

Improving Markets for Low-Grade Wood Will Help Keep Massachusetts Forests as Forests

The decline of pulp mills in the Northeast has left New England forestland owners with an abundance of low-grade wood – wood that has historically been harvested in order to improve the growth, health, and value of the residual forest. Decreased demand for pulpwood means that there is little economic incentive to harvest this wood. What does this mean for the future of Massachusetts forests? It means that some landowners cannot afford to do timber stand improvement. As a result, their forests will not be as productive as they could otherwise be. Without removing some of the low-value trees that crowd the forest, you can't grow valuable saw timber, so forest owners will receive less income from their woodlands in the future. This is going to make it harder down the road for private landowners to afford to keep their forests. Subdivision and development will become a more attractive alternative to forestland for some landowners.

Private individuals own more than 75 percent of Massachusetts's forests. These family-owned working forests provide essential ecological services that we all enjoy – including air and water quality enhancement, carbon sequestration, and a range of dynamic wildlife habitat. Privately owned woodlands also pay more in taxes than they consume in community services, making them a net gain for the towns in which they are located. (Residential land does the exact opposite – it uses more in services like schools, municipal sewer and water, and fire protection than it pays in taxes.) Private forestland owners are also excellent stewards– consider that over the past century, consumption of U.S. wood products has doubled, yet hardwood growth in each of the hardwood-producing states exceeds removals nearly 2:1. These are just a few of the reasons why it is so important to support privately owned working forests.

The biggest threat to private forests in our region is not timber harvesting – it is fragmentation and conversion to development, which is exactly what those of us in the forest industry seek to avoid by practicing long-term woodland management for our clients and ourselves. Periodic timber harvests improve the health and value of a forest and provide returns to the landowner. Imagine a famer who never weeded her vegetable garden. She would have less yield, and her vegetables wouldn't be of the best quality, so she wouldn't get much for them– which could make it hard for her to continue farming and paying her real estate taxes.

Timber harvests are a forest conservation tool, and a reduction in harvesting due to a lack of low grade markets would be detrimental for wildlife as well as the long-term viability of the region's forestland. Consider the following benefits that flow from timber harvests:

1. **The Forest Remains a Forest.** A timber harvest provides some income to the landowner so they can offset property taxes and afford to keep their forest as a forest. Development and fragmentation are less likely to occur when woodland landowners receive periodic income from the sale of timber. The amount of income received is related to the condition of the forest and the amount of timber stand improvement work (i.e. low grade removal) that has been performed. This is because the removal of poorly formed, unhealthy, low value material focuses future growth on healthy, more valuable species. Without markets for low-grade material, this work does not get done – leading to an overabundance of low value material.
2. **Enhanced Wildlife Habitat.** Timber harvests create and enhance habitat for wildlife. Some species rely on the young, regenerating forest that appears after a harvest. Timber harvests create changes in forest composition that serve many different populations.

3. **Seedling Regeneration.** Timber harvests create openings in the forest canopy that increase the amount of sunlight reaching the forest floor—this is essential for helping shade-intolerant species like Oak to regenerate. Because Oak requires larger openings (and hence a greater visual impact on the landscape) societal pressure can actually inhibit the implementation of practices needed to regenerate Oak trees. If we don't regenerate Oak, we are systematically devaluing forests because Oak trees have significant ecological and commercial value. Many species rely on Oak mast and prefer the structural and compositional features of Oak forests, so declines in Oak have negative impacts on wildlife populations. Oak trees are also valuable to the landowner in providing a return on forest investment, which is key to helping keep forests as forests.
4. **Forest Products.** Wood from timber harvests helps meet societal demand for sustainably harvested and renewable construction materials that contain less embodied energy than other building and finish materials, making them a superior choice from the perspective of life cycle analysis.
5. **Resilient & Healthy Forests.** Timber harvests create new age classes within a forest, and new age classes create a more diverse resilient forest.
6. **Sustaining Local Economies.** Private forestland is an economic engine for rural America. Privately-owned forests in New England contribute over \$3 billion annually to local and regional economies, sustaining over 80,000 jobs in the forestry, wood products, paper products, and wood furniture industries. For every forest-related job, there are two more indirectly related jobs in transportation, distribution, and sales.
7. **Renewable Energy.** Low grade material harvested from woodlands can be used for biomass thermal energy, helping to offset our nation's reliance on fossil fuels.

Massachusetts has an opportunity to help support its private working forests by promoting the use of locally produced, sustainable wood fuel – which will create a better market for low-grade wood and incentivize more landowners to do timber stand improvement, ensuring the long-term viability of their forests.

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