

 UI Extension Forestry Information Series

Idaho Forest Owners: A Growing Resource!

Chris Schnepf

Over 41% of Idaho is forested. Roughly 16% of the forestland in Idaho is held by private owners (11% non-industrial and 5% industrial). According to a 1996 U.S. Forest Service study by Thomas W. Birch¹, the number of owners managing Idaho private forests has more than doubled, from 21,700 forest owners in 1978, to 47,400 forest owners in 1993. Of these, 34,000 forest owners held less than 10 acres, nearly 6,900 owners held between 10 and 100 acres, and 6,500 held over 100 acres.

This data is no surprise to those who have watched forest properties being divided into smaller units in response to demand from people willing to pay higher prices for a slice of the rural lifestyle. However, there are a number of implications related to this news that bear reflection:

Small acres going out of timber base? We often tend to assume that decreasing forest ownership size equates to land “going out of the timber base”. However, during this period of forests being divided into smaller units, timber harvests on private land were higher than ever. It seems that when prices are high, even 5-acre forest owners are interested in harvesting timber, consistent with other values. On a per acre basis, these properties could be even more productive than larger properties. Owners of smaller forest tracts often have more time (per acre owned) to invest in intensive forest management practices such as thinning, pruning, and wildlife habitat enhancement.

Shrinking private forestland base? The report cited above also noted a slight increase in the amount of

Idaho’s private forestland, from 3.1 million to 3.2 million acres. This increase may be slight, but it dampens fears that we are losing Idaho forestland to development. That may be due to former pasture or marginal cropland being actively planted back into trees, or naturally coming back into forest through succession after farming stopped. Depending on what happens with federal agricultural commodity support programs, this trend could continue or accelerate.

Forest owners will have more neighbors. The current trend is to consider forest management in the context of larger ecosystems, then work together with adjacent forest owners to sustain shared ecosystem values (e.g. providing habitat for species that cross property lines). Doing this becomes progressively more challenging with more landowners to cooperate with. On the other hand, smaller landowners often place wildlife and similar ecosystem values at a premium, so they may be more motivated to work together (and again, may have more time to make related improvements, on a per acre basis). Rural interface conflicts (domestic cats killing songbirds, coyotes killing domestic cats, etc.) could increase, however.

Greater demand for logging contractors who can work on smaller parcels. As more landowners try to actively manage their property to achieve and maintain the type of forest they want, there is an increased demand for forest contractors who can do the work. However, there has been a trend in logging towards highly mechanized equipment, such as forwarders and cut-to-length machines. Currently, these machines must move a lot of wood to be profitable, so a growing number of loggers can’t afford to work on smaller

¹ Birch, Thomas W. 1996. Private Forestland Owners in the United States, 1994. Resource Bulletin NE-134. Radnor, PA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service Northeastern Forest Experiment Station. 183p.

jobs. Loggers who can affordably work on smaller properties (perhaps by using “small scale” technologies, commonly used in Europe and eastern Canada) have a growing market for their services.

Greater demand for forestry services. Larger numbers of forest owners create a greater demand for forestry education and assistance. In light of increased reliance on private timber, public and private investment in these properties by expanding education, assistance, cost share programs, and tax incentives is worth considering. In the absence of increased funding for forestry education and assistance programs, it may be up to knowledgeable forest owners to help spread

the word about good forestry practices through forestry organizations (such as the Idaho Forest Owners Association), and other means.

More forest owners and smaller forest parcels do not necessarily bode poorly for timber production, wildlife, and other forest value in Idaho. On the contrary, they bring new issues and even greater returns if the situation is addressed deliberately and creatively.

This information first appeared in Woodland NOTES, Vol. 9, No. 1.

About the Author: *Chris Schnepf* is an Area Extension Educator - Forestry and Professor at the University of Idaho.

