

Why Clearcut Your Timber?

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Any timber harvest should be well planned and have specific goals in mind. Some goals for harvesting timber might include the following: to increase the vigor of residual trees, to salvage timber damaged by weather, to remove trees with disease or insect problems, to receive income, to improve wildlife habitat of a desired game animal, or to remove overmature trees. In order to achieve these goals land managers use a variety of forest cutting methods.

One of these methods is **clearcutting**. Many foresters today refer to clearcutting as a **regeneration cut**, which more accurately describes what takes place. "Clearcutting is conceptually the simplest way of starting the replacement of old stands." (Smith, David M., "The Practice of Silviculture" 1986). The clearcutting practice is defined as: A method of regenerating a forest stand in which all trees on the area to be regenerated are removed in one cutting, leading to the development of an even-aged stand either by natural seeding or by planting. Clearcutting may be done in blocks, strips, or patches.

Clearcutting is generally recommended in the following situations:

- All the trees of a stand are mature or overmature and the stand contains no desirable seed trees.
- The stand is stocked with undesirable species.
- The stand is seriously damaged by fire, insects or disease.
- It is required to generate certain species.

Clearcutting is not recommended on steep lands subject to erosion.

Sound Silviculture

Clearcutting is a sound silvicultural practice used by many foresters today. When used properly it can lead to the establishment of an even-aged stand composed of naturally or artificially established trees. However, it should not be confused with a "commercial" clearcut where only the merchantable trees are cut. Commercial clearcutting, also called high-grading, usually leaves a stand in an unacceptable condition and requires considerable site preparation before tree planting can occur.



Clearcutting in small patches increases the amount of edge, which is beneficial to wildlife.

When clearcutting with natural regeneration careful consideration should be given to the desired species of the future stand. Some species regenerate readily from stump sprouts, others depend on seed stored in the forest floor, and other light-seeded species can reproduce from seed disseminated from trees located adjacent to the clearcut. Natural regeneration after a harvest cut comes from new seedlings established at or after the time of the harvest cut, from older seedlings established prior to the harvest cut (advanced reproduction), and from stump sprouts or roots of the harvest trees (Beck 1980). Depending on the species composition of the stand, options may be limited.

Artificial regeneration should be used if achieving successful natural regeneration following a clearcut is doubtful. If the clearcutting operation is performed properly, the majority of the vegetation of the previous stand is removed and replaced by newly planted seedlings. Some form of site preparation is usually needed before tree planting begins.

Wildlife Benefits

Many species of wildlife benefit from the opening effect of clearcutting. The Whitetail deer have much more browse, which is a major source of food, after a clearcut. Clearcutting in small patches also increases the amount of "edge." Edge is the transition area between two different stands. The edge effect is most prevalent between a forest stand and an opening; however, increased diversity, cover, and forage can exist between two different stand types.

The most recent forest inventory data for Alabama estimates that 800,000 acres per year have had some form of harvesting conducted. Approximately 360,000 acres, or 45 percent, of the 800,000 acres harvested is clearcut.

This 360,000 acres represents less than 2 percent of the commercial forest in Alabama.

Summary

Many individuals, groups, and societies today view clearcutting as an environmentally insensitive practice that should be banned. In my view, the forests of Alabama should be managed for the multiple benefits they can provide to our society, not preserved like a museum piece. If sufficiently planned and properly applied, clearcutting can be a management tool to improve the future forest productivity and sustainability of Alabama's forest. 🌲