What Should You Do with Your Woods?

A Resource Guide for Woodland Landowners in New York State
Acknowledgments

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Many people don’t think much about their woods on a day-to-day basis. You might enjoy the privacy, scenery, and firewood they provide, or enjoy walking the dog or cross-country skiing on the trails, but you may not often think about their management or their future. Eventually, though, something will trigger the need to make a decision about your woodlands.

It could be a change in your family circumstances, or perhaps just a logger knocking on the door. At that time, you will likely need to consider whether to sell some or all of your land, obtain income from it, or reduce your property tax burden so that you can continue to own it. Should you cut trees, or leave them alone? Sell the land, or keep it in the family? Are there ways to conserve the land while continuing to own it? (Yes!) Difficult circumstances can sometimes back us into a corner, prompting us to make decisions we later regret.
The resources in this guide can help you begin to navigate those decisions about the management and future of your land before you feel pressured to make a quick decision. We outline a few basic options, along with tips and contacts for learning more. Rest assured, there are no wrong answers. Simply gathering some information and talking with your family or a professional will set you well on your way to securing the future of your woods.
One Simple Option: 
The Hands-off Approach

Your woods may already fulfill your goals, just as they are, without any active management. Great! Your forested land will continue to shelter animals, supply clean water, and provide a beautiful setting for you and your neighbors. Or, you may want to earn a little income from your land, but without cutting timber. Forest-based enterprises such as maple sugaring and (safely) harvesting gourmet mushrooms are other ways to enjoy and utilize your woods. Simply by owning land and keeping it in its natural condition, you are stewarding a natural, financial, and recreational resource for yourself, your family, and your community. If you wish to pursue options for protecting your land from incompatible development, contact your local land trust.

To find a land trust near you, visit findalandtrust.org
Another Approach: Active Forest Management

Active management typically involves harvesting trees to enhance forest benefits or create new ones. As a landowner, you may decide to harvest and sell timber only a few times in your life. Since most landowners are not familiar with current timber values, markets for selling timber, or the roles various forestry professionals play, what follows here are resources to help you make an informed decision about your harvest.
First, Clarify What’s Important to You
Consider things such as your family’s needs, your attachment to the land, your aesthetic goals and recreational hobbies, and your interest in helping wildlife. *A timber harvest will shape your woodland for years to come, so be sure to identify what is most important to you.*
Your objectives will guide the amount and types of trees to be harvested. The trees that remain will shape the future look and feel of your woods, and will influence both the animals that can live there and the monetary value of future timber sales. Talking with a professional forester or other natural resource professional is an excellent way to help clarify your objectives and the options available to you.

Do I need a forester? How do I find a one?
A professional forester has academic training and experience in forest and wildlife ecology, economics, legal issues, and the growing and harvesting of forest products. Foresters provide technical expertise to assist landowners in managing their woods, including setting up timber sales, writing management plans, finding boundaries, creating forest trails, and improving wildlife habitat.
The type of forester you should choose will depend on your needs and goals.

Selecting a forester to work with is like choosing any other professional. A good starting point is to ask friends and neighbors about their experiences. You can also see if your local land trust maintains a list of foresters who have been recommended by other landowners. Don’t hesitate to ask foresters for

DEC Service Foresters

DEC Service Foresters are employees of the NY Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). DEC foresters provide free consultations to help landowners begin thinking through options for managing their land, and they can even create a basic forest stewardship plan. However, since each DEC forester serves multiple counties, DEC also maintains a list of private “cooperating” foresters who meet certain professional standards.

To find your local DEC Service Forester, visit dec.ny.gov/lands/97398.html
references from past clients, or to ask to see a woodlot that they manage. As you work toward a decision, you may want to consider the forester’s professional certifications, their fee structure, their insurance coverage, and their willingness to listen to your goals.

Private Consulting Foresters

Private consulting foresters who meet DEC’s criteria are listed in DEC’s Directory of Cooperating Foresters. Private foresters charge a fee for their services, but most landowners find that this investment pays for itself through increased financial returns and other benefits. Private foresters can provide more extensive services than the DEC Service Forester, on an ongoing basis.

For DEC’s list of cooperative foresters, visit dec.ny.gov/lands/5230.html

Your investment of time in finding a reputable forester is a critical step toward achieving your long-term goals.
Resource Professionals

Master Forest Owners (MFOs)
Master Forest Owners are fellow woodland landowners who have completed a four-day training with Cornell University’s Department of Natural Resources in sawtimber and wildlife management, forest economics, and ecology, as well as continuing education. MFO volunteers can join you on a walk in your woods, providing information and suggestions to help you clarify your goals and connect with the resources you need to achieve them. For more information or to schedule a visit, go to blogs.cornell.edu/ccemfo

Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)
NRCS offers a wide variety of programs designed to assist landowners in managing their woodlands, grasslands, and farmland. Many NRCS programs provide landowners with both funding and expert advice for management plans and management activities, about everything from pollinator habitat to woodland management. To find out what programs might be available to you on your property, speak with the folks at your local NRCS Service Center. To find your county's service center, visit nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/contact/local

Your Local Land Trust
The volunteers and staff of land conservation organizations that are active in your town or county can be an invaluable resource for information about land management, land conservation, and local resources and professionals. To find a land trust in your area, visit findalandtrust.org
Reducing Property Taxes through NY’s Forest Tax Law Program: 480-a

The New York Forest Tax Law Program (nicknamed “480-a” after the section of the law that created it) allows landowners to reduce their property taxes in exchange for a ten-year commitment to manage their woodlands in a particular way. Participants must own at least 50 contiguous acres of qualifying forest. Up to 80% of the assessed value of enrolled acreage may be exempted from property taxes.

To enroll in 480-a, you’ll need a management plan for your woods prepared by a professional forester and approved by DEC. For each year that you re-enroll, and receive your tax break, you commit to following your management plan for the following ten years. Leaving the program early would result in back taxes and penalties.

For more information about the 480-a Forest Tax Law Program, visit dec.ny.gov/lands/5236. In recent years, there have also been efforts to expand and update the Forest Tax Law, so check DEC’s website and speak with a DEC Service Forester before applying.
Timber Harvest: Getting a Fair Deal

Below are a few considerations to take into account before harvesting timber. A professional forester will be of great help in addressing these issues.

First, find out what your timber is worth. Many factors affect the value of your timber, including tree species, size, and quality, site logistics, and an accurate accounting of the volume of the timber to be cut. There are two ways that timber values are typically determined.

Competitive Bid: In a competitive bid process, your forester marks trees to be cut and estimates their volume and value. A timber showing is organized so multiple bidders, typically loggers and sawmills, can visit your land, assess the timber, evaluate the difficulty of the logging job, and prepare bids. A study done in Massachusetts showed that on average, the difference between the lowest and highest bid price is more than 100%, so getting multiple bids can really pay off. A competitive bid process will determine the value of your timber in the open market and can give you the highest return.
Negotiated Price: You can negotiate the price yourself or hire a forester to represent you. If you choose to negotiate the value of your timber yourself, keep in mind that you will be negotiating with someone who has an in-depth knowledge of timber prices and negotiates in the marketplace every day.

Secondly, make sure you have a strong contract with the logger that represents your goals and interests, and ensures compliance with all relevant laws. Consider requiring a performance bond as a condition of the contract, so that if the logger does not complete the job as agreed, you will have money to address problems such as hiring a bulldozer to smooth ruts or grade the roads.

*Working with a forester who represents you can be an excellent way to ensure your interests are protected in a contract.*
Timber Harvest Case Study

David Margulies and his wife Else Smedemark have owned their 542 acres in Columbia County for more than 30 years. Early on in their ownership of the property, they were looking for ways to obtain property tax relief, which led David to reach out to forester Ed Denham. Ed helped David and Else develop a forest management plan and enroll in the New York State Forestry Program (a.k.a. 480-a).
Over the past 25+ years, they have been working together to improve the quality and health of the trees on the land. David didn’t know much about woodland management when they bought the property. By working with Ed, he has come to understand the value of managing the woods for both the habitat and recreational value.

In 2005, David and Else worked with the Columbia Land Conservancy to protect their land with a conservation easement. David said the two programs have helped them achieve their goals to ensure the woods are healthy and in perpetual protection for future generations of his family to enjoy.
Keeping Your Woods as Woods, Long Term
Most family forest owners love their woods, whether for hunting, birdwatching, or winter snowshoeing. If you want the peace of mind of knowing that your woods will remain mostly or entirely undeveloped, even when you no longer own the land, then you may want to consider long term land conservation options. *Conserving your land can provide significant income, property, estate, and capital gains tax benefits,* depending on your situation.
There are a number of ways to conserve land, and your local trust can help walk you through the options. One way is to protect your land while you continue to own and enjoy it, through a conservation easement or purchase of development rights. Alternatively, you might decide you no longer wish to own the land, but you want to see it protected. In that case, you might donate or sell your land to a conservation organization, or gift the land in your will. Most of these options (and a few others) can be tailored to your goals, your property, and your unique financial situation. It helps to sit down with a land conservation professional and your attorney or financial planner to talk through the pros and cons of your various options. To begin exploring your conservation options, visit yourlegacy.ny.org or findalandtrust.org.

Whether you decide to conserve your land or not, giving some thought to who you would like to own it in the future and what you would like to see happen to it is a worthwhile investment of time.
Conservation Case Study

Drs. Edmund W. and Susan G. Gordon dedicated their lives to social and environmental justice. To honor that legacy, their adult children, Chris, Edmund, Jessica, and Johannah, knew they wanted to permanently protect the family’s 211 acres of pristine forests, streams, wetlands, and rare plants in Austerlitz, NY, so they reached out to their local land trust to talk through their options.
Initially, the Gordon siblings were thinking they would keep a few acres for a cabin to share as a weekend retreat, while donating the rest of the land to a conservation organization. The more they talked, though, the more they realized how deeply attached they were to the woods they ran and played in as kids. The siblings decided to keep the land, but they also wanted to ensure that the property’s important natural features would be safeguarded, even when they were no longer the owners. A conservation easement was the perfect fit.

The Gordon family talked with the Columbia Land Conservancy to craft a conservation easement document uniquely tailored to their property and their family’s needs and goals. The permanent legal agreement, which remains with the land, permits the landowners to build a home while keeping the woods and wetlands in a natural state. Although many conservation easements allow for responsibly managed commercial timber harvests, the Gordon siblings wanted to let nature take its course, permitting only modest tree-cutting for firewood and such. The family can now rest easy, knowing that CLC will ensure that the exceptional natural features of their property are forever protected.
Taking the First Step...
Making informed decisions about the future of your land is one of the most important things you can do for yourself, your family, and your community. Your woodlands connect to those of your neighbors, forming a patchwork of privately owned forest across our region (see map on next page). Since more than 75% of New York’s forests are owned by family forest owners like you, the collective effects of decisions about each of those properties will help shape our local economies and quality of life, the vitality of wildlife in our region, and the quality of the water in our streams and wells for decades to come.
Large Blocks of Forest in NY State and the Woodland Corridors that Connect Them

- **Green**: Large Blocks of Intact Forest
- **Yellow**: Forest Linkage Corridor
- **Dotted Yellow**: Forest Linkage Corridor Continues beyond NY State

Data was obtained from NY Department of Environmental Conservation and other sources.
Still, tackling those decisions can be daunting. Land is a financial asset, but for many people, it is also interwoven with emotion, family tradition, and spirituality. *Whatever path you choose, remember that any intentional, thoughtful action you take is more likely to achieve your goals than actions taken quickly in a crisis.* Even a single step of talking with your family or gathering information from a forester, land trust, attorney, or other professional will start you on the path of making informed decisions about your land.

*Let us know how we can help!*