

Why Management Of A Natural Stand May Be The Best Option For You

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Consider letting hardwood grow until it can be sold Instead of spending money to eradicate it.

For the past two decades many southern forest farmers have heard all about the merit of pine plantations. Much of the research gives the impression one can't grow trees without planting them. Moreover, the number of acres planted is used by many to measure forestry success, and numerous theories have been developed to justify heavy capital outlays for site preparation and planting. In many cases, extensive advertising is designed to convince owners to plant trees. In spite of this pressure, however, 75 to 80 percent of the pine types in the South are natural stands and most likely will stay that way.

In his paper, "Forests in the Long Sweep of History," Marion Clawson noted, "The capacity of natural forest lands to regenerate timber stands and the capacity of timber to grow, even in the absence of man's help and often in spite of his wishes, tend to be overlooked or ignored."

Clawson is right. There is little recognition of the fact that natural forests deserve much of the credit for the remarkable increase of southern timber over the past 40 to 50 years. The fact that managing those natural forests can be an excellent investment may be likewise underestimated.

By far the majority of land in the South is held by private nonindustrial forest owners, and they have a wide variety of needs and objectives. For many owners and situations, managing the stand they have, even when it is understocked, is a perfect strategy, and planting should be done only as a last resort. Furthermore, there are certain economic advantages of letting a grossly understocked pine stand grow for 20 years. The "let grow" alternative also preserves income opportunity at all times and exposes the owner to less risk of loss.

What Is Natural Stand Management?

Natural stand management may refer to anything between no forest management to harvesting followed by artificial regeneration. It includes all the major forest management systems and is frequently not the application of one system to a single tract. It includes uneven-aged management, all-aged management, and even-aged management.

The planting and growing of successive crops of pine trees is frequently likened to agriculture. In contrast, managing natural stands means control over the establishment, species, conditions, and growth of forests. This is the challenge for foresters who want a chance to show their skill and judgment in manipulating the natural forest to obtain the landowner's objectives.

Anyone can clearcut when the computer says to. It takes skill, nerve, faith, and guts to depend on natural regeneration. Unusual perception and understanding are required both by the decision-making managers and the men in the woods. Natural stands require intensive forest management, treating each acre as it should be treated.

Natural stand management is not "intensive" as the term is applied to plantation forestry, which really means capital-intensive forestry. Managing natural stands is generally low cost, yet can also be "intensive" forestry.

Managing Natural Stands

Natural stands can be managed any way in the book. The manager must be creative and well informed. There is no single system and one shouldn't worry about strict management systems. The basic aim is to keep the acres as fully stocked as possible, protect reproduction and small trees, and cut less than growth until the optimum volume is reached.

I like to describe managing natural stands as selective management, because one must select the right methods, tools, treatments, and timing. There are three critical areas in selective management of southern pines-hardwood control, harvesting, and natural regeneration.

A commercial timber sale is the simplest hardwood control, but other methods such as fire, chemicals, machines, and grazing provide a variety of options.

The second critical area, harvesting, involves a multitude of choices concerning frequency, intensity, type of equipment, timing, and products to be harvested.

A similar variety of selections must be made in managing for natural regeneration. The basic choice is between seedtree, shelterwood, clearcut or selection system, but timing methods and coordination with other activities involve many choices.

Natural Stand Management May Increase

There are a number of reasons more attention will likely be given to managing natural stands, and some advantages and disadvantages. Most "easy" acres have been planted and the easy plantation conversions, along with large capital outlays, have been made.

In my opinion, there should be less concern over timber shortages. In fact, I am concerned about oversupply. This could indicate advantages for the quality timber and low cost production associated with natural stands.

Moreover, changing utilization and improved tools have created new opportunities for managing stands. More importantly, some economists believe it is not in the best interest of the country for large amounts of capital to be diverted from high to low rates of return and immobilized for long periods of time.

Additionally, there are a number of forest management reasons that natural stand management makes sense. It is easier to work with-rather than against-nature. Understocked stands can grow to full stocking. Advanced growth can be preserved. A mix of species uses nutrients and soil effectively and can grow more volume. Uneven-aged stands make more efficient use of soil and space. The increasing market in some areas for hardwood, and softening pine prices, suggests that forest farmers might consider letting hardwood grow until it can be sold, instead of spending money to eradicate it.

A listing of advantages for managing natural stands includes:

- Less capital investment
- Low front end investment
- Better spread of capital investment
- Quicker returns from invested capital
- Better income flow
- Higher value growth
- Better quality growth
- More flexible management
- More liquidity and income opportunity
- Better occupation and use of site
- More aesthetic appeal
- Less disease and insect problem
- Greater wildlife diversity

There are, however, virtually no studies and models to analyze the returns from managing natural stands. Certainly the information needed to analyze the returns from a natural stand is complex. There are few yield tables or studies to predict such things as the effect of thinning on natural stands. But we can see the option is there and in the meantime we must use common sense to compare the alternatives of natural stands and plantations.