



Your Forest Stewardship Plan

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What is a forest stewardship plan?

A forest stewardship plan is a written document that establishes a landowner's intentions for a forested property and provides management guidelines for achieving the landowner's objectives. The most basic elements of a plan include a description of the landowner's specific ownership objectives, the resources present on the property and their current condition, and steps to achieve the landowner's objectives and protect public resources given current conditions.

A forest stewardship plan may also be referred to as a "forest or timber management plan," depending on the context. WSU Extension uses the term "stewardship plan," as the plans we teach go well beyond timber resources, and the concept of "stewardship" fits well with the ecological values and multiple-use ownership objectives of Washington's small forest landowners.

Forest stewardship plan components

There are different types of forest stewardship plans with different types of required elements, depending on the intended use of the plan (e.g., to enroll the property in a specific program). The stewardship plan format recognized by the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and taught in the WSU Extension Forest Stewardship Coached Planning program (known simply as "Coached Planning") includes all of the required elements for the most common plan uses in Washington. This format is based on the USDA Forest Service's national stewardship plan template.

Elements that should be included in a comprehensive forest stewardship plan are:

1. A description of the landowner's specific ownership objectives, such as maintenance of forest health, provision of wildlife habitat, aesthetic enjoyment, privacy, periodic income, or any combination of these.
2. A general description of the property, including location, acreage, geographic features, history, surrounding land uses, etc.
3. An assessment of specific resources on the property, including forest health, timber, wildlife, water, soils, threatened and endangered species, cultural resources or special sites, aesthetics, recreation opportunities, agroforestry, and grazing.
4. Management recommendations relative to meeting the landowner's objectives for protecting and enhancing the resources on the property.
5. A timeline for executing activities identified in the management recommendations.
6. Property maps.
7. Space for periodic updates and adaptive management considerations.

Benefits of a forest stewardship plan

1. A management tool

The most basic function of a forest stewardship plan is as a management tool for you as a landowner. A plan helps you solidify your objectives and set the direction you want to go with your property. It provides a road map for achieving your goals and maximizing your enjoyment of your forest. It helps you monitor your progress and stay on track, and it provides a clear outline of what should be done when and where, which can reduce the stress and anxiety that sometimes comes with owning a complex piece of property.

2. Better communication

A forest stewardship plan facilitates communication of your objectives, intentions, and management activities. This can help you engage with family and neighbors about what you are accomplishing on your property. It can also be an invaluable guide for heirs who will someday take ownership of the property. In addition, you may find a written plan useful when working with a natural resource agency or forestry professionals, as it will help them to better understand your goals, your values, and the unique aspects of your property.

3. Lower property taxes

One of the most common purposes for creating a plan is to meet the requirements for enrolling in one of the two forestry current use taxation programs, Designated Forestland or Open Space Timber. These programs allow forestland to be taxed for forestry use rather than "highest and best use." A written plan is usually required to participate in these programs. A plan in this context is often referred to as a "timber management plan," as these tax designations are for land specifically used for growing and harvesting timber.

Some counties in Washington offer an additional option known as the Public Benefit Rating System (PBRS) that awards points for the conservation of forest resources that provide public benefits. These points translate to property tax savings. Current use taxation and PBRS both provide significant tax reductions. Contact your county assessor or the Washington State Department of Revenue for more information on these tax programs and whether they are right for your property.

4. Third party recognition

Outside recognition of your stewardship efforts is enjoyable and rewarding. A DNR-approved forest stewardship plan will allow you to display the coveted “Stewardship Forest” sign. A management plan can also make you eligible to be a certified forest, either through the American Tree Farm System (ATFS), the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), or both. This gives you the opportunity to display more signs that will generate positive recognition of your property and in some cases allow you to sell your wood for a premium price or gain special market access.

5. Cost share eligibility

You may find that some of your goals for your property are prohibitively expensive, such as replacing an undersized culvert, restoring an area that is suffering from invasive weeds or poor past management, dealing with a forest health issue, improving water quality, or reducing wildfire risk. There are several federal and state cost share programs available to help with the expense of stewardship and conservation activities, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) or hazardous fuels reduction projects. Depending on the program, a stewardship plan may either be required or greatly facilitate the application and approval process.

6. Better stewardship

A written document is not required to be a good forest steward, and there are many outstanding landowners who have never created a formal plan. A written document is also not going to improve your stewardship in and of itself. However, the process of creating a written plan can significantly enhance the way you steward your property. Writing is a powerful activity that organizes, synthesizes, and cements concepts in your mind in a unique way. The process of writing a forest stewardship plan allows you to bring together all that you know about your forest and look at it in a new and integrated way that considers the forest in the context of both space (the landscape) and time. Even the most seasoned forest owner can learn (or re-learn) something important in this process and gain a fresh perspective that sharpens skills and leads to improved stewardship.

How to get a forest stewardship plan

You can get a forest stewardship plan a couple of ways. You can hire a professional forestry consultant to evaluate your property and write a plan for you. The cost of this service will depend on the size and complexity of the property. This may be a good option if you need a document quickly, such as for property tax purposes or for the sale or purchase of a forest property. Make sure to verify a consultant’s professional forestry credentials.

You can also write your own plan. This has a number of benefits, including a personal investment in and an intimate understanding of the plan, which can be invaluable in its implementation. Writing your own plan also offers the learning benefits of writing described above. Writing a plan is not difficult per se, but professional guidance is highly recommended to gather key technical information, do a proper assessment of your property, and develop an appropriate management strategy for meeting your goals.

The Forest Stewardship Coached Planning program offered by WSU Extension in partnership with the DNR is the best way to develop your own forest stewardship plan. This multi-week class allows you to write your own plan with coaching from natural resource professionals who will help you gather the information you need and identify appropriate management strategies to meet your specific objectives. Your coaches will visit your property with you, guide you in identifying problems and solutions, review and give feedback on your plan, and be an ongoing resource to answer your questions and provide assistance.

In addition to providing personal assistance with writing your plan, the Coached Planning program also provides 8–9 weeks of top quality education on ecology, forest health, wildlife, soils, silviculture, water quality, special forest products, and more. This education is integrated with the writing of your plan so that you will be able to understand the issues on your property and the science and rationale behind management solutions.



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