

# The New York Forest Owner

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*For people caring about New York's trees and forests*

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# Ask A Professional

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*Landowner questions are addressed by foresters and other natural resources professionals. Landowners should be careful when interpreting answers and applying this general advice to their property because landowner objectives and property conditions will influence specific management options. When in doubt, check with your regional DEC office or other service providers. Landowners are also encouraged to be active participants in Cornell Cooperative Extension and NYFOA programs to gain additional, often site-specific, answers to questions. To submit a question, email to Peter Smallidge at [pjs23@cornell.edu](mailto:pjs23@cornell.edu) with an explicit mention of "Ask a Professional." Additional reading on various topics is available at [www.forestconnect.info](http://www.forestconnect.info)*

## What do you want, and how do you get there? Planning to optimize productivity in your woodland.

### Question:

I retire in two years and we're excited to think about being more involved in our woodlot. What can we be doing now to prepare for what we might want to do? We're not even sure what we want or how to accomplish anything. (Ron, CDC)

### Answer:

A woodlot owner's goal in owning a woodlot is likely to enjoy the property as well as to benefit in some way from their ownership. The two general steps to this success are to (1) identify what you want from your woods and (2) set a path to acquire what you want. The woodlot jargon for these steps are: to know your ownership objectives and to have a management plan.

### Ownership Objectives

The quality and character of your woodlot will depend on what you do, or don't do, with those lands. Defining your forest management objectives will ultimately help you maintain or improve the quality and character of your forest. The pivotal and perhaps most important step is to know your objectives, clearly and explicitly. The range of services available

to help you recognize your ownership objectives illustrates the great value placed on this step.

Clearly stated objectives provide direction, simplify the decision-making process, and provide a basis to gauge success. Your management objectives reflect what you value about your woods. What you value might include tangible outputs (e.g., firewood, maple syrup, revenue), intangible outputs (e.g., time with family, privacy, sunsets), or how your

land is part of a larger forested landscape. It is helpful to make your objectives as specific as possible to know that most objectives are compatible (Figure 1), and include others who are or soon will be decisions makers about the property.

The first step in stating your management objectives is thinking about your woodlot—why you own your woods, what you like about it, and how you want it to look in 5, 10, 20, or more years. Many people own woodlands because they inherited them, purchased them as a place of sanctuary, or purchased them for investment purposes. This is a start for your objectives as it explains perhaps a sentimental value, the value of retreat or seclusion, the value of an investment, or most likely some combination of the three. You may like to visit the area where you had a pleasant experience with a family member, a scenic overlook, the spot where you can always flush a grouse or run a rabbit, or the stand of red oak or sugar maple that will someday help support you in retirement. Finally, the vision of your future woods is probably closely aligned with what you like about your woods, although you know your woods will change through time. For example, keeping the memorable spot unchanged, ready access to grouse cover, or an increase in the sawtimber value of your oak or maple stand. Again,



*Figure 1. Many objectives are complementary. This woods was thinned to remove trees of low vigor and improve tree growth. The skid trails were positioned to support the owners interests in cross-country skiing and bird watching.*



*Figure 2. Master Forest Owner volunteers bring their experiences as woodland owners on free visits to other woodland owners. The volunteers offer non-technical advice (such as a forester would provide), and can direct the owner to useful people and educational resources. (photo credit B. Blair)*

those things you value help define your ownership objectives. These thoughts and visions provide the direction and the standards for successful management.

The next step is to ensure your objectives are mutually compatible and realistic for your forest. This is where some owners start to have uncertainty, but there are several sources of assistance available.

### ***Master Forest Owner Volunteers***

One resource is a group of woodland landowners like you who are volunteers and trained by Cornell Cooperative Extension as Master Forest Owner (MFOs) volunteers. MFOs are not foresters, they are woodland owners trained to assist other woodland owners (Figure 2). From their experience as a fellow owner, they can help you think through your objectives and how those objectives might fit with your property. They can help you find educational resources to inform your

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*Figure 3. The New York Forest Owners Association (NYFOA.org) and other similar groups often host tours of private woodlands. These events give owners the opportunity to talk with other owners, see activities, and learn about the people and resources available to help with planning and management.*



*Figure 4. This woods was previously thinned to improve the growth of the best trees that are most suited to the local soils. As a result there was a change in the habitat to allow more sunlight and growth in the understory. One action often has multiple outcomes.*

planning and decisionmaking, that likely include written publications at [www.ForestConnect.info](http://www.ForestConnect.info) or archived webinars at [www.youtube.com/ForestConnect](http://www.youtube.com/ForestConnect), and a variety of other materials. A good initial document is the *Forest Resource Guide for Landowners*, something close to an “owner’s manual” which is a free download at <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/69464>. Typically, MFOs will schedule a half-day visit with you to your forest, listen to what you value, and help you think about your potential management options. Learn more about a visit from an MFO volunteer at [www.CornellMFO.info](http://www.CornellMFO.info)

Relevant organizations that many MFOs and other woodland owners belong to are the New York Forest Owners Association (NYFOA) and the Catskill Forest Association (CFA). NYFOA and CFA are active, landowner-based organizations full of good information and good people. Forest landowners that are members of NYFOA and CFA often lead woods walks (Figure 3) or may be available to discuss forestry with you.

#### **Department of Environmental Conservation**

Another option for assistance in identifying and assessing your ownership

objectives are the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation public service foresters, or something similar in other states. The DEC public service foresters are trained professional foresters, and will visit with you free of charge to discuss your ownership objectives. As professionals, DEC foresters can provide technical guidance on forest management questions. Like MFOs, the public service forester is a good listener and will help you think about the compatibility and synergies of your objectives. The differences between MFOs and DEC foresters are complementary. An MFO cannot write plans or make management prescriptions, but probably can visit with you sooner than a DEC forester, and the MFO can relate to you as a woodland owner. Although the MFO will likely recommend you contact a DEC forester, the MFO will help prepare you to optimally utilize your time with a DEC forester.

Depending on your interests and needs, the MFO or DEC service forester may suggest you engage a professional private consulting forester. Because private consulting foresters provide fee-based services, woodland owners are best positioned if they have their objectives well defined. You can learn more about

woodland owner support at <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/4972.html>.

#### **Management Planning**

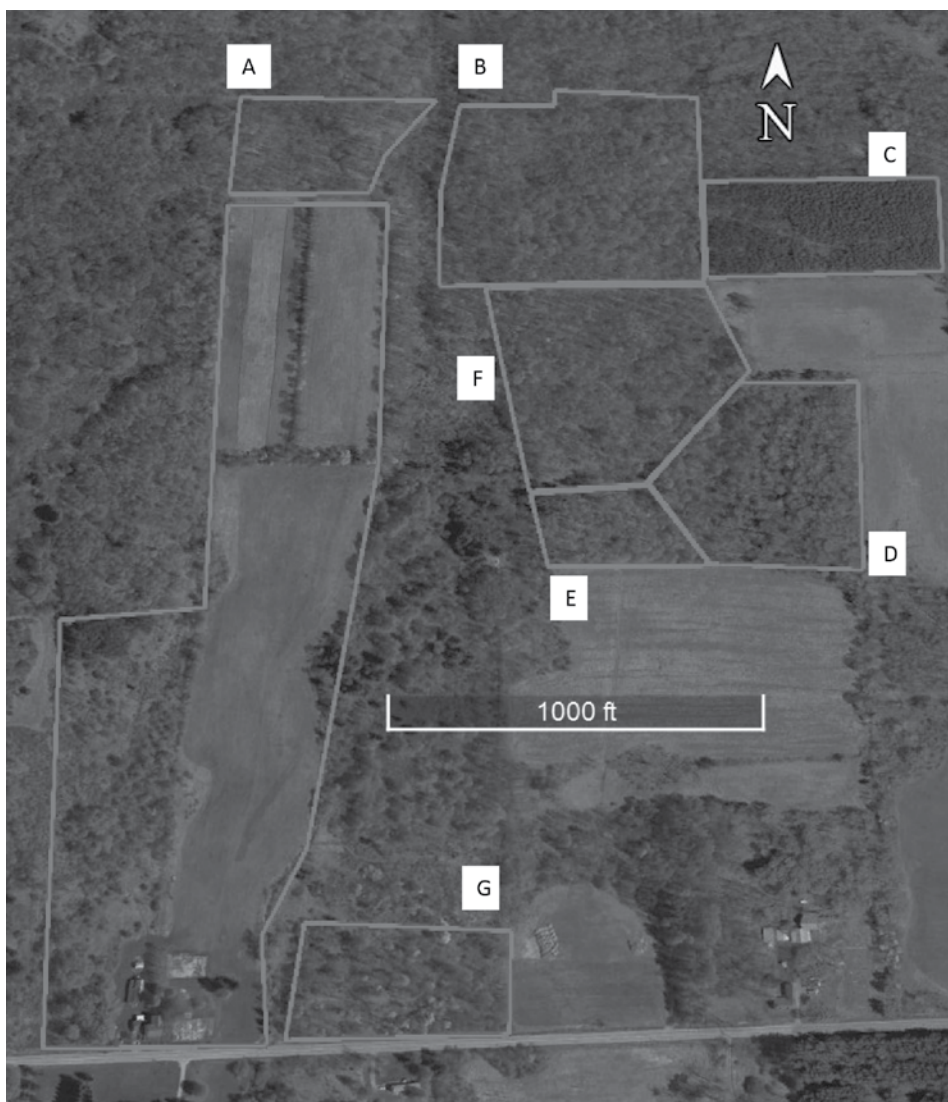
The planning that you do for your woodlot or forestland is not a difficult process and provides numerous benefits. If you have planned a vacation or a wedding, then you are capable of the planning necessary to get the most from your woodlot. Developing a plan for your woods, a task usually completed by a forester, must include your ownership objectives.

The planning process will involve some thinking on your part, discussions with your spouse, children, or co-owners, collection of resource materials, and working with a forester for technical and professional assistance. These are easy but necessary steps; the good news is that much of this can be accomplished for free or with minimal expense. The expenses you do incur may be tax deductible depending on your situation and will be offset by gains in the efficiency of management and the benefits you receive from your property.

A plan for your woodlot provides benefits that are aesthetic, economic, and logistical in nature. A plan allows landowners to integrate seemingly complicated objectives such as timber harvesting, habitat enhancement for specific wildlife species, and recreational trails. Planning ensures that activities (e.g., boundary marking, thinning) change the property in ways that help accomplish the owner’s objectives (Figure 4).

There are different types of plans. The simplest plan, suitable for many owners is often called a “stewardship plan.” These are quite short and have limited detail about the forest vegetation. A “forest management plan” is more detailed and often involves an inventory of the forest to describe the number and sizes of trees in certain areas. Your private consulting forester can write the forest management plan to also satisfy the requirements for the owner to participate in the NYS Forest Tax Law program known as 480-a. For landowners who seek IRS recognition as an active participant or proof of the intention of an activity, a forest management plan can document the role of the landowner in the management process or the intent of certain activities. Stewardship plans are free through the state forestry agency. More





#### Stand Acreage

|          |               |
|----------|---------------|
| A = 3.9  | E = 2.1       |
| B = 11.5 | F = 8.56      |
| C = 5.25 | G = 3.34      |
| D = 6.16 | Fields = 20.4 |

Figure 5. Maps of the property are helpful to gain a big picture understanding of your options. This image shows stand boundaries, but additional information might include soil types, trails, and past or future management activities.

detailed plans have a fee to cover the time spent on forest inventory, but often these fees are offset by state or federal cost-share programs.

A typical management plan, regardless of the type, has four sections. The first section is a statement of the landowner objectives. The second section describes the property. This might include some or all of the following: a legal property description; an assessment of the condition of the different areas or management units (called “stands”) for timber, wildlife, recreation, or other uses; and

characterizations of the soils, especially any limitations of use such as poorly drained or stony soils (Figure 5). The third section will be a work plan or calendar of scheduled events. Except for a forest tax law plan, the work schedule is only a suggestion of activities. You’ll likely want a fairly detailed plan for the current and next year, but then more general targets for the following 5- and 10-year time frame. Each year you can check the tasks completed and revise the current year plan. Part of the schedule might include the tools, equipment, or resources

you’ll need to complete some task. The fourth and final section is an appendix that includes any number of things from maps, to historic records, glossary of terms, aerial photographs, old pictures, list of trees or birds seen on the property, etc.

You have likely recognized that the planning process will be easiest with some outside assistance. Fortunately, there are numerous tools, people, and organizations you can access. Some woodland owners will simply want to contact their NYSDEC service forester and ask for a stewardship plan plan. Other owners will want to be more involved. One option is the Forest Resource Guide mentioned above with a link to download. Another is the American Tree Farm System template available at <https://www.treefarmssystem.org/tree-farm-management-plan-templates>

#### Summary

Once you have your plan, use it to your full advantage. The combination of your objectives and your plan’s work schedule can help you assess whether suggested actions you hear are a temptation or an opportunity. Use the schedule of activities to plan the yearly events, perhaps when children are home for the summer or in-laws come to visit and you want them to do something productive and useful. Use the description of the different management units to think about places to put hiking trails, picnic areas, or potential bird watching locations. Take the advice of your carefully chosen forester to help you evaluate offers from someone who shows up at your door and wants to buy your timber -- if your plan doesn’t call for a timber sale then you’re likely best to let the offer pass.

A management plan is a useful tool that will serve you for years to come. It’s a critical starting point for the long-term stewardship of your wooded acreage. 🌲

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