



## Frequently Asked Questions about Managing Forest Land in California

### What is the right thing or best thing to do on my forested property?

This is the fundamental question that most forest landowners really want answered. The answer depends on a great number of variables most important of which is what are the landowner's objective for their property. Why do you own the property? How would you like it to look 5, 10, 25 or even 100 years in the future? Decisions made today can have impacts for many decades. It is wise to make these choices based on the best available information that you can obtain.

Location, access, soil type, forest type, ecology, economics, and legal issues all play a part in your decisions. No single answer works for all landowners. Many people change their views over time as they develop a better understanding of the capability and limitations of their land.

The best single thing that you as a landowner can do is to learn more about your property, how your property fits into the ecological, economic, and legal environment around it. With this knowledge you will be better able to come up with tasks that best suit your needs and expectations.

### So how do I get started?

Consider creating a written plan for your property. The process of planning is an excellent opportunity to learn more about your land, and the outside forces that act upon it. With a written plan in hand you will be better able to describe what you want to accomplish, to your family, to the people that you hire to reach those goals, and to the agencies that administer land use. You will also have quicker access to cost sharing funds that help landowners reach their goals.

### What is in this plan?

Creating this written plan is up to you. What you include are the items that will help you manage your property better. There are a number of plan templates that you can follow. See the question "[Where can I learn more?](#)" to locate some of these guides.

### Is this the same as a Timber Harvest Plan (THP)? If not, what is a THP?

No - a Timber Harvest Plan (THP) is an environmental review document. California laws and subsequent court decisions have made the THP the functional equivalent of an Environmental Impact Report. The intent of the THP is to protect productivity of a timber harvest site and the environment around it from damage. The THP spells out the types of activities proposed, when and how they will be performed, and treatments that minimize impacts to the environment. Protection for streams, ponds, domestic water supplies, and prevention of potential erosion are emphasized. The idea, of course, is that if a landowner damages a water source it will impact downstream water users and wildlife.



## **Do I need a Timber Harvest Plan to cut brush for fire safety?**

Generally you do not need a Timber Harvest Plan to cut brush or for your own firewood. If you plan on selling some of the trees that you cut, then you may need a THP or an exemption to the THP.

## **When do I need a Timber Harvest Plan (THP)?**

Essentially, any time that you sell, barter, or trade timber; you need to have an approved THP or an exemption to filing a THP. Landowners, harvesting a small amount of wood for their personal use, typically firewood, do not need to obtain a THP. Whenever you sell or barter the wood, you fall under the Forest Practice Act and Rules and must have a THP. Landowners who harvest Christmas trees, dead dying or diseased trees, split products, are establishing a right-of way, or removing fire hazard trees within 150 feet of a structure can file for an exemption. There is also a one-time exemption for conversion of 3 acres to another use.

An exemption from filing a THP is not an exemption from following the Forest Practice and other environmental rules and regulations. The idea is that activities exempted from THP are of a size and scale that will not significantly impact the environment. Each of the exemptions has specific rules that apply both for qualifying for the exemption, and in harvesting trees under the exemption.

Ultimately the landowner is responsible for following the Forest Practice Act and the Rules.

## **I may want to sell some trees, how do I get a Timber Harvest Plan (THP)?**

You need to hire a Registered Professional Forester (RPF) who prepares the Timber Harvest Plan (THP) and submits it to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) for approval. The process is too long to describe well here. Look in ["Where can I learn more?"](#) for additional information.

## **How do I choose a Registered Professional Forester (RPF)?**

Registered Professional Foresters (RPF) are licensed by the state of California, to practice forestry. Registration requires 7 years of education and experience and a passing grade on a comprehensive exam. If you decide to harvest timber you will need to hire an RPF to prepare a Timber Harvest Plan (THP).

Choose an RPF like you would any professional - with great care. A timber harvest is an expensive, potentially destructive event. Significant financial, environmental, and emotional values are involved. Large sums of money often change hands. The laws are complex and confusing, so you want the best person to be working for you and looking out for your interests. You should be prepared to pay for these services.

Personal recommendations from neighbors, friends, and associates who have harvested timber in the past are great sources for finding the right professional for your needs. Many of the most experienced and respected foresters rely solely on referrals for new business and often have as much work as they can handle. Members of landowner organizations like the Forest Landowners of California swap forester and logger stories at their annual meetings and are often willing to share their experiences both good and bad. CDF publishes a list of RPFs that work in each county. Also, professional societies like the California Licensed Foresters Association, the Association of Consulting Foresters, and the Society of American Foresters will direct landowners to their members.

After you have some names, it is good to check out several before deciding on which one best meets your needs. Choosing an RPF is very much like finding the right doctor. The personality of the professional you hire can be just as important as their technical expertise. Some landowners are comfortable with the "get-in, get-out, get-it-done" cool efficiency of some foresters. Other landowners need more details and careful explanation for each step of the process. To provide the best possible service to their clients, RPFs need to become familiar with family circumstances and finances. Ask RPFs to visit you on your property for an assessment of harvest potential.

After narrowing the field, it is time to ask the hard questions. Ask for references for recent jobs and follow up. Call the references and find out if they were satisfied with the RPF. Ask if they would hire that person again. Visit recent harvest sites and review the THP. Check with the Board of Forestry, Professional Licensing and ask if the RPF under consideration has any disciplinary actions. Request details.

Check which organizations the RPF belongs to. The California Licensed Foresters Association provides continuing education to its members, mostly in terms of changes to forest practice laws. The Society of American Foresters is a professional society that has a continuing education certification program. The Association of Consulting Foresters was founded to advance the professionalism, ethics, and interests of professional foresters whose primary work is consulting to the public. Membership in any of these groups helps to indicate professional growth and continuing education.

Another place to check is with the county courthouse. Any professional facing a large number of lawsuits pending indicates potential trouble.

Avoid the temptation of having a Licensed Timber Operator (logger) provide forestry services. Many Licensed Timber Operators work with or have an RPF on staff and will prepare a complete THP as part of a logging contract. The RPF is legally and ethically bound to serve the financial interests of the person who is paying for their services. RPFs who work for the logger have a legal responsibility to look after the best interest of the logger. An RPF working for you has the legal obligation to look after your best interests. You want to be the one who hires the forester and writes the check.

### **How do I choose a logger (Licensed Timber Operator)?**

A Licensed Timber Operator (LTO) who is authorized by the state to conduct timber harvests conducts the actual timber harvest. Licensed Timber Operators are required to take a course in timber harvest laws, document at least 3,000 hours of timber harvesting experience, and present a certificate of timber harvesting insurance including a million dollars in commercial general liability insurance and a loggers third-party damage liability.

Typically, the Registered Professional Forester prepares a proposal that lists the quantity and quality of timber that is to be sold. The proposal also discusses the limitations of the timber sale and estimates the amount of roads and culverts to be installed and any other considerations that affect the bid. The RPF usually recommends which LTOs should be sent the bidding package. Potential bidders are invited to inspect the sale to clarify any questions that they may have and to confirm the volume and value of the timber for sale.

Licensed Timber Operators are professionals who do a difficult job. Similar criteria used to evaluate a Registered Professional Forester can be used with Licensed Timber Operators. References, recent work, affiliations, and legal situation are all indicators of the quality of the LTO. Most importantly, follow up on references and ask to visit recent jobs.

One difficulty that smaller landowners may face is hiring the best loggers. Experienced loggers prefer to work with larger industrial landowners. Larger landowners can hire the logger every year and for bigger jobs. Larger landowners also tend to have less strict requirements for cleaning up logging slash and debris. Larger jobs favor mechanized harvesting equipment over more costly hand labor.

There are excellent loggers that prefer working smaller jobs. They tend to be smaller operators, and less well capitalized. As a result, breakdowns and unanticipated delays impact the smaller logger more. These and other potentially costly events have to be monitored closely. Otherwise, the logger may feel the need to cut corners.

### **My neighbor says he does not need to file a Timber Harvest Plan he has an NTMP - what is that?**

A Non-industrial Timber Management Plan (NTMP) is an alternative for landowners with less than 2,500 acres that are willing to manage their land using specific management techniques. Like a Timber Harvest Plan a Non-industrial Timber Management Plan must be prepared by a Registered Professional Forester and approved by California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

A Non-industrial Timber Management Plan is an environmental review document that outlines the long-term management of your property. It also locks in the Forest Practice Rules that were applicable at the time the NTMP is prepared. When you decide to harvest timber, you file a Notice of Intent with CDF that you intend to have one of your planned harvests. The process is streamlined allowing you to take advantage of high timber prices for example, and lowers the future costs.

### **Why would I choose a Timber Harvest Plan (THP) over a Non-industrial Timber Management Plan (NTMP)?**

A Non-industrial Timber Management Plan (NTMP) limits the type of management that you can do. NTMPs are usually more expensive to prepare initially. If your property is small, you may not have enough timber overall to justify the extra expense of a NTMP. Again this all goes back to having a written plan so that you can compare your options and make informed decisions.

The process of obtaining an NTMP is too long to describe well here. Look in ["Where can I learn more?"](#) for additional information.

### **If I decide to log, I want to selectively log my property. How do I go about that?**

Carefully! The term selective harvesting is actually not defined in the Forest Practice Act. It is often confused with the selection harvest system. The difference is subtle, but can have major impacts on the ground.

The selection harvesting system is a regeneration harvest designed to get new trees growing. There are two major techniques, single tree selection and group selection. In single tree selection a forester carefully selects the individual trees that are harvested. Some large crop trees and smaller trees that are diseased, damaged or otherwise undesirable are harvested. The advantage to single tree selection is you have a continuous forest stand that looks more natural to many people. The disadvantages are that the technique is more expensive and difficult to execute well. Logging is more likely to damage remaining trees. By design, single tree selection stands have a continuous forest canopy from the ground up to the tops of the tallest trees, making it easier for wildfire to reach the crowns and kill the trees.

Group selection involves clearing patches, no larger than 2.5 acres in a forest stand, and possibly thinning out less desirable trees in the surrounding matrix.

Selective harvesting is all too often a euphemism for high grading, removing the best trees while leaving damaged, diseased, and trees unable to grow well behind. High graded stands grow much slower than well-managed stands. High grading can reduce future growth as much as 60 percent! That is, a well managed forest stand capable of growing 1,000 board feet per acre per year may only produce 400 board feet per acre per year when it is high graded.

To an untrained eye, high graded stands look like a light touch on the forest - many trees remain and there is a full canopy overhead. Logging debris is more difficult to notice. Depending on how payment is arranged, the biggest and best trees are often the most valuable, so the landowner is pleased with the economic gain. Unfortunately the trees remaining are of poor form, or may take many years to recover from the logging.

The key to a selective harvest is who selects the trees. An experienced forester can meet the landowner's objectives and preserve the integrity of the forest. Beware of diameter limit harvest - cutting all of the trees above a particular diameter. Look at your Timber Harvest Plan - selective logging is often disguised as "overstory removal" which is actually a step in the shelterwood and seed tree timber harvest techniques. Overstory removal is appropriate when the trees in the understory are young and vigorous and can respond with increased growth to the new conditions that they face following harvest.

You can read more about techniques for managing forest stands in ["Where can I learn more?"](#) The technical term is called silviculture.

**I'm not interested in harvesting timber; I am concerned about fire damaging my property.**

You should be concerned, on average wildfires annually consume over 150,000 acres in California. Most forested habitats in California are adapted to light frequent fires that have been largely eliminated by a policy of fire suppression. As more people move into rural lands, reintroducing fire is difficult. Fuel levels are higher than they were historically. With California's climate of wet winters and long dry summers, the potential for wild fire is of great concern to most landowners.

### **So what can I do to make my land fire safe?**

Here is one place a written plan can help. Most landowners only have the time and resources to reduce fire hazard on part of their property at a time. Having a written plan helps you treat your property in a systematic way and anticipate for the maintenance of those treatments. Maintaining a treated area is often less expensive and more effective than redoing a fuel treatment.

Applying the appropriate treatment at the right time can save you time and money, while being more effective. Scotch broom makes a good example. Many landowners lop this invasive shrub early in the spring when the flower blooms and the plant is obvious. Also the weather is cooler making this miserable task a bit less unpleasant. However, research has shown that if you lop scotch broom in late summer when the plant is experiencing drought stress, it is unlikely to resprout. Almost all of the plants loped in spring will resprout. Knowing about biology of the plant that you are treating can reduce your workload. Researching the ecology of the plants that are on your property and can help guide your management and is a part of a good plan.

Assess your situation. Where is fire most likely to start? Where is it most likely to travel? Are there places that firefighters may be willing to make a stand against wild land fire on or near your property? What treatments are appropriate to the plants that are a fire hazard? How often will you need to return to each treated area to maintain the fuel treatment?

Consider working with your neighbors. Fire safety is usually more effective when larger blocks of land can be protected. Fire fighting professionals can give you an idea of what they would like to see.

There are a great number of resources on the Internet and in books that can help. See ["Where can I learn more?"](#)

### **My interest is in wildlife how can I deal with the wildlife on my property?**

It depends to some degree whether you want to encourage or discourage wildlife - though the answer is somewhat the same. You do not manage wildlife directly, but you can manipulate wildlife habitat. Animals need sources of food, water, and cover in particular. By understanding an animal's needs you can either provide more of these to encourage use of your property, or provide less of these to discourage wildlife use. We come back again to a plan and knowing about the capabilities of your land and being able to express your goals and expectations.

### **Vehicles are tearing up my roads, what can I do about them?**

If you have control over the road, then sturdy gates are a good solution. Often the costs avoided in road repair quickly make up for the cost of gating a road. It is common for newly gated roads to have the lock shot off. People that have been using a private road may object to it being closed. Be persistent replacing locks and the damage usually stops.

If another landowner has an easement to use the road, you need to inform them that you would like to gate the road and provide for their legal access. Utility companies often have legal access via an easement to use your road for access to their facilities. Check your deed.

### **Where can I get the money to do all the things that I want to do?**

Timber harvest is one source of income. A well planned and executed timber harvest can both improve your land and put money in your pocket. If your property is in a condition where economical timber harvest is difficult, there are cost sharing programs that help forest landowners reach their goals. Most cost sharing programs require you to have a

written plan and you usually have to maintain a cost shared treatment for a minimum number of years. See ["Where can I learn more?"](#) for additional information.

### **Where can I learn more?**

The Forest Stewardship Help Line at 1-800-PET-TREE (1-800-738-8733) is a good first step. They can help you with most general forestry questions and can put you in touch with experts that can answer your questions in detail. The Forest Stewardship Help Line keeps track of the cost share and assistance programs - level of funding, dates for applications, and names and addresses of contacts.

Your local California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection office, listed in the State Government pages of the phone book can point out sources of information. They usually have a list of professional foresters that work in the area.

<http://www.fire.ca.gov/>

Your county Cooperative Extension office can direct you to a great deal of information. Look in the county government pages of the phone book under University of California, Farm and Home Advisors office or on line at:

<http://danr.ucop.edu/danrdir/>

The Forest Landowners of California is an organization that promotes science based forest management on private lands.

Forest Landowners of California

980 Ninth Street, Suite 1600

Sacramento, CA 95814

916-972-0273

<http://www.forestlandowners.org/>

### **Are there any web sites that can help?**

The Internet is a wonderful resource for finding information on forest management information. Because the web changes so frequently, knowing how to use a good search engine will often lead you to new resources difficult to track in a static document.

One technique to effective use of a search engine is to try a very specific search first, and then use the links on the pages resulting from that search to find additional information. If your specific search does not work out well, try other similar terms and synonyms. For example try forest management, woodland management, or wood lot management. Be persistent in your search.

Another method to locate forestry information on the Internet is to use the various web directory services. Forestry is usually listed under Science > Agriculture > Forestry. For example Google and Yahoo both use this scheme.

<http://directory.google.com/Top/Science/Agriculture/Forestry/>

<http://dir.yahoo.com/Science/Agriculture/Forestry/>

The About.com web site uses guides to search the Internet for topical information. The Forestry guide is particularly active. Try:

<http://forestry.about.com/science/forestry/>

You can often make an educated guess about where useful information may be stored. If you want to know about Forest Practice laws, you can correctly assume that the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection's web page will have that information or at least a link to it.

<http://www.fire.ca.gov/>

The California Environmental Resources Evaluation System (CERES) is an information system developed by the California Resources Agency to facilitate access to a variety of electronic data describing California's rich and diverse environments. CERES has a large number of links to all kinds of environmental information. CERES is best searched as a directory, either by theme or organization. The CERES search engine often misses relevant links.

<http://www.ceres.ca.gov/>

One of the useful sources of information on the CERES web site is the California Forest Stewardship web site.

<http://ceres.ca.gov/foreststeward/>

This site offers specific information on forestry issues design for forest landowners. Back issues of the newsletter with many helpful articles are archived here.

Templates on planning for forest can be found many places on the Internet. One is the Working in the Woods - Who, What, Where, Why, When, How, How Much format. You can find at:

<http://www.CNR.Berkeley.EDU/departments/espm/extension/ABOUT.HTM>

Another plan format suggested by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection can be found at:

<http://ceres.ca.gov/foreststeward/html/planformat.html>

Good luck in the management of your property.