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Cutting and Selling Timber From Your Farm Woodlot

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Although selling standing timber to a buyer who then arranges for cutting and removal is the most common sales method, some farmers may choose to harvest the timber themselves, cut it to length and market it directly to sawmills.

Advantages & Disadvantages

Some choose this method because they have farm equipment suitable and available to do the cutting, available time and may realize a greater financial return than by selling the trees to a timber buyer uncut. On the negative side, logging can be dangerous work. Regular farm liability and accident insurance may not cover accidents that occur with this type of operation. Some lumber mills refuse to buy timber from anyone who is not fully insured. In addition, improper cutting, handling or transportation of the logs can reduce a valuable log to firewood quality and cause a great deal of damage to remaining trees in the woodlot.

First Steps

If you are considering doing your own logging, follow these guidelines before cutting any trees:

- Have a market for your trees before you invest the time and money to harvest them. Talk to several sawmill operators and have a detailed written contract before harvesting. Don't cut the trees ahead of time and get stuck with a product to sell without a buyer.
- Know your buyer's specifications and requirements, including the board foot volume or number of trees they will accept in a given time, and the species and quality required.
- Make sure you know your legal responsibilities for such things as workers' compensation, liability insurance and government safety requirements. This is particularly important if you employ other people to help you in the operation.
- Use the proper equipment. Many types of farm equipment are simply not designed for woods work. This is especially true of field tractors that may easily tip over under the strain of moving heavy logs. At a minimum, all tractors used in the woods should be equipped with roll-over protection. In addition to the safety considerations, improperly designed farm equipment can be easily damaged during logging operations.
- Observe all safety precautions and procedures. Woods work can be very dangerous and the risk of injury greater than in other agricultural operations.

Choosing Trees To Harvest

Trees harvested for lumber should be a minimum of 18 inches in diameter or greater at the stump. They should also have few major branches on the lower part of the tree and be free of evidence of rot. Decay can be recognized by holes in the stem (especially where old branches broke off) or "punky" wood at the base of the tree. Ideally, only the largest, most mature trees should be harvested, leaving good quality, smaller trees to grow and increase in value. At the same time as crop trees are harvested, poor quality, low value trees should also be cut down for use as firewood. Often, removing these poor trees opens enough space in the woods to more easily cut trees intended for lumber.

Cutting Techniques

When felling trees, care should be taken to avoid damage to the tree being cut down as well as remaining trees in the stand. Try to make the tree fall in an area that is relatively flat and away from other large trees. Cut the tree as low to the stump as possible to maximize the amount of wood in each log. This is especially important with high value species such as oak and black walnut where a portion of the tree may be sold as veneer. Trees should be cut into lengths before they are dragged out of the woods to avoid damage to both the felled tree and to trees along roads or skid trails. Care should be taken to cut the felled tree into lengths of highest possible value. Standard sawlog lengths usually run from 8 to 16 feet, with intermediate cuts at two-foot intervals. Veneer logs (high quality, straight logs that are generally greater than 20 inches in diameter at the small end of species such as black walnut and white oak) may often be cut to a specific length as required by the buyer. In addition to being cut into standard lengths, logs should be cut so that they are of the highest possible quality, with defects removed.

Follow these guidelines for maximizing log quality:

- Make the butt-log (the one closest to the ground) as free of defects, such as knots, branches and irregular areas as possible.
- Cut all logs into lengths as sound and straight as possible.
- Cut at crooks, crotches and knots where possible.
- Cut and leave badly decayed sections of the tree in the woods.
- Make each log an extra 3 inches long to allow for trimming.

Despite using these guidelines, it is difficult for an untrained individual to cut the tree into lengths without making mistakes that significantly reduce the value of the log.

Log Scale Selling Method

Cut logs should be sold to the buyer on the basis of a log scale. Under this system, each log is given a specific price based on its size, species and quality. This provides the seller with a far more accurate assessment of the true value of the logs rather than selling the logs on a “woods-run” or average value based mostly on volume harvested.

Transporting Logs

If there is sufficient volume, a buyer may be willing to purchase the logs at the farm and transport them to the sawmill. When only a small number of trees are sold, farmers may have to transport the logs to mill themselves. Transporting logs can be difficult, since green wood is quite heavy in relation to its volume and is frequently cut in lengths that are not conveniently placed on conventional farm trucks. Seasonal load restrictions on rural roads may further complicate matters. Even when logs are transported to the mill by the farmer, prior arrangements should be made with the buyer before the logs are delivered. Sawmills rarely accept deliveries of wood that were not pre-arranged.

Where to Go For Help

Professional foresters may be able to help in choosing trees to harvest and finding possible markets. Private consulting foresters could help arrange the details of the timber sale for an agreed upon fee. Bulletins and advice on woodlot management and timber sales is also available at your local Cooperative Extension Service office or from the nearest Department of Natural Resources regional forester.

*Adapted from materials developed by MSU Forestry Extension Specialists and district staff members

