

Some Things Your Wife Should Know about Your Forestland

By Jerry Gibson, Landowner

When I bought my farm in 1990, I was the dumbest forest landowner in Washington County. So why should you read on? Because I know something most of you do not. I know what it's like to be a female forest landowner, uneducated in good forest management.

- Gentlemen, if you died tonight, could your wife successfully manage your forestland?
- Does she know where it is?
- Does she know where the land lines are? Are they marked?
- Does she know where your forest management plan is? If it's only in your head, that won't help her.

The most valuable asset a man can have is an educated wife. There are too many horror stories of widows being cheated. Don't allow your wife to become a victim.

- Does she recognize and appreciate the value of your land and timber?
- Does she know where your legal papers are located? Will, deed, insurance papers, bank statements, outstanding loans, investments, etc.
- Does she know your forester, accountant, insurance agent, and contact at the bank? Can they work as well with her as they do with you?
- Have you discussed your goals for the land with your wife? Is she in agreement?

Your land is important to you. You worked hard acquiring and improving it. Most of you would want the land to stay in the family and continue to be well-managed. Now is the time to work just as hard in educating your heirs.

Do your children and grandchildren appreciate, respect, and love the land as you do? Having fun is a good starting point. Money spent to help kids appreciate forestland is a wise invest-



Jerry Gibson (right) and her sister, Wilma Gandelman, mark an area they've treated for cogongrass. It's an ongoing battle in Mrs. Gibson's 260-acre TREASURE Forest.

ment. A very smart man once shared with me the advice his daddy gave him: "Make your place the most fun place to visit."

Do your wife/heirs know who to call for professional advice? Even if your forestry plan is up to date and written down, wouldn't it be easier for your widow to continue doing the good job you've been doing if she had a professional forester to help her? Not just any qualified forester, but one that will provide the desired level of service. The best forester in Alabama may not be the best one for your widow, if they can't work together.

In 1990, friends advised me to hire a professional forester. They said it would be easy; "the woods are full of them." They are, but it wasn't that easy. The following story is mostly true; the names have been changed. All the men and women were well-qualified foresters, but they were not the right foresters for me.

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The first one, “Adam,” came to the farm one early autumn. [My sister, Wilma Gandelman, and I – both of us widows – live on a 260-acre TREASURE Forest.] As we walked the property, he would occasionally make a comment. At the first fallow field, he kicked the dirt and said, “Look at that! Dirt’s so poor it won’t even grow weeds! I don’t know what you paid for this place, but you sure got took.” He didn’t ask, and I didn’t tell, that the field had been rented out and improperly farmed that summer.

“Let’s go look at those trees,” he said. So we did. A few minutes and a hundred yards later, we stood at the edge of the 20-year-old pine plantation. To my surprise he said, “I don’t know what you paid for this place, but you sure got a good deal.” Then he turned to me and said, “What you ladies need are two good men.”

I opened my mouth to ask if he was available, then looking him up and down, decided he probably was, and shut my mouth. Needless to say, I did not choose him to be my forester.

Later, several foresters, representing a highly recommended local management firm, dropped by one at a time to visit. First Alex, then Daniel, Jessica, Gaines, Max, Aime, and Marcus all sat on the back porch with me, drank iced tea, and made polite conversation. There was a lot of talk, but very little about forest management.

“Bruce” was doing an excellent job for a friend of a friend. He suggested undertaking a select cut, then planting the fallow fields. I accepted his recommendation and he did a good job. He even wrote a five-year management plan for me, without asking about my long-term goals. Then, for a year, he forgot to return my phone calls. He forgot to answer my letters. He *did* remember to send me a bill. I forgot to pay. I guess he quit, but it’s kinda hard to tell.

After several years, and a degree from the School of Hard Knocks, I met the right forester for me while attending an AFC forestry tour. When Patrick (his real name) came to the farm, I suggested we have some iced tea on the back porch. He said, “Why don’t you show me your place first?” *That* was different.

We rode where we could and as we turned to go back, he stopped the truck, turned to me and asked, “What do you want to do with your forestland?” I was speechless. No one had ever asked me that.

I’m really proud of what we’ve accomplished. Patrick wrote a management plan with my input. We have marked the lines, applied herbicide, thinned trees, improved roads and ditches, and established permanent fire lanes. I am now a Certified Burn Manager, and together we have conducted prescribed burns as needed. We also learned some unexpected lessons from hurricanes Ivan and Katrina.

With three years of help from the Natural Resource Conservation Service’s cost-share programs, we have had great success in controlling cogongrass. We continue to monitor the land for new infestations and spray as needed.

We have also greatly reduced the amount of Japanese climbing fern, Chinese privet, tallow trees, willows, and wax myrtles. Patrick keeps me informed of new trends in management and programs available from various agencies. We discuss the options and together make the decisions.

In 2006, we were riding through the then-36-year-old-pine plantation when he asked me, “Do you know the first thing most heirs do when they inherit forest land? They clear cut.” It took me about 20 seconds to decide that we needed to set some new long-term goals.

We clear cut, leaving several areas of mixed pines, hardwood, and native shrubs surrounded by a permanent fire lane. Patrick and I discussed the site-prep options, reached a consensus, and then did it. We planted slash pines because they are the best species for my land and my goals.

We’re managing the land for timber production, later to be leased out as a hunting camp.

When my work here on earth is done, my grandchildren will be in charge of managing the property. I have taken the time to teach them the value of their inheritance, while they enjoy visiting the property and getting their hands dirty. In 2009, my Christmas present to them was to apply liquid fertilizer to the two-year-old pine plantation!

It took me a while to find the right forester and management plan for me. But my advice to you is that it is not too late to start. Educate your loved ones about the value of your forestland. Give them an opportunity to enjoy the land as you have. And hopefully, they will learn a lesson from you and teach it to the next generation of forestland owners. 🙏

