

A forest plan? What?

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Forest management plans sound like a good idea. They're a gateway into a range of cost-share, assistance, and property tax programs. Yet, few forest owners have formal, written forest management plans. Plans help inform forest owners so that they might make better choices about their property. Plans provide a roadmap and activities schedule (including waiting) that reflect forest owner objectives.

There are nearly 200,000 Michigan family forest ownerships of at least 10 acres in size. This complex ownership block sums to around 8.5 million acres, the largest ownership group for the 20.1 million acres of Michigan forestland. The vast majority of these holdings lie north of a line running east-west through Saginaw. These lands provide timber, water quality, habitat, recreation, and other goods and services for the forest owner, the public, and the environment. They are critically important natural resources.

Management plans are not required in Michigan, but they seem like a pretty good idea if one adheres to the notion that the future should be built, rather than simply waiting to see what might happen. In forestry, as in other endeavors, doing nothing will most likely lead to a place where most forest owners don't want to be. Yet, less than 20% of this family-owned acreage has a management plan, with even fewer acres where a plan has been implemented.

What goes into a forest management plan? It's not rocket science. The DNR has a nice one-page summary of items. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has another checklist on their Qualified Forest Property webpage. There are other checklists, too. Much of the plan direction is up to the forest owner. A professional forester can provide valuable insights and services, helping to match land capabilities with a forest owner's vision. A forester can assemble knowledge about many natural resources to help move a forest owner forward.

A complete plan, some of which may not be of particular interest to some forest owners, will pave the way into cost-share programs from the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), either of Michigan's forest property tax programs, the Qualified Forest Program and the Commercial Forest Program, and eligibility for the Tree Farm Program. Some of the plan elements are obvious, such as names, addresses, contacts, legal descriptions, a map or two, dates, and a description of the property. The owners should frame management goals and desired future conditions with a forester. The forester can inventory the forest to yield important characteristics, upon which decisions can be better made.

Soil properties and habitat conditions should be spelled out, including such things as possible endangered and threatened species, as well as exotic invasive species. An archeological and historic review might be good practice for many woodlands.

A timber management schedule is a requirement for both the property tax programs. It's also a pretty good way to assess what sort of revenue might be expected during the life of a management plan. Other desired management practices should also be included in the schedule of activities, such as pond-building or habitat changes. The costs of obtaining a plan can be partially paid through the DNR Forest Stewardship Program or through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) program. Michigan is served by many good consulting foresters.

Most of Michigan's heavily forested counties have foresters available through the Conservation Districts and the Forestry Assistance Program (DARD). These foresters can provide a free on-site visit and help guide forest owners to appropriate resources and programs. Many of these programs have deadlines. A forest owner needs to plan ahead to give a consulting forester enough time to schedule and prepare a management plan, and an agency to process an application. Cost-share programs require an approved plan as part of their application process. These programs can sometimes be confusing, which is another reason to work with a forester.

Forest management planning represents a commitment to the future of the forest, the family, and all those numerous linkages to a forest.

Source: https://www.cadillacnews.com/news/community/a-forest-plan-what/article_7e04a621-db3c-5213-a270-47bc2428b9c1.html