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Forest Landowner Workshops--Combining Traditional Forestry Field Days and Short Courses

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Abstract

Forest landowner short courses have long been the main programming method for the forestry Extension program at Mississippi State University. While short courses provided training in concentrated areas, participant evaluations indicated the need for more specialized training in specific areas. To address these training needs, forest landowner workshops were created. Workshops combine the classroom training found in short courses with the more hands-on activities associated with field days. This article explains what the workshops are and how they can be used in other programs around the country.

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Introduction

Approximately two thirds (18 million acres) of Mississippi is covered with forest land, with 66% owned by non-industrial private forest (NIPF) landowners (Londo, 2000). These individual forest landowners provide a large and diverse audience for Extension Forestry programming (Monaghan, 1997).

Direct contact NIPF landowner educational programs in Mississippi have traditionally consisted of landowner short courses and field days (Londo & Monaghan, 2002). Short course evaluations indicated that participants wanted more intensive, hands-on training in specific subject areas in order to learn how to do what they were learning about in the short courses. To meet this demand, forest landowner workshops were created.

Forest Landowner Workshop Mechanics

The original intent of county forest landowner workshops was to provide practical, on-the-ground field exercises of forest management activities, allowing landowners to more actively participate in the practice of forestry. Workshops are a combination of the forestry field days and short courses. Workshops are designed to follow up the county forest landowner short courses, extending the learning experience of participants from the classroom to actual field exercises. The first workshop was conducted in 1999. Since then, 81 workshops have been conducted for 1,840 participants statewide.

Workshops are held in individual counties in conjunction with each county forestry association (CFA) and Extension office. The first workshop was Are My Pine Trees Ready to Thin? This workshop has been widely conducted across the state and has been adapted to other states in the region as well. Due to its success, additional workshops have been created. These include Best Management Practices (BMPs), Forest Herbicides, Forest Valuation, and Royal Paulownia Plantation Establishment. A Forest Taxation workshop has also been created that has no "field work" component. However it does provide intensive training in specific forest taxation subjects.

The first hour of a workshop is typically held indoors and serves as a lecture period. The lecture is usually given by one of the MSU Area Extension Foresters. The Area Extension Foresters are faculty members in the Department of Forestry and are responsible for conducting Extension

forestry programs in their area, or district, of the state (Londo & Monaghan, 2002).

With the assistance of forestry faculty and professional foresters, participants are divided into groups and dispersed through the forest for measurement collection. Measurements collected typically include: species, diameter at breast height (DBH), total height, merchantable height, height to natural pruning, and number of stems per acre. The field exercise provides an excellent opportunity for participants to learn how to use the assorted forestry tools for collecting these measurements. In many cases, workshops have prompted the CFAs to purchase this equipment for the use of their members.

Following the field exercise, the data is summarized with a discussion of the results and management recommendations. For example, the results of the Are My Pine Trees Ready to Thin? workshop describe the number of stems per acre, average total height and average height to natural pruning, diameter, and stand volume. These values lead to the final decision on whether the plantation needs to be thinned or not. These workshops have been very popular, in large part because the landowners are taught how to use the equipment and collect, evaluate, and interpret the data and results for their own land.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Forest landowner workshops were created in response to landowner requests for more in-depth training in specific areas. The success of the workshops shows the ability of the forestry Extension program at MSU to respond and adapt to clientele needs for programming. Short courses are still the an important means of providing educational opportunities for Mississippi forest landowners; however, the use of more topic-concentrated landowner workshops is gaining in popularity.

Landowner workshops can be easily adapted in other states. The key to the success of workshops is to create universal teaching objectives and handout materials. These materials are then made available to the instructors, regardless of program location. This ensures consistency in teaching, despite variability in location and instructors (Londo & Monaghan, 2002). Workshop subject areas should be based on local needs assessments and planning activities.

It is likely that workshops will continue to be an important component of forestry Extension programming activities at Mississippi State University. Workshops will continue to cover current subject areas, as well as new topics when landowners' educational needs change.

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