

Dear Tree Farm Inspector:

I live in the calcium rich soils of the Taconic Mountains. We purchased our property in the fall of 1987, after living in Pittsfield, Vermont for a couple of years. We fell in love with the grand 250-year old sugar maples and vast views of Grampa's Knob and Birdseye Mountain. The land itself was overgrown pasture just beginning to come in with sugar maple seedlings and small saplings. There were places we cleared for the house and for a large garden, brush-hogging some areas to keep them open, later to be used as pasture. As the matriarch maples begin to die off, the saplings have begun to respond and step into the sunlight. The ash I thought would amount to something of quality has begun to decline from ash yellows. There is a small wetland at the bottom of our property, fed by a spring, with clumps of willows, cattails and joe-pye weed. I spent a few successive summers pulling purple loosestrife out of the wetland before it went to seed to gain control of at least one invasive plant. Sensitive fern and sedges create hummocks that you can use as stepping stones to try and keep your feet dry.

We have a little bit of white pine, most of it weeviled, which we slowly girdle as the understory needs to be released. We retain red oak where we find it, and cut the ash with yellows, and the lower quality maple for firewood. There is a small grove of paper birch, a favorite place to take photos that mark time in our family's life. We fight the battle of buckthorn with the barberry twins, but now have a new fight with multiflora rose, and parsnip (of which I am very allergic) moving in wherever drainage carries seeds from the town road. We care about our land. We enjoy living here, watching the sunsets, the birds and other wildlife, and being able to time the storms coming across the mountains with sheets of rain blanketing the hills. I have carried plants home in my pockets to plant in the garden and the woods, have watched the ferns, wildflowers and mosses begin to come back in the young forest after two hundred years of use as pasture, and curse the deer when they eat my lilac blossoms. I have listened to the change in bird song with the change in cover, and look forward to watching the turkeys walk through my backyard on the way to the farmer's fields above my house.

All of that said, I am a wife, mother, sister, aunt and daughter, friend to many, a forester and a landowner, but alas I am not a Tree Farmer. In my heart I am, but I do not have enough land to hang that green and white sign on my property. That makes me a bit sad.

I asked a friend recently who still had some reservations about the Tree Farm program here in Vermont. I asked him why he was a Tree Farmer if he found it hard to promote the program to another landowner. He said he liked being a Tree Farmer because he liked the green and white sign. With that in mind, what really was he saying? Being a Tree Farmer was about pride in his family's stewardship of their property. Placing the sign there says to anyone passing by that they are going the extra mile to make sure that this forestland will be part of the working landscape for a long time because they were managing it properly. It may not be a matter of economics, or certification or being able to sell their wood. They feel satisfied about being good stewards of their property, managing it properly, producing wood products, cutting their own firewood, sawing their own logs, encouraging wildlife, protecting water quality, providing a place of recreation for their family and sometimes the public, sharing ideas, and creating a legacy for their families. I believe it is an honor to be a certified Tree Farmer, to have that sign in front of their property. Those signs we see, announce that this forest landowner believes in long term responsible stewardship of their land, and are thinking about a legacy for the next generation.

I think it is also an honor to be the Tree Farm Inspector who certifies Tree Farms, or the consulting forester who manages the forestland. We are also a part of that stewardship, and are responsible for guiding and educating landowners on the benefits of management and long term stewardship. I don't know about you, but I didn't become a forester because I thought I would get rich. I would venture to guess that some of your career choice reasons for becoming a forester are similar to reasons for wanting to own forestland. The top three reasons in any order may be that we loved being in the woods, we thought that we wouldn't have to be around too many people, and didn't want to sit at a desk. My love for being in the forest and for the natural world, led me to forestry. I don't know that I considered the volume of communication skills I would need to stomp around in the woods all day!

When we as foresters meet with our clients, we are not just selling the services we offer, we are selling the concept of stewardship, the concept that what they as landowners do today, will affect the forested landscape for generations. It is an

easy thing to tell someone to plant beans, and with fertilizer, weeding, tilling, and the right weather, know that you will have a crop to harvest before the end of the summer. It is an easy risk to take. It is entirely different to own forestland, and trust that over the next 60 plus years, they will reap a harvest of many different “products.” As foresters, we are selling a concept that through long term management, their land will produce forest products, provide wildlife habitat, maintain water quality, and provide a place for recreation, as well as provide a place for biological diversity and their ecological processes. I am sure many of you have met with landowners who have a hard time with the long term concept, and are looking for instant gratification or are only interested in a tax break. For many, that may not change, but we are charged with an important role. We are charged with the responsibility to generate excitement and passion and a vision for stewardship. If we can do that for forest management in general, why not the Tree Farm Program? Is being a Tree Farmer for everyone? Probably not. But there are many landowners out there, landowners whose property we manage, who have not even heard of the program before, and we are Tree Farm Inspectors!

So considering everything mentioned earlier, why are you as foresters, Tree Farm Inspectors if you aren't promoting this program? Are you an inspector only because you have clients who are Tree Farmers? My guess is that may be the most common reason. In Vermont, we have an active landowner organization with Vermont Woodlands Association sponsoring the Tree Farm Program. This was originally put into place to revitalize the program and give it stability, have available staff on hand to manage paperwork, and develop some continuity in administration. It has worked well, to date; however, we as Tree Farm Inspectors need to begin to take ownership of some of this program. We need to step up and become more vocal about the importance of becoming a Tree Farmer, or maintaining someone's status in the program. We need to begin to take a more active role in the promotion of this program in Vermont.

I believe Paul Harwood said it best in his article from a couple of years ago when he said, “It isn't your granddaddy's Tree Farm Program anymore! It has gone through a great metamorphosis, and I believe it can only get better.”

Maybe all of these thoughts are just assumptions on my part since I don't have that green and white sign on my property for the world to see, or maybe I have touched a chord within you that reflects exactly how you feel. If I have piqued your interest, please get in touch with Vermont Woodlands Association to see how you can help.

Regards,

Kathy Beland
Consulting Forester, Tree Farm Inspector