

“Remember the “D” Trees”

Imagine a horse breeder who sends his Kentucky Derby winning stud to the glue factory and keeps the inferior horses for breeding stock. Or the farmer who sells his top heifers every year and only keeps the lame, lazy, and late breeders to put back in his herd. Neighbors would mock these folks because they are sacrificing the long term success of their business for a short term gain. The same thing can happen when we go to “log” a piece of land if one fails to think about the long term.

“High grading,” which might also be thought of as “taking the best and leaving the rest”, is where landowners or those they have hired cut the best trees with the highest value and leave the low value trees in the woods. By cutting only the largest and most valuable trees you remove those best suited to that site. The trees that are inferior remain as the next forest and the seed source for future forests. In effect, you are taking the best genetics of the forest and leaving the junk. The financial gain of high-grading exists only briefly, yet ownership objectives can be sacrificed for decades.

Keep in mind that smaller diameter trees are not necessarily younger trees. Many of these trees are trees of the same species and age as the larger trees, which did not grow as quickly as their larger-diameter counterparts. These trees have low-vigor and sparse crowns at an advanced age with low probability of responding to overstory release. Others are slower growing trees of the same age, but different species that are not capable of growing into the overstory when larger trees are removed. These include midstory species such as dogwood, blackgum, and sourwood.

Harvesting only the best trees or trees above a certain minimum diameter will leave a residual stand poor in quality or low in value. Instead, harvest consideration should also be given to include the “D” trees: dwarfed, dying, diseased, damaged, deformed, defective, and less desirable. This is the necessary part of weeding the stand and eliminating unwanted seed sources. Just like livestock producers cull the animals that don’t produce, timber owners too should consider marketing lower quality timber to remove the undesirable genetics from their property.

So how do you decide which trees to cut and which to leave? The answer to that question will vary from property to property based on the available resources and your long term objectives. Your first step should be to work with a competent professional logger and forester. Ask for references and inquire as to whether your forester participates in continuing education programs such as the TN Master Logger Program. The University of Tennessee Extension office is also a good resource for publications related to recommended forestry practices and how to go about selling your timber.

Stewardship requires that landowners consider the future consequences when making a decision whether or not to accept the use of high-grading practices on their land. Resource professionals and harvesters also have an obligation to look beyond the present when recommending forest management practices to landowners. Cutting only the best growing trees prematurely reduces the rate of return and can impact the future value of the forest. High quality (better grade) timber is more in demand, less in supply, and yields greater prices. Growing high quality trees gives a much greater financial return during a rotation (even with the time value of the investment) than short-term high-grading.

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