



LOGGERS, FORESTERS, LANDOWNERS: EDUCATION GOES THREE WAYS

BY ROBBO HOLLERAN

The relationships between loggers, foresters, and landowners in the logging business is simple but complex. Some in each category view the other parties as evil, and perhaps a necessary evil. Others create a friendlier atmosphere. A sound view of human nature suggests that we are all capable of great failures and will tend to operate in our own self-interest. So how do we navigate this conundrum since we all have to work together?

A big part, in my opinion, is each party's opportunity to educate the others about their perspective, needs, and desires. The forester plays an important role as the "go-between" person

and should be aware of the landowner's situation along with the realities of the logging process and costs. This should all be integrated into the final harvest plan and agreement.

The **landowner** needs to explain their goals and requirements. These typically fall into several categories: money, service, trails/recreation, aesthetics, wildlife habitat and tax implications. Drawing from online sources and advertisements, many landowners are under the impression that they can do everything on every acre. Many owners don't understand the range of options, costs, and potential outcomes. While they are articulating their interests, either the logger or forester needs to

explain the consequences of choices in each of these categories.

We need to understand what their real interests are, which is not always what they say at first. One example is the dozens of “landowner surveys” where a university or state agency sends out questions to landowners asking them to rank their interests. I believe that landowners fill these out at the kitchen table, giving the answers that these non-profits want to hear. These commonly come back with high marks for “healthy forests,” wildlife, and recreation, and low marks for income, return on their investment, or timber harvesting. No one wants to admit that they do it “for the money.” Often the questions are phrased poorly. I looked at a recent survey that allowed them to rank “timber products” but gave no option to rank for “income.” Unless you cut your own firewood or have a sawmill, most owners don’t really care about the products. When it comes to a harvesting decision, often, the money is quite important.

Some owners have unrealistic financial expectations. They would like to “sell their trees and have them too.” I had a case where a landowner thought they had “twenty thousand” on their small woodlot, because someone said so. I had to correct their notion. It was 20,000 board feet, not dollars! Or they have some idea of their total timber value, which does not include logging and trucking costs, things like access improvement, boundary marking, or other forestry fees. I have had a landowner show me a mill price sheet from an online source and they expected that was what they would get for standing trees.

Then there are owners who say, at first, that they don’t care about the money. Their main interest is aesthetics, trails or wildlife habitat. I have often seen owners change their tune when they find out that there are tens of thousands of dollars involved. One client wanted to clear a red pine plantation to make a small pasture with no concern for the income. When they got the first check, they asked to clear all their red pine and continue into the hardwood forest as well.

Many landowners are glad to offer their contribution to the rural economy once they understand that their wood, beyond their own stumpage income, pays the wages of the logging crew, trucker, and forester, and then goes on to the “value added chain” of mill workers, furniture makers, firewood processors and so on. There really is a 50-1 multiplier from stumpage dollars to the rest of the economy.

While we have a responsibility to learn what the landowner really wants, they often are ignorant of real-life forestry and so we have the obligation to explain. I enjoy educating landowners, and find that the ones who really want to understand the processes, options, costs, and income will make the best choices and show the greatest satisfaction as steady clients.

Loggers have a critical role in educating both landowners and foresters. I have often heard from loggers that other foresters were not respectful of their costs, or understanding of their logistic requirements. I have heard loggers say that a forester expected excessive cull tree removal, operation on very steep ground, or limitations on timing or scheduling that could not be met. One example is the forester who goes back to mark additional trees after the harvest is done. Picking up a few bumper

trees on the main trail is one thing but going back for scattered trees – especially poor-quality ones – is an unexpected cost with low production days. Another is the forester who expects additional service – such as fancy trailwork – at no cost. It is up the logger to explain, before taking the job, what is realistic.

Loggers, as you know, need to have either profitable and/or steady work. Some emphasize one or the other. There are loggers who are very picky and will refuse a lot that is not profitable. For them, missing a few months of work each year is a cost to be made up by better jobs, or alternate work like sugaring, firewood processing, or dirtwork. These are usually smaller scale shows that will look for high value sawlogs and veneer that can be purchased for reasonable stumpage. In the extreme, it is loggers who look to take advantage of ignorant owners. Most loggers, however, especially with a big set of monthly payments, are eager to be working as much as possible, and glad to have a fair deal. You still need to be somewhat choosy for lots that meet your needs for travel time, terrain, volume per day or per acre, product mix, and reasonable stumpage.

Educating the foresters you might work with is a good way to have a successful business. Foresters need logging services and are in the business of hooking you up with projects. Help them to understand your needs. I work with dozens of loggers regularly and consider myself like a Yiddish matchmaker in some ways – matching the right crew to a project. I am always learning what these operators need, the terrain and scope of project they prefer, and the level of detail they want to put into a project. Your relationship with one forester might get you dozens of jobs.



Logger Scott Fisk reviewing a project with landowners and forester.

Opposite page: Robbo Holleran giving a presentation to a landowner group.

Building a brand name for demand is one way to increase your market share. When you are well-known for satisfied customers, especially among foresters, they will be beating a path to your door. Of course, satisfying the customer (from your perspective, this is both the landowner and forester) is a bit different on every job. Each job has a balance of service vs. manufacturing. Some loggers are merely in the manufacturing business, where they buy trees and manufacture logs, pulp and chips, with little thought for other services. There is room for this, especially in industrial land management. On private land, as mentioned, landowners often require various services for full satisfaction. Trailwork, (beyond Best Management Practices), timber stand improvement, extra cleanup, food plots, and view clearing are common services which the contractor can provide, either for reduced stumpage or separate payment. This should be a profit center in your business. One logger said to me: "If I do everything you ask, and there is a problem, it is not my problem."

Foresters come in two main flavors: independent consultants and procurement foresters. (When state foresters are selling state timber, they are functioning as the landowner representative.) From a logger's perspective, each is engaged in providing logging opportunity, and each is – to some extent



Landowner admiring a clean beech

– representing the landowner. Procurement foresters have a complication. Their main responsibility is to their employer, to "feed the beast." But they also need to serve the landowner to maintain a reputation, build relationships, and continue to "feed the beast."

These foresters have the training and experience to play a primary role in educating both the landowner and the logger. But they also need to be actively learning from both parties. Independent consultants, in particular, are hired by the owner for their expert opinion. We need to be actual experts, and expertise does not come from a book.

One thing that I am always doing is looking at the land history to see what worked and what did not on every woodlot and even looking over at the neighbor's land. When we see that "the best regeneration is in the skid trails" how do we translate that into regeneration practices? When we see that a 20-year-old shelterwood cut to 60 sq ft did not regenerate well on the neighbor's land, will we give it a try anyway? You don't need 40 years of experience to read the woods, but it helps.

Many landowners do not really understand the questions, let alone the best choice. They pay us for advice, and some don't want to hear what we have to say. We need to have a certain confidence gained from experience and be able to consider the widest range of choices, and then to choose the best one for the landowner and logger. We should be able to explain both good and bad consequences: economic, ecological, wildlife, aesthetics, etc.

Foresters also need to be learning from the loggers. We often "sell" light cutting and intensive cleanup/trailwork to owners because that is what we think they want to "buy." We also need to pay attention to the logger's perspective on their costs, limitations, and production rates. From a purely selfish perspective, we need these loggers to be successful and profitable, and we should also want them to gladly come back to us for the next project. I had a logger explain to me that 100 MBF of wood with my paint on it was worth quite a bit more than another forester's paint, because of the increased costs that they add to the project.

We just completed a big project that had some BMP issues and high trail requirements for a family hunting paradise. They wanted to have nice trails for ATV use, above the state requirements. After doing all this work, the logger explained that it cost \$8,000 for the BMP work and extra trail work. We looked over the project and found that we had produced about 8000 tons of product, so we learned that our cost was about a dollar per ton. I told him we could adjust the stumpage price for the next project.

All three parties need to be actively engaged in learning from the other, and carefully articulate their particular perspective to have successful projects.

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