

# An Introduction to Forest Management Plans

By: Terence E. Hanley



Whether you are new to the land or not, you may find at some point that you need a plan of action, something that will help you meet your goals of ownership. Jessica Smith and her husband, Rich Fox, realized that not long after they acquired their nearly 71 acres in Athens County. “We are members of the Southeast Ohio Woodland Interest Group (SEOWIG),” Jessica explains, “and we learned about forest management plans through their monthly programs. It was something that seemed important to us.”

Located near the headwaters of Dutch Creek, Jessica and Rich’s farm is like most in the area, a mix of grassland and woods, with a small pond on one end and an oil well on the other. Walk through their upland woods and you will find some fine oak, hickory, and maple. In the bottom is a dense patch of walnut, buckeye, boxelder, and hedge-apple. There is even a small stand of pine. Every one of these stands needed some work, But before the work could begin, Jessica and Rich needed a plan. Their planning began with setting goals. “We enjoy hiking, wildlife, and the trees in our woods,” Jessica says. “We would love to be able to see healthy and mature trees and would like to sustainably harvest trees for firewood and lumber for farm use.” Hiking, wildlife habitat, healthy trees, sustainable timber harvests—these are all goals. In stating their goals, Jessica and Rich had taken the first step in the planning process. Their next step was to have a management plan drawn up for their woods. They knew from their long involvement in conservation that they should contact a state-employed service forester for help. After finding out about their goals and walking through their woods, their service forester wrote a plan for Jessica and Rich. Their plan, just like any forest management plan:

***“Land is an asset. Like your home or any other investment, your land appreciates in value. Nowhere is that more obvious than in your woods where, year by year, trees grow in quality, volume, and value”***

- includes a statement of their goals,
- a description of their woods,
- and a prescription of activities that will help them meet their goals.

Implementing the plan will take time and effort, but Jessica and Rich will see benefits before long, as will their son, Noah, once he is old enough to lend a hand. Noah will also see how important it was for his parents to

have planned for the future of the woods, because a plan for the woods was a plan for their future and his.

## Establishing Goals

Before you can begin managing your woods effectively, you must set some goals. In setting goals, you should ask yourself, “What do I want from my woods?” The following list might give you some ideas.

A goal is a destination. In order to reach it, you have to take steps. Those steps are your objectives. For example, if providing wildlife habitat is one of your goals, your objectives might include:

- putting up 15 bluebird houses, 10 flying squirrel boxes, and five bat boxes;
- favoring white oak over red maple wherever you can;
- retaining at least three den trees per acre;
- eradicating non-native, invasive plants that are interfering with the growth of native food plants. As you can see, objectives are specific and quantifiable.

They turn a distant goal into something you can accomplish, step by step, beginning today.

Possible Goals for your woods	
Wildlife Habitat	Outdoor recreation (hunting, hiking, camping, picnicking, bird watching, nature study)
Timber production	Production of firewood, posts, poles, etc.
Outdoor education	Cultivation of non-timber forest products such as edible, medicinal, and decorative plants
Investment potential	Tax savings
Peace and privacy	Pride of ownership
Natural beauty	Spiritual and psychological benefits

Land is an asset. Like your home or any other investment, your land appreciates in value. Nowhere is that more obvious than in your woods where, year by year, trees grow in quality, volume, and value. Your woods grow on their own, without any help from you. But if you want to make the most of your woods, you will take steps to improve their value, quality, and productivity. Taken together, those steps become your plan for managing your woods. In order to manage your woods well, though, you should have a written forest management plan to guide you.

### **What is management?**

In reference to your woods, *management* means all those activities that—taken together—will help you reach your goals. “Management” comes from the Latin word for hand, but managing your woods means more than just working with your hands. It takes a good deal of thought and planning as well.

### **What activities are involved in managing my woods?**

Managing your woodland can include all kinds of activities such as planting trees, cutting to improve your woods, controlling weed species, and harvesting timber. Management can also mean simply leaving things alone for awhile and letting time do the work for you.

### **Should I manage my woods?**

The answer is almost certainly “Yes.” If nothing else, your woods are an investment, potentially a very valuable investment. Managing your investments pays. That is as true for your woods as it is for your money. Beyond that, well managed woods provide benefits of all kinds, including clean air, clean water, improved wildlife habitat, opportunities for outdoor recreation, peace, privacy—the list goes on and on. Whatever you do, you should begin managing your woods today so they can provide for you and your family tomorrow.

### **What is a management plan?**

A management plan is a written document outlining your activities for a certain period of time, usually five years or more. There are different parts to a plan, but three are essential:

1. A description of your land and your woods, including a map (what you have)
2. A statement of your goals (what you want)
3. A prescription for managing your woods (how to get from what you have to what you want). If you don't have these three elements, you do not have a complete plan.

### **What is a stewardship plan?**

A stewardship plan is a specific kind of management plan, written in accordance with standards established by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). A stewardship plan includes all the elements of a basic management plan but usually in more detail. More importantly, a stewardship plan includes a signature agreement between the landowner and the organization or agency that prepares or approves the plan. With your signature, you the landowner: a) affirm that you have read and understood the plan, and b) agree to implement the plan to the best of your knowledge and ability. The organization or agency that prepares or approves the plan also signs it, thereby agreeing to assist you in the implementation of your plan. You do not have to sign the plan unless you want to take part in a program that requires a signed plan. And, if you want to withdraw from the stewardship agreement, you can without a penalty. However, if your plan is to qualify for a program, and you fail to meet your obligations under the program, you may be removed from the program or penalized in some other way.

### **Do I need a management plan?**

Yes, if you have goals, you need a management plan. Also, if you want to participate in certain programs, you will almost certainly need a plan.

### **What kind of programs require a management plan?**

Every one—or nearly so. Whether you are planting trees, improving your woods, or trying to save money on your property taxes, if you want to participate in a program, you probably need a plan. See Table 1 for a list of programs and details on each.

### Who can I get to write a management plan for my woods?

A professional forester is the person most highly qualified to write a management plan for you and your woods.

### What is a forester?

A forester is a person who—by a combination of education and experience—is qualified to advise and assist you in the management of your woods. Most foresters have a four-year forestry degree. Some arrive at their titles after years of experience. In any case, forestry is a profession, like law or medicine. Not just anyone can call himself or herself a forester. A forester is also a person who follows a code of professional ethics. In every situation, a forester should do the right thing, for you and for your woods.

### How do I find a forester?

The place to start is the Ohio Division of Forestry, a state agency within the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR). Every county in Ohio is covered by a service forester who can advise and assist you in managing your woods. State-employed foresters do not have any monetary interest in your woods. Their sole bias is in favor of what is good for you and your woods. To find the service forester for your county, call the central office of the Ohio Division of Forestry toll free at (877) 247-8733, or look on the division's website under the Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

In some cases, your service forester will refer you to a consulting forester, also called a *consultant forester* or *forestry consultant*. A consulting forester is a professional forester, that is, someone with a forestry degree and some level of experience in forestry. The main difference between a service forester and a consulting forester is that a consulting forester works in the private sector and charges a fee for his or her services. You can find a list of consulting foresters through the Ohio Division of Forestry, the Society of American Foresters (SAF), the Association of Consulting Foresters (ACF), or your local soil and water conservation district (SWCD), located at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Service Center.

### How do I get a management plan for my woods?

One of your first steps is to contact a forester. There are certain things you can do to move things along, including:

- ✓ Work on your list of goals. Your forester can help you if you have trouble.
- ✓ Get together all the information you can regarding your land and your woods. That includes maps, aerial photographs, deeds, abstracts, property tax records, and any other records on the history, ownership, and management of your woods.
- ✓ Locate and mark your property boundary lines. Again, if you have problems, talk to your forester.
- ✓ Read up on how to manage your woods.
- ✓ Contact your service forester to schedule a meeting. Be sure to call well in advance of any planned meeting.
- ✓ If your service forester cannot handle your case, start looking for a consulting forester who can.

### What types of information is included in a management plan?

A management plan can be as short as a couple of pages or as long as a book, but every plan should have three basic elements:

- 1) Description (including a map)
- 2) Goals
- 3) Prescription

A management plan can also include all kinds of things, including information on:

- Your woods and the trees growing in your woods
- Topography and geology
- Soil and water
- Watershed and wetlands
- Fish and wildlife
- Rare, threatened, and endangered species
- Cultural, historical, and archaeological resources
- Non-native, invasive plants
- Insects and disease
- Forest protection
- Aesthetic and recreational concerns and resources
- Forest products
- Ways of making money or saving money with your woods
- Management practices

### How much does a management plan cost?

Service foresters are state employees. You pay for their services with your tax dollars. You may get a comparable service from other agencies or organizations. If you work with a consulting forester, be ready to pay for his or her services out of your own pocket. Charges will vary depending on your woods and on the consultant, but the cost of a plan prepared by a consultant is on the order of several hundred dollars or more. Be sure to shop around.

### What are the benefits of having a management plan?

There are many benefits to having a plan. First, a plan contains important information for you, your family, and those who come after you. Second, it may qualify you for programs that can help with the management of your woods. Third, a management plan puts you on the path towards meeting your goals, but remember, that even the best management plan means little unless it is implemented.

### What if I want to change my plan?

Your management plan is written on paper, not in stone. You should change or update your plan if:

- ✓ The ownership of your woods or any part of your woods changes
- ✓ You add acreage to your woods
- ✓ Land use changes significantly
- ✓ The timetable built into your plan runs out
- ✓ You have completed the activities prescribed in your plan
- ✓ Your goals change significantly
- ✓ Conditions in the woods have changed enough that the description and/or prescription is no longer accurate
- ✓ Your plan becomes outdated or invalid for any other reason



### Can I develop my own management plan?

Yes—to a point. You can help yourself and help your forester by doing some of the work needed to develop a management plan. See the workbook page(s) on how to begin. At some point, however, your plan will probably have to be approved by a forester.



### What can I do to manage my woods?

Taking these ten simple steps will move you a long way on the path towards reaching your goals:

1. Locate and mark your property boundary lines using fence, posts, and/or paint.
2. Exclude livestock from the woods.
3. Prevent forest fire to the best of your ability.
4. Control erosion and prevent runoff by implementing forestry best management practices (BMPs) wherever needed.
5. Eradicate the worst non-native, invasive species, including ailanthus or tree-of-heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*), autumn-olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*), and bush honeysuckle (*Lonicera* species).
6. Control other non-native, invasive species, including multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*) and Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*).
7. Control grapevines growing on your best trees, the trees you want to grow to maturity. You should not cut every grapevine in your woods, and you do not have to worry about poison-ivy or Virginia creeper.
8. Undertake timber stand improvement (TSI) with the advice and assistance of a professional forester. TSI includes a number of activities, including invasive species control, grapevine control, pruning, thinning, crop tree release, and cull tree removal.
9. Talk to a forester before selling timber. Selling timber can be one of the biggest financial decisions you make in your life. Make sure you do it right by working with a forester in every step of the process. Talk to your service forester before you begin.
10. By all means, avoid high-grading your woods. High-grading is an all-too-common practice whereby the best, most valuable timber is cut and low value timber is left in the woods. Diameter-limit cutting and so-called "select cutting" are two of the more common ways the woods are high-graded. Again, for advice on how to sell timber, talk to your service forester.



### What are the costs and benefits of managing my woods?

There is no doubt that managing your woods comes at a cost. If you do your own work, your main costs are time and effort. You will probably also incur costs in the operation of equipment or in the purchase of fuel or other materials. In any case, you can put a dollar figure on most of your costs. That is not necessarily true with benefits. For example, how much is it worth to be outdoors on a beautiful spring day? What is the dollar value of exercise and physical activity? How valuable is the knowledge that what you are doing will benefit not just you, but also your family, the wild animals in your woods, and the environment in general? Whatever you do, you can be sure that management pays off in increased value, quality, and productivity, especially of your timber, one of the most highly valued resources coming from your woods. In addition, managing your woods means that you do not have to wait as long for a return on your investment.



## Who to Contact

For advice and assistance on managing your woods and on management plans, contact:

### Ohio Department of Natural Resources

Division of Forestry

2045 Morse Road, Building H1

Columbus, OH 43224

Toll free: (877) 247-8733

### Rural Action, Inc.

P.O. Box 157

Trimble, OH 45782

(740) 767-4938

### Your local USDA Service Center

Includes Farm Service Agency (FSA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) <http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app>

### See the government pages of your phone book.

Also, your area may be covered by a watershed group, landowner group, and/or resource conservation and development (RC&D) group that may be able to help. Finally, there are many publications available from federal, state, and local agencies and from university extension services that can help you learn more about sustainable land management. In any search of the Internet, look for websites ending in "gov," "edu," or "org." Before getting started, Be sure to seek out the advice and assistance of professional people working in the field of natural resources and conservation

## Further Reading

- *Caring for Your Forest with a Forest Stewardship Plan*, USDA Forest Service, FS-661, Mar. 2001.
- *Forest Management: Developing a Plan to Care for Your Forest* by Randall B. Heiligmann, Ohio State University Extension, F-34-02, Feb. 2002.
- *Forest Management for Missouri Landowners* by Bruce Palmer, Missouri Department of Conservation, May 2003.
- *Forest Stewardship Program National Standards and Guidelines*, USDA Forest Service, State and Private Forestry, Cooperative Forestry, Feb. 2009.
- *Planning for Forest Stewardship: A Desk Guide* by D. Ramsey Russell, Jr., and Susan Stein, USDA Forest Service, FS-733, May 2002.
- *A Stewardship Handbook for Family Ownerships*, National Association of State Foresters, Aug. 2005.

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