

TREES - OUR GROWING RESOURCE

Are we really running out of forests in America?

No, we aren't running out of forests. And we need never run out in the future, if we protect the forest and practice intensive forestry on the lands already dedicated to growing trees as a crop.

The best estimates are that America still has almost 75 percent as much forestland as was here when Columbus landed.

That's not bad for the most highly industrialized nation in the world, and it probably is a higher figure than most people would guess.

But the situation isn't entirely comfortable just the same. While the land available for growing and harvesting trees has diminished gradually in the face of advancing civilization, the demand for wood products has expanded dramatically. Projected demand is even greater. The U. S. Forest Service figures show that the demand for wood by the year 2000 could be double what it was in 1972.

To meet the increased needs of the future, we Americans will have to manage our forests more intensively than we have in the past. Acting as passive custodians of the forests is no longer sufficient.

Who owns the forest?

There are 753.5 million acres of forest in the United States. Of that, about 31 percent is set aside in parks or wilderness areas, or is otherwise unsuitable for growing trees as raw material for wood products.

That leaves about 499.7 million acres of commercial forest to grow the trees we need for the more than 5,000 wood products that support our civilization.

Surveys show most people think the forest industry owns the biggest share of America's commercial forest. But the opposite is true -- industry owns the smallest fraction. Some four million individuals own about 59 percent of the forest in small woodlots. Government, state and federal, owns the next biggest chunk -- about 28 percent of the total. Industry comes in a distant third with about 13 percent of the total. Yet industrial lands work the hardest, providing about 26 percent of the total volume of raw material for the wood products we need each year.

Another way to obtain more usable wood is to more completely utilize the total volume.

Twenty-five years ago, a good logging crew on a typical Douglas fir site could recover about 30 percent of the gross green fiber weight of a given acre of forest. Today, a good operation can just about reverse the numbers -- take 60 to 70 percent of the available fiber and convert it into useful products. We still haven't found an economically sound way to recover the material in the stump, root system, smaller branches, needles and bark. And broken or damaged trees still may be left on the ground.

But the trend is toward the use of more species, the use of smaller trees, and the use of more available fiber in every stand.

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