Forestry in the Smallest State

Thomas A. Dupree

Having served as state forester for more than a dozen years now in the smallest state in the union, on occasion I find myself looking back to see where my feet have traveled. No, I have not been circling Rhode Island's only tree, but I do frequently ask myself if forestry's footprints can be seen. The state has lost 26,000 acres to suburban sprawl during the past 10 years without gaining any population. The city of Providence occupies approximately 13,000 acres. You can do the math. It's no secret that our primary concern is fragmentation of the resource base and how we can initiate change to secure our forestry future. The state, while being the second most densely populated, is still 56 percent forested, although the average landowner owns only 10 acres.

Bernhard Fernow advised the state in 1897, "Forests in the strict sense of the word can hardly be said to exist in this state. Although 24 percent is reported covered with wood, it is mostly coppice and white pine or pitch pine which here or there may be said to rise to the dignity of forests."

A document from the 1930s known as the Hawes Report stated that "a deliberate policy of promoting forests and providing adequate fire protection could result in a forest of nearly 600 million feet or even a billion board feet by the end of the century." The forest inventory and analysis crew is currently at work (although they're four years late), and it's my guess that 100 years after Fernow's visit, the forest will exceed one billion board feet.

Now consider our primary industries that utilize the resource. Of the 20 or so sawmills that are operating, only a few have more than a couple of employees. Any sizable mill operation needs to draw on the resource base of Connecticut and Massachusetts, as well as Rhode Island. Within a 75-mile hauling radius, these mills encounter at least 300 government bureaucracies, each local government responding to the hysteria of the chainsaw in its own way. Needless to say, I've received no phone calls from Georgia-Pacific looking to locate a new sawmill here.

Where do we go from here and how do our forestry efforts become relevant? The focal point for our efforts needs to be decisionmaking at the community level. Communities are making choices every day that can negatively affect private woodland owners and wood-using industries and their cumulative ability to manage natural resources. In the past we have focused on forest landowners; now it is important that we move the cross hairs to a different target. Reaching 30,000 landowners in my state is not going to happen one-on-one. Reaching 39 cities and towns, 25 of them heavily forested, is where we need to be. Grant avenues are needed that will enable state forestry agencies to work directly with communities, providing sorely needed assistance with planning for growth in ways that protect forest resources.

With the help of the USDA Forest Service, we've achieved some success working through a nonprofit corporation, the Southern New England Forest Consortium. The consortium has enabled the state foresters within the region to communicate specific messages to community leaders, tax assessors, town planners, and conservation commissioners. The organization's "Cost of Community Services Study," which evaluated the fiscal impact of residential development and highlighted the economic importance of protecting open space, received two regional planning awards, affording a high level of visibility for forestry issues. More importantly, the study served as a catalyst for new efforts to mitigate sprawl and protect open space in Rhode Island. The Rhode Island Rural Lands Coalition and Grow Smart Rhode Island are groups that are focusing on policy changes necessary to manage fragmentation. Foresters in our state are playing leading roles in these efforts.

What, then, do we do to improve our utilization of Rhode Island's one billion board feet? When it comes to timber, I guarantee that we're gonna use some, save some, lose some, and waste some. Resource fragmentation in this region will continue to hamper our efforts to promote primary industry. Our best strategy is to focus on simple and succinct messages aimed at state and community leaders. We need to lead the discussions regarding flexible zoning, transferring development rights, and other inventive land protection strategies, especially within rural communities that have limited planning expertise.

One final thought. I got a call not long ago from a popular manufacturer of small, portable sawmills. While doing marketing research, the company noticed it had recently sold 30 sawmills in Rhode Island, a sizable number for a state with only 300,000 acres of nonindustrial private forest. The company wanted to know why. I guess it all comes down to size.

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