

What is in a Natural Resource Management Plan?¹

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Your forest property will serve your needs and interests best if it is managed according to a clear plan. A forest or natural resource management plan is a specific statement of the objectives you have for your land, followed by a series of activities that will take place in order to meet those objectives. Without a plan, decisions may be made based on short-term conditions but with long-term, undesirable consequences. In essence, your plan is a "road map" to guide you from where you are to where you want to be.

A management plan does not have to be a complicated document and there is no standard format for writing one. It may vary from a simple description for timber management of one or more plantations to a very detailed multiple resource plan for participation in programs such as Forest Stewardship, Tree Farm, and even county tax assessment. No matter what the purpose or program, it is important that your plan include the following information:

1. Your objectives
2. Property location and history

3. Resource assessment
4. Management recommendations
5. Activity schedule
6. Supplemental information

Your Objectives

This is the most important part of the management plan because it is where you state exactly what you want out of your land. An objective is a desired outcome or future condition for your property. Your objectives should reflect your true desires and must be compatible with the resources available to you. It is therefore necessary to have some basic knowledge of the resources on your property before establishing your objectives.

An example statement of objectives for a property might be: *to obtain periodic revenue from timber production, while providing habitat for deer, turkey and some songbirds.* Based on this broad statement of desired outcomes and an assessment of your resources, discussed on the next page, more specific objectives can be outlined for each resource. Ideas to help you formulate your objectives are listed in the appendix at the end of this paper.

1. This document is SS-FOR-14, School of Forest Resources and Conservation, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. First published August 2001. Reviewed August 2006. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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Property Location and History

Your management plan should include a description of your land as recorded in the legal deed for the property (in county records) as well as maps showing its location relative to land features and roads. For this it may be useful to outline your property on a U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) topographical map. Your local surveyor's office (or even some bookstores) should have copies of local USGS maps. For more detail you can include a survey map showing the precise location of property corners and boundary lines. If a survey map is registered with the deed as a legal description of the property, a licensed surveyor must have completed the survey. A second set of maps that are useful for planning management activities should focus just on your property, and should identify roads, land or structural features, different forest or vegetation types, fence lines, and any other features that may influence or be part of your goal. Aerial photos of your property will significantly enhance any of these maps.

It is also helpful to document, as best you can, the management history of your property. Has it been cleared for agriculture? Have there been previous rotations of timber? Is there evidence of any other uses in the past? This information will give you some idea of your land's potential and may give you clues about what can be done with it.

Resource Assessment

This section contains descriptive information about the natural resources on your property. It may include information such as stand types (e.g., dominant species, ages, understory), other vegetation communities, soils, water bodies, historical features, wildlife uses, and recreational opportunities. The assessment is also used to help determine what the land is capable of producing in terms of timber and/or wildlife, and will help you to further clarify your objectives.

This information comes from an inventory that you or a natural resource professional conducts on your land. Generally, an inventory includes a portion, or sample, of a resource because it would usually take too much time and money to measure every

plant or other feature on a property. The number of measurements needed to describe a forest depends on the variability within that forest. More data are needed on sites with a greater variety of plant and animal species than on those with only a few species.

One type of inventory is the timber cruise. A timber cruise is usually organized by stands in the form of stand and stock tables. A *stand table* lists the number of trees per acre according to species and tree diameter. *Stock tables* give volume information in board feet, cubic feet or cords per acre. A consulting forester can conduct a timber cruise and interpret the data for you.

The resource assessment should also be used to determine if any regulatory constraints will apply to forest practices on the property. Consider potential erosion problems, wetlands or water bodies, and threatened or endangered species habitat. Addressing these up front through following Best Management Practices (BMPs) and, if necessary, cooperation with appropriate agencies will help you avoid problems or litigation in the future. Florida's silvicultural BMPs can be obtained from your county forester, or viewed on the Web at <http://www.sfrc.ufl.edu/Extension/ffws/bmp.htm>.

Management Recommendations

Based on the resource assessment and your specific objectives, recommendations can be made for the entire tract or individual areas. Recommendations should outline a general set of treatments or operations over a long term, with a discussion of the expected results of each management sequence. Those general recommendations should be supplemented with specific recommendations, which are usually designated for five to ten year blocks of time. Specific recommendations may include the forest regeneration method(s) to use, where to plant wildlife food plots, when and where to burn, which areas to harvest, and the BMPs that apply to each practice.

Harvesting is a common management tool used to alter the species composition, density, and age of forest stands. Both plants and animals will respond to the changes that take place in a stand following a cut. A forester or other resource professional can help you

to decide which cutting practices are appropriate for achieving your desired outcomes, and will recommend a silvicultural prescription for each stand.

Activity Schedule

An activity schedule lists when each recommended treatment will take place. It may also include projected costs and revenues for each operation. As management activities take place on your property, a continuous record should be kept of the dates, times, places, expenses, and income associated with each activity. This record will be helpful for reporting the costs and revenues associated with your management activities for tax purposes. Records should also include details about the specific activities, such as types of seedlings or herbicides, weather conditions, contractors and results of follow-up monitoring. These records will be a great help in the future as you evaluate your successes, plan additional activities and update the management plan.

Supplemental Information

Appendices provide other types of information and can be included at the end of the plan. You may wish to include an overall financial summary that describes the costs and revenues mentioned in the Activity Schedule section. Extension or research publications containing information relating to specific practices in your plan can also be included as an appendix. Another useful appendix would be a list of contacts in case you need further assistance.

Contacts to include would be your county or consulting forester, wildlife biologist or consultant, county extension agent, regulatory agencies, financial advisors, attorneys, or anyone else that might be of assistance to you.

Conclusion

The information in your management plan should be simple, but with enough detail to be useful. Since a management plan is flexible your objectives and resource conditions can be periodically reconsidered. Most management plans are designed to be reviewed every five to ten years, with adjustments made to accommodate the continually changing environment

(from fire and bugs to landowner objectives) that is part of natural resource management.

Consider getting a natural resource professional to inventory your forest and develop your plan. Most consultants base their fees on the size of the property involved, either as a per-acre fee or a fixed fee per minimum acreage (usually 50-100 acres). Others charge hourly rates. County foresters can write your management plan at no cost but they do not conduct inventories.

Appendix - Establishing Your Objectives

If you do not yet have specific objectives for your land, here are some questions to help you get started. Your answers to these questions will help you determine the things on which you may want to focus as you develop your management plan.

- What is your property used for? (primary residence, weekend retreat, agriculture, recreation, timber investment, future development, other)
- How many acres in forest? In crops or pasture? Other uses? Total?
- What are your priorities? (timber management, wildlife management, recreation/aesthetics, water protection, soil conservation, other)
- What types of recreational activities do you enjoy on your land? (bird watching, biking, hiking, firewood, fishing, hunting, camping, horseback riding, boating, nature walks, wildlife observation, other)
- What are your timber management goals? (generate immediate income, generate periodic income, maintain forest health, improve future income potential, maintain mature forest, other)
- What are your wildlife management goals? (recreational hunting opportunities, non-game species, protection, observation, other)
- What wildlife species would you like to feature on your land? (white-tailed deer, fox, squirrel, bear, raccoon, rabbit, beaver, quail, waterfowl,

songbirds, birds of prey, wild turkey, mourning dove, other game or non-game species)

- What is your soil and water management focus? (stabilize existing erosion, improve water quality, increase soil productivity, other)
- What are your management constraints? (limited capital, lack of equipment, distance from property, need financial assistance, need technical assistance, other)
- What is the management history of your property?
- Are there outstanding or unique features requiring special protection or management?
- What is your overall management philosophy?
- What is your ownership/family situation?

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