

Knowledgeable Forest Landowners: An Important National Resource

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Introduction

This is a presentation about non-industrial private forest owners, an important national resource; and I am Thorn Liechty, from Montana. It is good to be with you here today, and I am honored to give this talk. Before I begin, however, you need to know something about me so that you can understand my perspective.

I am a relative latecomer to forest ownership. My work has been varied, my education sound, my experience growing.

Vocationally, I have moved from the optimism of Peace Corps teaching; through the realism of military service, the responsibilities of University Administration, and the challenges of small business ownership; to the joys of forest management and the frustrations of communicating private forest landowner viewpoints and interests.

Educationally, the value of my University of Wisconsin doctorate in Educational Administration has been supplemented by graduate study in forestry at the University of Montana.

Experientially, though a silent member of SAF, I have served in active leadership positions in numerous state, regional, and national forestry organizations. In addition, for nearly a decade I have had the privilege of serving as elected trustee to our local fire district board.

My wife, Karen, and I now live on 130 acres of forestland some 25 miles

northwest of Missoula, Montana. This land was purchased in 1989. We were part of the pilot Forest Stewardship education program in 1991, harvested trees in 1993, and have attended a wide variety of landowner and professional forestry workshops and conferences.

Concepts and Slogans

The topic of this meeting is "engaging private forest landowners in sustainable forestry." I have much to say about engaging private forest landowners, but little to say about sustainable forestry. Let me elaborate.

Among all natural resource professions, forestry and foresters delight in developing pithy slogans. We have been treated to management mantras like *resources planning, nondeclining even flow, sustained yield, multiple use, ecosystem management*, and now *sustainable forestry*. We bandy about value-laden concepts like *old growth, roadless areas, wilderness, wild and scenic lands, biodiversity, endangered species and habitats, global warming*, and now *harvest certification and forest fragmentation*.

These mantras represent the ebb and flow of popular science, and they have been propagated by the forestry profession. Yet rightly they will be superseded because they suffer from two major flaws: (1) as scientific concepts, they are imprecise at best and misleading at worst; and (2) as functional goals, they focus on production, things, and vague sentiment -- but not on people.

Yet, when we cut through this morass, we are always left with people -- it is people who serve as our audience, as our key actors, as our most important resource. And it is the private forest landowner who is the vital component.

The most important issue related to private forestry today, is not achieving "sustainable forestry," but engaging and increasing the number of -- indeed, **sustaining – Knowledgeable Forest Landowners.**

The Knowledgeable Forest Landowner

In this country, we have no shortage of private forest owners; but

Knowledgeable Forest Landowners are becoming an endangered species. To my mind, Knowledgeable Forest Landowners not only appreciate the forest as a series of resources, processes, and values, but also accept responsibility for defining and implementing their management objectives.

I will not repeat national statistical and demographic profiles of the nearly 10 million American private forest landowners. You are more aware of those data than I. Briefly, though, in Montana, a state with the fourth largest land-base but under 1 million residents, we have over 80,000 people who own an acre or more of forestland; we provide nearly 40% of the saw timber in a state dominated by public land holdings; and we own thousands of acres of sensitive riparian lands. Less than 1% of owners cite timber production as either a primary or secondary objective for owning land; yet over 50% had past harvest experience. Clearly, many owners, with a variety of forest values, find that management is necessary to achieve non-commodity goals.

Suffice it to say that in Montana as well as nationally, the number of private forest owners who own smaller parcels of land is growing while those that own larger areas are declining; the experience of private forest owners likely does not include natural resource management; and more private forest owners than ever do not think of themselves as forest owners.

It is sad but true that private forest owners possess a shadowy public image. In publications, media, and the talk of some forestry professionals, the idea is conveyed that forest owners are either property rights fringe fanatics or financially and educationally challenged opportunists. This stereotype grossly underestimates the management intent, cultural values, and societal contributions of private forest owners. With restricted exposure to professional expertise, forest landowners work under conditions of radical uncertainty, in a complex environment (1) of management incentives and disincentives, (2) of individual motivations and societal expectations, (3) of economic necessity and legal constraints, (4) of practical experience and limited knowledge.

Moreover, Knowledgeable Forest Landowners develop concepts about how to address our private forest management challenges.

Personal Forest Management Philosophy

Over the years I have come to adopt a relatively straightforward personal forest management philosophy. While the words were developed by a close friend of mine (an Extension Forester and forest landowner himself), they encapsulate my values and those of many other landowners. Simply put, as Knowledgeable Forest Landowners, we have a responsibility to:

- 1. Learn all we can.**
- 2. Respect others' viewpoints.**
- 3. Do no harm.**

1. Learning all we can is the basis of a proactive philosophy. Workshops and courses, engaging professional consultants, and receiving state technical assistance are important avenues of learning for landowners. However, of all the barriers to learning, the most pervasive and insidious is APATHY among landowners themselves. Sometimes apathy is a personal characteristic drawn from lack of time, money, knowledge, energy, awareness, or interest.

2. Respecting other land use and management viewpoints sometimes requires a leap of faith. Allowing ones personal objectives to be influenced by broader social values may not be easy. Public and private lands are governed, to varying degrees, by management, conservation, and preservation constraints and philosophies. But learning all we can requires that we respect a variety of perspectives in order to select the best aspects for ourselves.

3. Doing no harm is the most ambitious and subjective of these principles. Harm may come from action as well as inaction. The hope is that the more we learn and are able to respect a variety of viewpoints, the less harm we will do when we undertake management actions. Realistically, we minimize harm rather than eliminate it.

Application of this Philosophy to Government

These same three principles can also be applied to state and federal

forestry officials:

1. Learn all you can about your private forest owners. We need you to understand us; and we need to be visible to you. The apathy I referred to earlier can also arise from ineffective communication between professionals and landowners. We should also recognize that landowner apathy is a **rational** response to that profound sense of powerlessness that results from professional insensitivity or their application of unbending rules and vague regulatory interpretation.
2. Respect our values and our objectives. Government is a complex organism, which doesn't like to deal with complexity. Government likes simple and simplistic solutions that can be written up in a handbook or manual, and which can easily be applied across a variety of geographies, ecosystems, and populations. Too often, society, burdened with misguided governmental natural resource decisions, has sought legislative rectification that constrains private lands out of proportion to its culpability.
3. Doing no harm should be the watchword of every legislator who undertakes to define forest policy and every forestry professional who writes and imposes the rules related to that policy. Regulatory solutions are often not designed to consider the complexity of private forestland management and objectives. Rather unfortunately, government deals with private lands as it would deal with itself -- with little regard to economic or livelihood considerations. These mistakes of policy construction, interpretation, and application have serious side effects for Knowledgeable Forest Landowners and a society dependent on their contributions.

The Value of Collaboration

The Montana Forest Owners Association has been well treated by our State Forestry office as well as by Forest Service Regional State and Private Forestry officials. This year alone, for example, much of what we have been able to accomplish in Montana for private landowners has been due to a creative partnership between landowners and state and federal government: a Legislative Listening Session for Landowners, revisions to the state's Hazard Reduction Law, development of a conference on the future of Montana's forests, and creation of a Specialty Forest Products Web site are valid testaments to our effective collaboration. We believe in

cooperation as the principal approach to supporting Knowledgeable Forest Landowners.

There are numerous examples of positive cooperation on educational projects between federal, state, and private landowner interests. One such example is a Forest Insects and Tree Diseases Workshop. Region One Forest Service pathologists serve with the Montana State Forestry entomologist to put on a two-day workshop for loggers and landowners. This important educational opportunity has been strongly supported by our State Forester and the Regional Forester's office. Landowners and loggers enthusiastically participate. The model provides for academic instruction with handouts and slides in the morning; and hands-on field experiences in the afternoon. The approach actively involves landowners in the educational process. And the professionals as well benefit from the experiences of the landowners. Evaluations of the workshop routinely find that 100% of participants consider the time invested to be a good value; and 100% would recommend this workshop to other loggers and landowners. There are always lots of positive comments. Typical is the following: "This was a very informative and interesting workshop. I had no idea what to expect; there's a lot more going on in the forest than I realized."

The state, the Forest Service, and Extension Forestry have cooperated on other educational workshops following the same model: quality instructors provide information and handouts that show landowners what happens in the forest. The importance of this approach is that it does not tell landowners what to do, but lets them choose from among solutions that have been shown to work. Landowners are treated as fellow professionals in the discipline of natural resource decision-making. Silviculture, Noxious Weed, and Hazard Mitigation workshops have effectively followed the same model of institutional cooperation and instructional presentation.

From such experience we learn the following:

1. Together we can aid landowner learning by making available quality technical assistance, educational opportunities, and hands-on workshop programs that genuinely empower landowners. Knowledgeable Forest Landowners are natural resource professionals regardless of formal

education, and need to be treated as such. Their practical expertise can be a valuable asset – should public agencies choose to accept it.

2. Together we can encourage respect for landowner viewpoints by building a culture of political participation. Effective involvement of landowners occurs when we can participate at all levels of policy development, rule making, implementation, and evaluation -- having a say in and understanding of the purposes for the rules and regulations which govern our forest management alternatives.

3. Together we can mitigate harm to landowner initiative by employing more voluntary than regulatory constraints on action. Montana and other states have demonstrated the efficacy of voluntary Best Management Practices in forestry to preserve water quality during harvesting operations. When Streamside Management Zone or Slash/Hazard Reduction Agreement legislation require rule making, the involvement of the private forest landowner viewpoint is essential to avoid institutionalizing counterproductive rules.

The Consequences of "Doing Harm"

Public servants generally do not worry that uneconomic regulatory decisions will affect their own financial and family security; private landowners, however, do not have this luxury. Creating a situation, where forestry is a financial drain as opposed to an incentive, causes private landowners to question their forestry commitment. This has significant unintended consequences for society by: reducing the pool of active and interested private forest managers; raising the number of new owners who don't consider themselves forest owners; increasing fragmentation of forest land as a result of subdivision sales; discouraging smaller landowners from managing their forests. Furthermore, professional foresters often find themselves trapped within academically taught forest management paradigms, against which private forest landowners are judged. Consider the changes that have occurred in the forestry profession in the last 20 years! Policy or regulation is imposed to mold private forest landowners into accepting doctrine that they find intrusive and that stifles the creativity of individual landowners. I think it would be fair to generalize that many Knowledgeable Forest Landowners know their land-base more intimately than a consultant or public forester. The same creativity and personal

incentive that makes our business economy a world-class power needs to be maintained – or better, promoted for private landowners.

It is very important for us all to learn from our mistakes. I'll offer two recent examples from Montana, not for the purposes of "finger pointing," but for improving landowner-agency cooperation. These examples clarify significant barriers to government's ability to "engage private forest landowners." These examples are not unusual.

Example 1

Private landowners Tom and Gloris live on 410 acres in Western Montana. Access to their property is on a joint private/Forest Service road. Tom and Gloris applied for a commercial haul permit more than a year ago. After fourteen months of silent deliberation, the Lolo National Forest has refused to issue the permit unless the landowners agree to follow USFS-prescribed harvesting measures on private land. One such measure imposes a 150-foot no-cut zone on private property on either side of a defined stream channel. This requirement bears no relationship to Montana's Best Management practices or Streamside Management Zone requirements. The not-cut zone was ostensibly levied to protect habitat for the endangered bull trout fish. But the bull trout do not inhabit the stream in question. Moreover, that stream's structure prohibits fish migration through the watershed, and there are no plans to mitigate this problem. These facts are known to the LNF.

Tom and Gloris have been good neighbors to the Forest Service. They help maintain the joint use road without reimbursement from the USDA/FS; and they freely permit passage for Forest Service personnel through their property for setting up Forest Service timber sales, cruising, and fire access. They also allowed part of their property to be used as a log landing site for a 1996 Forest Service helicopter harvest operation which removed nearly 1 million board feet -- yet the Forest Service wants now to place this site off limits to private sustainable forest management.

Government representatives of the Lolo National Forest have done harm:

(1) They have failed to respond to the commercial haul request in a timely

fashion; and, with the issue still in doubt, they have taken economic benefit from Tom and Gloris.

(2) They seek to regulate private land forest management on the pretext of a non-existent endangered species, thus casting doubt on the Forest Service willingness to stay out of private forestland management.

(3) They refuse the necessary haul permit to cross public land unless the landowners give over nearly 100 acres of private land as habitat protection for the non-existent bull trout.

(4) As a result of their actions, Knowledgeable Forest Landowners are being soured on the efficacy of partnering with the government.

Government officials are communicating the message that sustainable forestry is not important, that Knowledgeable Forest Landowners are not worthy managers capable of developing their own natural resources plan, and that they are not equal partners to the Forest Service staff.

Example 2

Richard is a lifelong cattleman. He and his wife, Druska, live in the Paradise Valley, just north of Yellowstone National Park. The details of their recent experience are as follows:

In July, a lightning fire starts in the Gallatin National Forest, in overstocked and unmanaged forest stands. Firefighters arrive in the morning, lose their way, but refuse help from Richard, who, checking on his cattle's condition, knows the location of the fire. The following day, Richard finds the firefighters still lost; they continue to refuse assistance. After two days they finally find the fire and luckily are able to contain it.

The following month, another lightning strike occurs on private land approximately 20 miles from Richard's ranch. Conditions are very dry and the fire starts racing through heavy fuels on private as well as National Forest land toward Richard's land. They name it the Fridley Fire, and it eventually consumes nearly 27,000 acres. Although the Incident Command team knows for several days in advance that the Fridley fire has a high probability of reaching Richard's lands because of heavy fuels and predicted high winds, nobody bothers to inform him or three other adjacent private landowners. When the fire is close enough for Richard himself to deduce his lands are threatened, he is grudgingly allowed access and given

six hours to move his 300 cattle off his own lands, a task that normally requires a full week. With the help of neighbors and at great personal risk (no fire team help was offered), he managed to keep his cattle just ahead of the fire, losing only two. The fire ends up burning over 1300 acres of Richard's forest grazing land.

The fire bosses prepare a fire plan for attacking the blaze. Richard later finds out that there were six priorities outlined for the Fridley Fire: among them is the direction to "be sensitive towards wilderness study plots on Forest Service land." There is no mention of being sensitive towards private landowner needs; indeed, there is no mention of private lands, their protection, or cooperation with private landowners at all. A valuable partner, who has never asked anything of the adjoining federal or state lands, and who has considerable knowledge of the area, fuels, and climate has not been asked for help. Worse, he has been treated as a nuisance and annoyance.

A footnote to this fire: the Fridley Fire was a mile-wide running crown fire with 300-foot flame lengths being fanned by a very strong wind when it hit Richard's forest. Other owners of private forests lost to the fire have, for five years, been trying to thin their lands; on the basis of poorly-understand forest structural requirement for grizzly bears, the Gallatin National Forest continually denied their commercial haul permits unless dubious Forest Service management measures are implemented on private lands. But, because Richard has uncontested access to his land, he has been able, during the past three years, to implement a forest management plan that called for thinning dense stagnant stands of trees, creating small openings (patch cuts) to reduce the dense continuity of the forest while providing a greater forage base for cattle and the 200 head of elk that commonly reside on their property. Remarkably, the crown fire dropped to the ground when it hit the managed portion of his forest, and fire fighters were able to suppress the fire before it reached newly created fire lines.

Unfortunately, the story gets worse. Many 20' wide fire roads were built on Richard's land during the fire suppression activities; but the Forest Service has offered no compensation for the loss of grass, trees, or habitat. Reseeding of standard Forest Service mix was accomplished without informing Richard or asking him for the kinds of grass species that should

be used – even though Richard is a 4th generation cattleman and has a detailed understanding of what grass species work best in his area and what he needs on his lands.

The Incident Commander recently made a public statement of how wonderful it was to work with private landowners and how their help was essential in the suppression activity. Yet Richard and Druska, as the major landowners affected, were never asked, never consulted, and never informed of anything. They wondered, during this speech, to whom the IC was referring. These Knowledge Forest Landowners are left with a charred forest from a fire that did not start on their lands; yet their land management practices and ethics were responsible for containing the fire. They are left with the prospect of having to sell off their entire herd of cattle into which they have invested over 40 years of breeding. They are left with the horrific cost of rehabilitating their lands with almost no help being offered by public agencies. This, their first experience with natural resources public servants, has not left them with much confidence or desire to cooperate in future endeavors.

These two examples are not isolated; similar incidents occur regularly in the West. Landowners want to view public agencies as neighbors equal in responsibility, realizing that their mutual actions affect each other. But too often agency personnel do not treat landowners as equals, preferring to focus on their own agendas and resources. It will be a long hard struggle in the West to encourage agencies to realize the magnitude with which their actions affect **individuals** as well as resources.

Summary

Let me end as I began. The crisis facing us is not one of how to manage sustainable forests but of how to encourage and increase the numbers of Knowledgeable Forest Landowners. By making cooperation with natural resource professionals a positive experience, you will attract landowners and their lands. Make it a negative experience, and you will turn them away; worse, you will associate the benefits of sustainable natural resources management with that negative experience.

Government policies, both state and federal, sometimes operate at cross-

purposes to this objective. Active educational and program collaboration represent positive and nurturing experience for both private landowners and public servants. Apathy and misinformation, however, are our mutual enemies, and we are jointly responsible for its prevalence. Apathy is fed by the worst examples of both our behaviors. And I would be remiss if I did not suggest that, for many landowners, government is perceived as the source of the problem, not the answer to our prayers. But we plead the following:

Where we need learning, **teach us**; and stay away from policy slogans and barriers of misdirection and untruth;
Where we need technical assistance, **help us**; and don't rely on budgetary excuses;
Where we need your respect, **give us positive reinforcement**; and curb displays of paternal arrogance;
Where we need empowerment, **involve us**; and don't relegate us to the backbenches of policy development, rule making, and implementation of management actions that affect private lands.

Engaging private forest landowners is a cooperative venture. We look forward to your recognition that forest landowners are an appropriate component of our countryside as well as an important cooperator in management activity.

Non-industrial private land forestry is a people business, a cultural affair. To stem the loss of Knowledgeable Forest Landowners, please carefully consider the following:

- (1) Learn all you can about us;
 - (2) Respect our values, viewpoints, and involvement;
- And, (3), above all, **do no harm**.

Thank you.