Technical Ambiguity

Among the traits that identify a professional group is a body of precise technical terminology that, though often regarded as tedious by laypersons, facilitates unambiguous communication among members of the profession. Therefore, I expect the JOURNAL OF FORESTRY, a major organ of communication in the forestry profession, to use correct terminology in its technical articles.

So I was surprised to read in “Growth and Yield of Thinned and Unthinned Plantations” by Amateis et al. in the December issue, “Selection thinning from below alters the diameter distribution by concentrating the growth on the larger residual trees.”

The first four words qualify as an oxymoron. The official SAF Silviculture Working Group terminology defines selection thinning as “the removal of trees...in the dominant crown class in order to favor the lower crown classes.” Similar definitions are given by R.D. Nyland (1996, Silviculture Concepts and Application) and D.M. Smith et al. (1997, The Practice of Silviculture: Applied Forest Ecology). So selection thinning actually is from above. What the authors meant to say could have been clearly conveyed by omitting the word selection or by using instead the word selective. As it stands, their statement is contradictory and an example of sloppy, imprecise technical writing.

Unfortunately, the term selection thinning is in general problematic because it is so easily confused with several other silvicultural concepts, such as selective thinning or the single-tree selection reproduction system. Try explaining these nuances to beginning silviculture students! Both Nyland and Smith et al. refer to the synonym thinning of dominants for this method. I suggest in the future that we simply call it dominant thinning. Although not a momentous issue in the larger scheme of things, this change will be a step in the direction of clear and unambiguous communication in our
Letters

A Misinterpreted Message

In his letter in the December issue of the *Journal* ("Long-Term Investment Strategies"), James A. Rinehart usefully amplifies the enormous opportunity that remains to expand institutional investment in timber.

We do, however, believe he has misinterpreted one of the fundamental messages of our paper. Quoting our paper, he says, "...the conclusion that risk-adjusted returns to timberland 'may actually be lower' than the yield available from financial markets strikes me as weakly supported (p. 32)." What we actually said (quoting the original paper) is, "...we now understand that the appropriate, risk-adjusted guiding rates of interest for timberland may actually be lower than the yields available from financial markets taken as a whole" (p. 27). This is one of the take-home messages of figure 4.

Historically, forest economists have recommended using guiding rates of interest (sometimes called hurdle or discount rates) equal to the returns on stocks and bonds (the "financial markets taken as a whole") plus some amount to account for the putatively high risk of timberland. Instead, we show that the appropriate rate is the market rate minus an amount to account for risk. That is, timberlands may carry less risk than ordinary financial assets, and therefore timberland investments should be evaluated with a lower hurdle rate than what would be applied to other classes of assets. We say "may" because circumstances differ among regions of the country, according to age of the trees and because of other risk factors that may be priced. All of these considerations cannot be simply treated in a short article.

We hope this clears up any confusion that our article might have left in readers’ minds.

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Vancouver, BC, Canada
Charles F. Raper
Auburn, Alabama
Courtland L. Wasburn
Boston, Massachusetts

Private Potential for Biodiversity

Industrial foresters have little interest in extending the harvest cycle to 100 years because the trees grow slower and the increased management costs of a mixed-species stand are not compatible with the economic objectives of most companies ("The Market Incentive for Biodiversity," January 1997 *Journal*). Public lands (both federal and state) are often excluded from thinning, micromanagement to control disease, and timely salvage of storm-damaged trees. This leaves the nonindustrial landowner as the one who has the greatest potential for providing biodiversity in our forests, but there are many regulations and tax laws that make this unlikely.

The inheritance tax is one of the most damaging disincentives to extending the harvest cycle and developing improved wildlife habitat in nonindustrial private forests. As prices for quality logs have escalated, even a small tract of forestland will be valued over $600,000. When the inheritance tax demands 55 percent of appraised value and the trees are growing at less than 2 percent annually, there is no alternative to liquidating a large portion of the standing timber.

I was puzzled by Lippke and Fretwell's suggestion that noncommercial thinning could be used to accelerate the rate at which we restore biodiversity in immature forests. It has been my observation that single-grip harvesters, with their high production rates, and the elevated prices for chipped fiber could justify a commercial thinning when the trees are 18 to 22 years old. If thinning is done again after 10 years and shade-tolerant species are encouraged to grow under the differentiating canopy, biodiversity could be economically achieved at an early age. The authors propose to use improved wood quality and economic incentives to drive the forest industry toward biodiversity and longer harvest rotations. Have they also considered the possibility of hand-pruning crop trees, thereby assuring a greater percentage of knot-free wood, as a further enhancement of this objective?

There are more than two million nonindustrial tree farmers in this nation. They will further refine their forest management and enhance forest diversity if market incentives are provided and there is some assurance that the rules will not change in a few years, jeopardizing their investment. Such incentives would yield public benefits by increasing both tax revenues and recreational environs.

John Belton
Seattle, Washington

In Service to the Public

Thank you for Carlton Owen's perspective ("A Forester's Top 10 Predictions") in the February *Journal*. I haven't seen such a clearheaded piece of writing about our profession in a long time.

How right he is that society should and will do with its forests as it chooses. Forestry is a service profession—the measure of our success is in how well we help society achieve its aims. These aims are changing and will always change; we must listen and adapt if we wish to continue to serve
We foresters have a proud record of service to society, and it’s natural that in these tumultuous times many of us have “bowed up” in response to society’s changing priorities. We will do well, however, to shift our focus from defending ourselves to seeking ways we can use our extensive abilities and knowledge to, as Owen put it, “work with the world public to manage in accord with their expectations.”

The constructive and positive tone of Owen’s column was a breath of fresh air!

Kathryn H. Robie
Atlanta, Georgia

Who’s Running the Business?
Carlton Owen’s PERSPECTIVE is a little disheartening. I doubt that he wants some of his predictions to come true, although some of his fixes appear to be what he thinks is best for forestry. At any rate, it is a warning.

He indicates that forest management will be dictated by the public (even on private land) and that management will be done on a landscape basis (also on private land). I can’t think of anything worse. Why have a profession if laymen, knowing little about forestry or the resource, tell us how to run our business? Ridiculous. We can look at management on public lands, where “the public” has considerable input, and see inefficient, ineffective, and weakly managed forests. Public lands should be a substantial contributor to the wealth of the country.

Landscape management crosses property lines. If this happens, private property rights go down the drain. The free enterprise system, which is based on the ownership of property, could well follow. What a socialist mess we would have.

We must mount a strong educational effort. I believe Vice-President Karl Wenger will champion that cause Let’s support him.

Ecosystem management, or landscape management, is an ill-conceived concept. It is a major threat to private property rights and may result in more restrictive regulation unless we stop it. I believe President Harry Wiant is articulating the proper course to fight this threat. Let’s support him.

Wasn’t there a book entitled 1984 that told us Big Brother would dominate our lives by that year? Thankfully, it didn’t happen, but Big Brother is still alive and healthy. Maybe we can get to work and turn him into Charlie Conservative by 2020.

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The JOURNAL welcomes letters referring to ideas or facts raised in the JOURNAL OF FORESTRY within the last six months. Letters referring to general professional discussions or events, or to SAF policies and activities, should be directed to The Forestry Source.

Letters should be no longer than 350 words and are printed as space permits. All letters are subject to editing; significant changes only will be cleared with correspondents. Prior to publication, authors are offered the opportunity to respond to letters pertaining to their articles. Such comments are also limited to 350 words. Please include full name, address, and phone or fax numbers.

Letters may be faxed to (301) 897-3690, attention Rebecca Staebler, or sent via e-mail: staebler@safrnet.org.