of future economic returns and the health of your forest. Unfortunately, this is an all-too-common practice when timber is sold without the aid of a consultant forester. High-grading, sometimes referred to as a "diameter limit cut," diminishes the potential of a forest, shifts the composition to less desirable species, and greatly reduces future economic returns. These negative impacts can last for decades. Be wary if someone offers to "Take all of the big trees to let the little ones grow". The best way to protect the future of a forest is to hire a consulting forester to select/mark harvest trees and administer the sale.

Finding a Consultant Forester

The University of Illinois Extension Forestry Program maintains a directory of consulting foresters. The 2016 directory is available for download at <https://uofi.box.com/v/consultingforesterdirectory>. You can also find the latest version from the home page of the Illinois Forestry Association's website under "Find a Forester" <http://ilforestry.org>. This is a great resource for landowners to find consulting foresters that cover their region.

It is important that the consulting forester is a good match with the landowner. A landowner may want to speak with several foresters before choosing one.

Questions to ask when choosing a consultant forester

What are your educational qualifications, and what kind of experience do you have with timber sales? Consultants should have at least one degree in forestry or natural resource management and have experience facilitating timber sales.

Are you a member of any professional forestry organizations? This is not a necessity, but it can indicate a commitment to the forestry discipline and continued professional development.

When can you start working on my timber sale? Consulting foresters are busy people, so it is important that a landowner has a clear understanding of the timeline that each consultant has available to complete their timber sale.

What are your fees? Consultant foresters provide a valuable service, so we can't expect them to work for free! They typically charge somewhere between 8-12% commission for a timber sale. Others may charge a flat rate or a certain hourly or per-acre cost, particularly if they are only doing a specific activity, such as marking trees or valuing timber. The increase in revenue from the timber sale is likely to more than offset consultant fees, yielding a higher economic return for the landowner.

What are the exact services you will provide to me during the timber sale? This is important because a lot is going on during a timber harvest. A landowner needs to know which aspects the consultant will handle. Typical duties include selecting and marking trees for harvest, confirming and marking property boundaries, assembling a timber sale announcement, advertising the sale and inviting timber buyers to bid, creating and administering the sale contract, and monitoring the timber harvest and post-harvest clean-up specified in the contract.

Can you provide me with references? Definitely follow up with references provided. In particular, talk to landowners that have used the forester for timber sales in the past.

Once a forester is selected, create a contract with the consultant that specifies the exact nature of the work, the method of determining a fee, cost estimates, and a time schedule for starting and completing the work.

In summary, it is definitely in the landowner's best interest to use a consulting forester for a timber harvest. Benefits include better economic return, a smoother process, and a healthier post-harvest forest.



Photo by Chris Evans

A timber harvest contract should include practices that protect soil and water, including water ladders installed on skid trails on slopes.

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