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Using a Welcome Wagon Approach to Reach Out to Woodland Owners in Appalachian Ohio

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Abstract

A welcome wagon approach was used to provide new forest landowners in southern Ohio with information to help them make informed decisions about the management of their forest resources. New forest landowner information was gathered from county auditor records, and landowners were provided with contact information for agencies and organizations to consult for assistance and an invitation to pick up a woodland owner resource packet containing a wide array of materials and information to help them with the management process.

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Introduction

Ohio's 29 Appalachian counties account for one third of the state's land base and 4.8 million acres or 64% of the state's forestland (Griffith, 1992). Nearly 80% of these acres are owned by an estimated 150,000 private individuals (Birch, 1994), and the number of private woodland owners is increasing due to parcelization (Best & Wayburn, 2001).

There are numerous resources available to assist landowners in making informed management decisions. However, only about 5% of forest landowners in northern states have forest management plans (Birch, 1994). Frequently this management shortfall results in haphazard timber harvests that often leads to a reduction in future forest productivity.

In an attempt to address these issues, Ohio State University Extension and Rural Action Sustainable Forestry initiated a joint effort with the objective of providing new woodland owners in Appalachian Ohio with the contacts and information needed to help them make informed decisions about the management of their forest resources.

A Three-County Pilot

Athens, Jackson, and Washington Counties in southeastern Ohio were chosen as pilot counties to represent the Appalachian region. These counties are on average 61% forested. The following process was used to identify new landowners for this outreach effort:

- Acquired land transfer information from county auditor records.
- Mailed contact information of agencies and organizations to consult for assistance.
- Provided management resources packets to interested landowners.
- Tracked responses through a database for follow-up with non-respondents.

Acquiring Landowner Information

To increase the likelihood of contacting landowners with forestland, only transactions with more than 10 acres that occurred in 2002 were recorded. Information that was collected from conveyance forms included: landowner contact information, property location and acreage, and transfer date.

A total of 545 land transactions representing 22,545 total acres (an estimated 13,752 forest acres) were recorded (Table 1).

Table 1.
Land Transactions for the Three-County Pilot Project

County	Land Transactions Recorded		
	Number	Acres Transferred	Average Acreage
Athens	287	11,071	38.6
Jackson	89	3,438	38.6
Washington	169	8,036	47.6
Total	545	22,545	41.4

The Mailings

The initial mailing (late summer in Athens and Jackson Counties, early fall in Washington County) targeted conveyances in the first half of 2002. This mailing included a welcome and an invitation to pick up a resource packet at the County Extension Office. The second mailing (spring 2003) included more descriptive information about the effort, a contact sheet listing local assistance providers, and the invitation. This was sent to those who completed transactions in the second half of 2002 and non-respondents from the first mailing.

Forest Management Resource Packets

Resources packets included letters from the Welcome Wagon Committee and local Extension agent, and a variety of publications and materials selected to assist the landowner with management of their forest resources (Table 2).

Table 2.
Items Included in Welcome Wagon Packets and Information Source

Resource Material	Source
Woodlands, wildlife and watersheds newsletter and class information	Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Woodland Stewards team http://woodlandstewards.osu.edu/
Sustainable forestry and non-timber forest products publications	Rural Action Sustainable Forestry http://www.ruralaction.org/forestry.html

Selected fact sheets and order form	Ohio State University Extension http://ohioline.osu.edu/
Selected wildlife and forestry publications and list of others available	Ohio Divisions of Forestry and Wildlife http://www.dnr.state.oh.us/
Applications for membership	Local woodland interest groups
Coupons for discounts on classes	Ohio Woodland Stewards
Discounts on seed and planting stock	Rural Action Sustainable Forestry
Coupon for free color GIS map of property (Jackson Co. Only)	Jackson County Engineer

Pilot Results

Thirty of the 545 landowners who were mailed invitations requested or picked up the packet. Response rates ranged from 2.8% to 8.9%, with an overall response rate of 5.5% (Table 3). Although this was less than our 10% response target, we did transfer more usable information in the second mailing, and the project drew additional requests from non-targeted woodland owners.

Table 3.

Packets Distributed to Landowners, Acres Transferred, and Response Rates in the Three-County Pilot Project

County	Packets Distributed			
	Number	Acres Transferred	Average Acreage	Response Rate (%)
Athens	8	276	34.5	2.8
Jackson	7	436	62.3	7.9
Washington	15	554	42.6	8.9
TOTAL	30	1,266	42.2	5.5

Where Do We Go from Here?

Additional funding was received from the Ohio Environmental Education Fund to expand the Woodland Owner Welcome Wagon project to include a total of 14 counties in 2005. Based on the results of this pilot project, the following modifications will be implemented in an effort to improve the potential success of this expanded project:

- Frequently use a multi-media approach to reach new and tenured landowners,
- Include contact information for local assistance providers with all mailings,
- Encourage other organizations and agencies to collaborate,
- Send at least three mailings within the first two years of ownership,
- Secure additional incentives to encourage participation,

- Develop a Web page as an additional method of information dissemination,
- Offer targeted educational programming in Welcome Wagon counties, and
- Use a follow-up survey to evaluate the process.

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