

 UI Extension Forestry Information Series

## Ecosystem Management for Private Woodlands?

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The winds of change are blowing through the forest, and public and private forest owners, managers and operators are alternately confused, inspired, encouraged, and threatened. They are concerned about the proliferation of legal, economic, and social terminology that impacts the definition and operation of all types of forest ownerships. They have sifted, sorted and suffered through efforts to define and often detain forest management activities with terms including *new forestry*, *adaptive forestry*, *new perspectives*, and most recently, *ecosystem management*.

Primarily designed to redirect the management of national forests, these new terms have made owners on non-industrial private forests (NIPF's) feel interested but wary. Each of these terms has fallen by the wayside as attempts to clarify what they mean and how they affect forests inevitably led to even newer verbiage to describe forest management in terms aspiring to universal acceptance.

Most NIPF owners, operators and managers paid only passing attention until *ecosystem management* evolved as the latest term to describe ideal management. Their attention is riveted to USDA Forest Service statements that Ecosystem Management is *landscape management* that involves ecosystems of 100,000 acres to possibly 1,000,000 acres across all ownership boundaries. Political conservatives point to erosion of our capitalistic economy, landowners fear loss of private property rights and "eco-snoopers" invading their forests, and some timber buyers fan the flames of rampant exploitation before the right to harvest timber is lost.

Forest landowners and professionals should remember that all this change is the result of citizen input and a real need to redefine how we use our natural re-

sources. Individuals can have considerable impact on directing that change in a way they see as positive. The size of the ecosystem we define may be critical or irrelevant for specific management decisions. The riparian zone along the lower Lochsa River in east-central Idaho is a definable ecosystem for the unique, coastal-disjunct vegetation it supports, such as Pacific dogwood and red alder, yet for other purposes it is only a small part of a huge Columbia River basin ecosystem. For some purposes, the entire globe is an ecosystem (and yet we can also see the earth as part of the larger ecosystem of the Galaxy and beyond!) and for other goals, a 40 acre patch of residual bunchgrass prairie in the middle of a Palouse wheat field can be defined and managed as an ecosystem. Don't wait for the USDA Forest Service to figure out what all of you are thinking – if you are concerned about the definition and application of ecosystem management, write to them or better yet, attend a public forum on the subject.

There is good reason for concern about regulation of units as large as 1,000,000 acres. The average Idaho NIPF owner has 35 acres and fears regulations based on cumulative ecosystem effects – where what you can do depends on what has already been done by your neighbors. However, ecosystem management is not much different than forest stewardship or the older term *integrated natural resources management*, and has much to offer NIPF owners with new approaches in education, equipment and practices.

Ecosystem management can help NIPF owners, managers and operators attain goals that have long been expressed but only marginally addressed. NIPF

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surveys consistently show strong desire to protect and enhance healthy, productive forest ecosystems. Most landowners are concerned about the impacts of timber harvests on wildlife habitats, water quality, soils and aesthetics, but they also want income from timber and other forest products. One outcome of the surveys is *Forest Stewardship*, a federal program designed and defined by NIPF owners and the natural resources professionals who work with them. Forest Stewardship goes beyond any previous NIPF program because it targets wildlife, water quality, forest health and aesthetics as well as productive timber management. However, in developing and conducting the Stewardship Program, many of us involved in NIPF education and management, and many NIPF owners, discovered that ecosystem management goals are difficult to achieve. We lack the methods and materials to guide us in evaluating forests for the broader ecological goals of forest stewardship and ecosystem management. We also lack good examples of timber harvest strategies and wildlife habitat development that meet our expanded concepts of how we want to manage our lands.

Once these materials and practices are developed and delivered, ecosystem management can be a new tool

to build coalitions and help reach long-held goals of NIPF management. We need to “hop on the wagon and grab the reins” before we are either run over or lose this opportunity. We have evolved through many new terms to describe forest management methods that merge sustainable timber production with sustainable environments. The arguments are no longer just about public lands. Ecosystem management may provide opportunities or hazards for NIPF owners. We can reject the term but not societies demand for more enlightened, sensitive and thoughtful forest management. Knowledgeable decisions are preferable to fearful ones. Check the listing of available publications at your local office of the Cooperative Extension System. Your local USDA Forest Service offices, radio, television, and newspapers can also give you information on opportunities to learn about and influence the development of ecosystem management.

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This information first appeared in Woodland NOTES, Vol. 6, No. 1.

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