

Forestry Report -- 2022

As an introduction for new folks, we own about 680 acres, and 660 of those are classified as farmland, a tree farm from which we harvest large mature trees to sell to lumber mills, and gather firewood from dead trees. We've been doing this since we bought the property, and it saves us a lot in taxes as well as providing useful income. The low-tax farmland status is governed by NJ state laws, and we have to show "devotion to agriculture" every year.

For harvesting saleable timber, we set up contracts with loggers, while for smaller, year-by-year work, teams of LLCOA volunteers do the work. In the past, we often did "timber stand improvements," where a team of volunteers cut down weed trees, leaving more space for the valuable trees to grow.

Last year we had to face a problem. Over the past few years, gypsy moths and the emerald ash borer have killed ash and oak trees. Many of these were very large and near roads, so we had to take them down. We did, and there are still piles of wood, mostly ash, along Orange and Grey Roads. A lot of this is still good firewood, and is available to any cabin owner who would like to help themselves.

Also, Duke Grimes, who has been our professional forester since we bought the property, retired last year, and we had to find a replacement for him. New Jersey has a list of approved foresters, and the Forestry Committee (see the roster) worked from that list to identify a forester who can best meet our goals of sustainable forestry, farmland tax status, and compliance with the assorted rules we must follow. We interviewed several candidates, and selected Ridge and Valley Forest Management (R&V) of Lafayette, NJ. The owner, Andy Bennett, inherited the business from his father, and it dates back to the 1970s. Andy is assisted in the forests by Dylon Borger and Laura Nywening. They currently serve more than 600 landowners in New Jersey and nearby Pennsylvania.

Under New Jersey law, there are two ways to manage a tree farm. The traditional method, which we followed for years with Duke Grimes's guidance, treats the forest almost exactly the way a farmer treats a farm: when operating under a "Woodland Management Plan," the goal is to grow and harvest trees in a sustainable and profitable manner. To maintain this status, we must show forestry income, although we are allowed to average it over several years, since doing a timber harvest every year on our 660 acres is not possible. We have substantial income from harvests we have done and in addition, \$15 of your annual maintenance is a "firewood fee," permitting you to harvest all the firewood you want from dead or downed trees. This "firewood income" is included in our tax reports as forestry income. R&V prepared a new Woodland Management Plan for us last year, and we filed our application along with that new plan last summer, and will file for our forestry tax status again this summer. The entire Woodland Management Plan (with lots of maps and details) is available on the LLCOA website under "Forestry."

We will do some work in compliance with our plan this summer, hiring LLCOA volunteers to do the work, which will probably involve a little classic chainsaw work removing “weed trees,” but also attacking vines and invasive plants. Any opportunities will be announced to the entire lake community.

The second way to operate a tree farm under a newer New Jersey law is to use a “Forest Stewardship Plan.” With this certification, there is less emphasis on sales and more on creating a beneficial woodland environment. Some of the changes are described in a document on the website called (“NJ_Woodland_Stewardship&ManagementActs”). It will be beneficial to us to convert to a “Stewardship” program, if only because it will then be possible to access funds from the National Conservation Resources Service (NRCS), a federal agency that supported our Habitat project. It is likely that the NRCS will reimburse us enough to cover about 60% of the cost of R&V both creating our current Woodland Management Plan and converting it into a Forest Stewardship Plan, and will then continue to offer some reimbursement for activities we undertake to remain in compliance with the plan.

Where does this stand? We have been approved as contractors by the NRCS, and are awaiting completion of their internal office procedures. Within a few weeks (or less) that should be completed, and R&V will move to create our Forest Stewardship Plan. It will be based on our current Woodland Management Plan, with more emphasis on sustainability and less on harvesting. Once the Stewardship plan is approved by the township, we will operate under its guidelines for the foreseeable future.

Feel free to contact me if you have questions or concerns, and consider joining the Forestry Committee if you are interested.

Dick Leigh, Forestry Manager, rwleigh@earthlink.net