THE IMPERATIVE OF POLICY MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

In order for forests to remain a profitable investment, private forest landowners, both old and new, must develop an effective means to represent their interests on policy issues. This presentation, “The Imperative of Policy Management,” gave an overview of the shift in land ownership in the southeastern U.S., how population growth will affect land use, and the potential impact this will have from a policy standpoint as described above. My intention was to demonstrate that policy has the potential to have as much or a greater economic impact on the future of our forests than any force of change. If we do not pay the proper attention to this risk, we as a forest community stand to lose more than an important industry; we could lose our way of life.

Keywords: Investment, landownership change, population growth, risk, southeastern U.S.

Discussion

With the sustained changes in forestland ownership and the massive influx of population predicted for the southeastern U.S., forest landowners are already facing, and will continue to face, new challenges with fewer resources. When traditional forest industries owned large amounts of productive forestlands, they employed policy advocates and analysts to protect their investments against risks associated with policy. With the turnover of the ownership of those lands, the new forest landowners find themselves in the same position as the traditional private forest landowners: a large investment in land with little or no political representation. When policy is set without forest landowner input, the result has the potential of impacting the future of our forests through a reduction of land being managed for forest. This, in turn, has the potential to affect the overall economic health of those states that enjoy a significant economic impact from working forests.

In order for forests to remain a profitable investment, private forest landowners, both old and new, must develop an effective means to represent their interests on policy issues. “The Imperative of Policy Management,” is created by the shift in land ownership in the southeastern U.S. and population growth. From a management standpoint and a policy standpoint, these have the potential to seriously impact private landowners.

America’s private, non-industrial landowner now owns and manages nearly 60% of our nation’s forest resources. With this ownership comes a great responsibility to provide fiber for our
growing nation and now to provide ecosystem services to our growing population. With the emergence of the ecosystem service interest in our forests, new “stakeholders” have showed up to the policy table with the hope to maintain the current state of our forests. This non-scientific, emotional approach often resonates with policy makers and has increased the pressure on forestry groups to ramp up their efforts to highlight the good work our nation’s forest landowners do on their forests. However, as our population continues to grow we will see more stakeholders and additional regulatory attempts made on these productive forestlands.

In the recent Southern Forest Resource Assessment, Wear and Greis (2002) suggest that “Urbanization will have the most direct, immediate and permanent effects on southern forests — of all forces of change.” By the year 2030, the U.S. is estimated to add an additional 82 million people, a 30% increase, to its population. In the timber rich southeastern U.S., we expect the population to increase by 80% in Florida and nearly 50% in Georgia. This will increase the amount of services in these growing regions and will in turn lead to fragmentation of our productive forestlands. Studies have shown that with increased fragmentation we will see decreased opportunities for traditional forestry practices, wildlife habitat and large scale conversion projects. Along with this we expect to see an increased amount of forest land converted to other uses. The end result being more landowners managing smaller tracts of land that have less potential for traditional forestry and greater potential for development. If we do not pay the proper attention to this risk this creates, then we as a forest community stand to lose more than an important industry, we could lose our way of life.

Landowners have always been aware that there are risks associated with owning and managing forestland, and for the most part, we have always done a good job of managing to reduce the physical risk on our property: fire lines can be plowed, boundaries marked, overstocked stands can be thinned, and routine inspections can alert us to any problems that might be evolving. However, this is one area for which landowners have not so vigilantly managed to protect their property. Much more devastating than a fire or storm, from which landowners can eventually recover, adverse legislation or misguided regulation can interfere with landowners’ abilities to continue managing their forests for today and the future. The good news is that these risks can be managed just as well as physical risks.

Landowners no longer can depend on someone else to mind the shop in Washington, D.C. on their behalf. The paper company lobbyists no longer have forestland on their agenda and instead are focusing their efforts on manufacturing issues. This leaves the responsibility of working with congressional leaders to protect private property rights and encourage new markets for forest products up to the largest ownership group of forests in the country: the private forest landowners. However, landowners cannot abandon their day-to-day jobs to work on all the legislation and regulation that is proposed each year that affects their property, but they can join and financially support the organizations that do this work on their behalf. They can also serve as boots on the ground, when necessary, to stand up and advocate on behalf of their property, their legacy and, for some, their livelihood.

Landowners are under more pressure than ever to become more active on the issues that they face today and indefinitely into the future. As our population continues to increase, we will have more parties at the policy table hoping to influence how private land is managed, and without a
strong voice, private landowners are sure to see their rights whittled away. The time to play
offense is now, and you can do your part by continuing to participate and support those
organizations that support your ideals. The Forest Landowners Association is doing all it can in
Washington D.C. to ensure private forestlands are successful. All we need is landowners and
those interested in the future of America’s private forestlands to respond to when called upon to
act on behalf of private forest landowners around the country.

Literature Cited