LETTERS

What’s Happening in the Woods

Thanks to Fischer, Ruseva, and Smith for their thoughtful responses to “What’s Happening in the Woods” in the September issue. Although each explores different aspects of the two questions we posed, it is important to note that apparently we all agree on one thing: destructive logging and harvesting without forester involvement on America’s private woodlands deserves the attention of the forestry community, a serious discussion, and timely action. Smith concludes his remarks by saying “the order of the day is leadership and action.”

We agree with Fischer and Ruseva that there is no single solution to destructive logging and also with their suggestion that foresters should collaborate with all potentially affected interests (PAI) if workable solutions are to be realized. However, before effective collaboration is possible, foresters themselves need to develop a consensus on the issue. We agree with the observation that foresters will not be able to resolve this problem by themselves. Any progress will require a concerted effort with all PAI, which should probably start with the recognition that destructive logging is a problem and that silviculture is an important part of the solution. However, if SAF cannot even agree on the value of a position statement (for example), it seems premature to begin collaborating with others to develop solutions to the problem.

Fischer and Ruseva make the point that there are many contributing factors, and Smith opines that “the problem is probably much more complex than the present discussion implies.” We agree, the issue is complicated, and there are no simple solutions. However, the complexity of the situation should not be used as an excuse for inaction by SAF. We suggest that, at the very least, SAF could develop a position statement on high-grading and diameter-limit cutting and promote the use of a professional forester and silviculture whenever timber is harvested. Ironically, SAF has a national position statement on subdivision and development (Loss of Forest Land) but has nothing on destructive harvesting practices.

Smith believes that our first question “Why are so many acres of nonindustrial private forest lands harvested without the involvement of a forester?” is the most important of the two questions because the amount of destructive harvesting is often a result of the lack of a forester’s involvement. We are not as confident that the involvement of a forester ensures a silviculturally sound timber harvest. For example, a training session sponsored by the Watershed Agricultural Council for foresters working in the New York City watershed was held this fall. One of the presenters discussed “The Influence of Forest Management Plans on Best Management Practices and Sustained Yield Management on Family Forests” within the watershed. His report showed that watershed management plans result in better best management practices implementation. However there was no significant silvicultural difference between loggers’ choice harvests and those with forester involvement. According to this report, high-grading is common, even when foresters are involved.

Finally, we hope other readers noticed the relationship between the questions Daniel Goerlich posed about the involvement of foresters in the parcelization of timberland (“Are We Playing the Game the Best We Can?”, September 2010) and our concerns about destructive timber harvesting. One consequence of destructive logging is a loss of future timber productivity and value. This probably makes the land more vulnerable to conversion to nonforest uses that offer the possibility of higher economic returns. Goerlich points out that, by our Code of Ethics, SAF members have pledged to advocate management that will maintain the long-term capacity of the land. What does it mean to be a professional forester and a member of SAF? His question “Are we only playing the game?” is pertinent to both situations.

Michael Greason
James E. Coufal
Carl Wiedemann

Jim Coufal, Carl Wiedemann, and Michael Greason in “What’s Happening in the Woods” lament the lack of forester involvement in the management of nonindustrial private forests. Lamentable it may be, but possibly not entirely mysterious. The authors present a forestry tenet “Timber harvesting drives most management for all values,” something I too used to believe but possibly not an attractant to all owners of private forests classified as nonindustrial. These owners appear to be faced with more than the two options inferred by the authors, forester involvement or questionable management. This may explain the cited 47% of harvests in Pennsylvania, surely some without forester involvement, reported as “sustainable.” Then too, there is the almost embarrassing proportion of what is not bad management that is the pleasurable application in the woods of experience and common sense.

A term repeatedly used in the article that should be expunged from forestry is “high-grading.” The term, as defined by SAF, calling for leaving a residual of “low value,” outlaws destructive logging but also legitimate clearcutting and some harvesting of the rewards of patiently produced mature forests in irregular forests just because of their high grade. The definition of low value is apparently a loose cannon. According to the article, foresters seem quick to condemn residuals to values low enough for rejection almost on aesthetic grounds, such as “removal of most big trees,” “severely understocked,” “fewer trees,” “no matures,” “unsustainable,” “little or no forest,” or “the rest.” Some of these unfortunates appear simply victims of mathematics. However unsightly a residual, at least in mixed hardwood forest headed for a different future market, if left alone it may still have or be expected to acquire naturally within a reasonable period, without unneeded close spacing, enough seedlings, saplings, or poles of acceptable species for a more advanced start than alternative replants.

A term described as “destructive logging” is “diameter-limit cutting.” One source cites this better than to cut at all, and yet another reports improved forests so cut in half the cases. Even in sophisticated ecosystem management with compatible timber production included, the measure of sustainability and when to harvest usually comes down to dbh. In extensive unmanaged forests of the world where conservation practices are hardly achievable, diameter limits have proven a stopgap simple to require with compliance discernable in the cut and in the forest, sparing immatures that

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