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If it Pays, it Stays - Rewarding Private Forest Landowners

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A VIEW FROM YOUR STUMP

Opinion

BY STEVE BULLARD

IF IT PAYS, IT STAYS—REWARDING PRIVATE FOREST LANDOWNERS

Your forest is an ecosystem—a group of organisms like trees, other plants, and animals that are living in connection with the soil, water, air and other non-living elements on your property. Ecosystems, like forests, produce many goods and services, but in the past only a few of those goods and services have provided income to landowners. For example, forest landowners in most areas know that timber products can be sold, and many of us lease our land for hunting and other recreation. Thus, timber and recreation are “monetized” in most locations. But what about the other goods and services that forests provide on a continuing basis?

Are you or other forest landowners in your area being rewarded monetarily for soil stability, flood control, the full diversity of wildlife habitat, water filtration, air quality, and other critical services, collectively referred to as “ecosystem services?” The answer to that important question is yes in some cases, but no in far too many others. Throughout the world, many non-timber, forest-based goods and services have great value, but these values are often not priced or monetized. For this reason, they tend to be under-represented in the decisions of forest landowners and decision makers.

During the dust-bowl era of the 1930s, in the depths of the Great Depression, famed conservationist Aldo Leopold noticed this very issue. Leopold noted that our government was making great efforts to “fix” conservation problems that were caused by a lack of rewards for the un-priced benefits that rural landowners provide. He stated, however, that conservation “ultimately boils down to rewarding the private landowner who conserves the public interest,” and he called for “workable vehicles to carry that reward.”

In the United States today, there is strong support for keeping healthy, productive forests in our landscapes. If we are serious about this goal as a society, however, we need to pay careful attention to developing those “workable vehicles” that will “reward the private landowner who conserves the public interest.” The much shorter phrase “If it pays, it stays,” coined by the Property and Environment Research Center (www.perc.org), succinctly captures this critical

concept—private forestland and forest resources must be profitable in the long term, or in many cases they will be under-managed for many benefits, or they may be converted to land uses that are more directly rewarded in the short-term.

Today, our society is developing more and more examples of “workable vehicles” to reward private forest landowners, and we must continue to develop and deliver more of these. In the public sector, cost-share programs, income and property tax incentives, purchase of easements, and publicly-funded programs to encourage conservation-related land uses are great examples of carrying a reward to private forest landowners. Also, however, there are increasing numbers of private-sector examples where non-timber goods and services of forests are being rewarded monetarily. Examples include privately-purchased easements or development rights, eco-marketing of sustainably-produced goods, and unbundling and marketing of opportunities for photography, bird-watching, and many other forms of recreation. These are only a few examples; many others are listed in the matrix for “Innovative Markets and Market-like Instruments for Ecosystem Services” at www.ecosystemmarketplace.com.

Whether we call them “workable vehicles” or “market-like instruments,” forest landowners should see increasing opportunities for income for conserving the public interest. We must continue to work together—through university research and outreach, as well as through public agencies and private sector groups—to develop and share these vehicles and instruments. What Leopold called for in the 1930s, workable vehicles to carry the reward to private landowners, was very well said. Today and in the future we must continue to deliver these measures, because keeping healthy, productive forests in the landscape is a goal that’s too important not to do well—and as stated by Benjamin Franklin, “Well done is better than well said.”

Steve Bullard is dean of the Arthur Temple College of Forestry and Agriculture at Stephen F. Austin State University.

Your opinion matters; submit your opinion to A View from Your Stump in 700 words or less by sending it to info@forestlandowners.com.