

10-1-2002

Forest Landowner Short Courses at Mississippi State University

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Recommended Citation

Londo, A. J., & Monaghan, T. A. (2002). Forest Landowner Short Courses at Mississippi State University. *The Journal of Extension*, 40(5), Article 14. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol40/iss5/14>

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October 2002 // Volume 40 // Number 5 // Research in Brief // 5RIB5



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Forest Landowner Short Courses at Mississippi State University

Abstract

Extension forestry at Mississippi State University has been providing educational opportunities for forest landowners in Mississippi for more than 70 years. The first forest landowner short course was offered in 1984. Since then, the short course curriculum has grown to include 11 short courses taught throughout the state every year. Since 1987, these short courses have resulted in over 7,000 attendees owning or managing over 2,000,000 acres of forest land and valuing the information they received at over \$115,00,000. The short course format described here will combine well with new and emerging technologies such as interactive video, the Internet, and live satellite broadcast.

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Introduction

Approximately two-thirds (18 million acres) of Mississippi is forested, with 66% of this owned by over 314,000 non-industrial private forest (NIPF) landowners (Londo, 2000; Gunter, Bullard, Doolittle, & Arano, 2001). These individual forest landowners provide a large and diverse audience for Extension programming (Barden, Jones, & Biles, 1996; Monaghan, 1997).

There are nine faculty members with Extension responsibilities in the Department of Forestry at Mississippi State University. Five faculty members are located on campus and provide statewide leadership in the areas of silviculture, harvesting, economics, and taxation. Four faculty members are strategically located throughout the state (NE, SE, NW, and SW districts) and work closely with 20 to 21 Extension Agents in their respective areas. These faculty assume statewide leadership in needed subject matter areas according to their interest and expertise. In addition, there are four program assistants working in conjunction with the faculty to provide programming across the state. The effectiveness of the Extension program of the Department of Forestry has increased with the creation of these off-campus faculty positions (Monaghan, 1991).

Forest Landowner Short Courses at MSU

Prior to 1984, the predominant Extension forestry programming methods utilized in Mississippi consisted of forestry field days, group meetings, demonstrations, publications, and mass media (Monaghan, 1991). These traditional Extension education methods have been used successfully in many other Extension programs around the country (Presternon, 1986; Harmon & Jones, 1997) and are still integral parts of our program. These early methods were designed to provide some general knowledge of forest management options to landowners, but did not provide intensive training in any specific area (Monaghan, 1991).

The need to provide more intensive training in specific forestry areas prompted the creation of short courses for forest landowners. Short courses can be an effective way to impart knowledge to

the user by bringing together researchers, forestry professionals, and Extension personnel (Neal, 1991; Svenson, 1997). The first forest landowner short course was conducted in Jones County, Mississippi in 1984 (Monaghan & Londo, 2001). This course, "Woodland Management," was comprised of 2-hour long classroom sessions conducted one night per week for 5 weeks. Various forest management topics were covered during the 5-week period. Each participant was provided with a notebook containing publications from various sources as additional reference material. The success of this program resulted in the Woodland Management short course being offered in several other counties over the next 2 years.

Continuous evaluation and modification resulted in improvements in delivery, increased efficiency, and an expanded short course curriculum. Landowners' evaluations of these early programs indicated a need for more in-depth training in a variety of forestry-related subjects. In response, new forest landowner short courses were developed in other subject areas. As a result, short courses have become one of the most important programs for educating Mississippi forest landowners (Monaghan, 1997).

Short courses have also been instrumental in stimulating the formation of County Forestry Associations (CFA's) in many counties. The Mississippi Forestry Association (MFA) initiated a statewide effort to organize county affiliates around 1985. For several years, the core group of landowners who formed CFA's were recent short course participants. Their enthusiasm for forest management was stimulated by these short courses.

Sixty-three CFA's have been established representing 71 counties and serve as local affiliates of the Mississippi Forestry Association. The members of these local organizations include landowners, business people, forestry consultants, forest industry representatives, and anyone else interested in forestry. The local County Extension Agent serves on the board of directors of each CFA. CFA's serve as excellent advisory groups for program planning and provide political support when needed (Monaghan & Londo, 2001).

Short Course Curriculum

The short course curriculum now consists of 11 forest landowner short courses. Length (contact hours of instruction) varies from 6 to 10 hours. Depending on the needs of the target audience, a course may be scheduled as one all-day session or a series of 2-hour sessions, one night per week, over a period of 3 to 5 weeks. The short courses are offered in various counties across the state each year (Monaghan, 1997). A list of the short courses offered, along with a brief description of each, can be found in Table 1.

Table 1.
Forest Landowner Short Courses Offered by the Department of Forestry at Mississippi State University

Short Course	Hours of Instruction	Description
Forest Stewardship and Management Plan Development	10	Topics covered include economics and forest management. Working in conjunction with consulting foresters, participants receive a management plan for their property based on their objectives.
Introduction to Woodland Management	10	Topics covered include thinning, prescribed fire, taxation, timber marketing, wildlife, cost-share programs, among others.
Profitable Marketing and Harvesting of Timber	10	Topics covered include principles of timber marketing, making timber sales and contracts, logging plans, and timber income taxation.
Forest and Wildlife Management for	10	Topics covered include habitat management, biology,

Profit and Recreation		and the economics of wildlife and forestry.
Forest Regeneration: An Investment in the Future	8	Topics covered include site preparation, natural and artificial regeneration, and regeneration economics.
Forest Herbicides	8	Topics covered include available herbicides, application methods, safety, costs and benefits, and environmental impacts.
Introduction to Hardwood Management	8	Topics covered include species site/evaluation, timber stand improvement, regeneration, inventory, and marketing.
Forest Investment and Taxation	8	Topics covered include basics of forest investment analysis, terms, basic formulas, and investment analysis computer programs,
Longleaf Pine	8	Topics covered include the history, ecology, management, and economics of long leaf pine.
Timber Tax Fundamentals	6	Topics covered include the basics of state and federal income tax, recovering reforestation costs, capital gains, tax treatment of timber, and basic record keeping.
How to manage your Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Pine Plantation	6	Topics covered include prescribed fire, wildlife management, and economics.

The planning, coordination, and implementation of a forest landowner short course are the primary responsibility of the area forestry faculty in cooperation with the local county Extension agents and CFA's. Short courses are typically scheduled during the spring (February-May) and fall (August-November). The breaks in between these two periods are essential for planning and preparation purposes.

Faculty members from the Department of Forestry typically serve as instructors; however, volunteer instructors (professional foresters from industry, consulting firms, and government agencies) are often used. Each short course has a standardized schedule of sessions. The standardization allows for efficient development and duplication of notebook material as well as scheduling volunteer instructors.

Teaching objectives have been developed for each session and are provided to all instructors to assist with presentations and to avoid duplication of subject matter covered in other sessions by other instructors. Consistency and similarity have proven to be very important in the development of our short courses. All short course offerings of the same title are virtually identical. This enables us to produce the notebooks in bulk and schedule guest instructors up to a year in advance.

Scheduling and Publicizing Short Courses

In collaboration with Forestry Faculty, each CFA plans programs such as forest landowner short

1991	23	286	168,708	3,766,100	12	590	13,168
1992	27	455	149,549	6,207,100	17	329	13,642
1993	17	256	78,188	4,287,100	15	305	16,746
1994	25	421	108,267	6,320,100	17	257	15,012
1995	25	434	104,302	7,152,400	17	240	16,480
1996	30	566	139,419	10,223,150	19	246	18,062
1997	36	667	207,346	16,561,500	19	311	24,830
1998	40	856	224,578	16,721,000	21	262	19,534
1999	46	858	228,393	13,693,000	19	266	15,959
2000	41	712	168,733	10,010,500	17	237	14,060
TOTAL	417	7,144	2,008,649	115,536,100	17***	281***	16,172***

* Data from Monaghan 1987-2000, Annual Reports of the Extension Forestry Program of the Department of Forestry, Mississippi State University.

** Values in these columns have been rounded off to the nearest whole number.

*** These values are averages per column for the years 1987-2000.

Who Attends Extension Forest Landowner Short Courses?

Traditionally, brochures advertising landowner short courses have been sent to landowners by using mailing lists devised and maintained by the county agent. This method was very inconsistent from county to county. Each county agent maintained their own mailing list, primarily based on attendance at past programs. Notices and brochures were being sent out to the same people for each program. While efforts were made to have notices put in newspapers and have mailings in conjunction with local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, few direct mailings were made and attendance at all programs was small.

The first county forest landowner mailing list was developed using county tax assessor roles in Grenada County Mississippi in 1992. The tax role was obtained from the County Tax Assessors Office, and all landowners with 40 or more acres were sent brochures. This increased participation in all Extension forestry programming. Many other counties started maintaining their landowner lists in this manner; however, it was very time consuming for the county agent.

By the late 1990's, computerized tax roll records were being used to create the landowner mailing lists. These mailing lists are now being maintained by an Extension assistant in the Department of Forestry at Mississippi State. Upon request, these mailing lists are provided to the county agent. The advent of 911 emergency addresses has caused the need update and maintain these landowner lists more often than initially expected.

The use of the computerized records for the landowner mailing lists has significantly increased the attendance at all programs while at the same time making it easier for the county agent.

Adaptability of Short Courses for Other States

While specific short courses taught in Mississippi may not all apply to all states, the underlying principle of making the handout materials and teaching objectives consistent can increase the productivity of any Extension program. This consistency allows for the increased use of volunteer instructors, thus reducing the speaking load on a county agent and Extension specialist.

The flexibility afforded by providing a number of different short course topics makes the use of short courses for Extension program even more attractive. With a broad range of topics to choose from, a given county advisory group can pick and choose, from the menu of programs available, those programs that will best address the educational needs in their county.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Over the past 20 years, the Extension program of the Department of Forestry at Mississippi State University has undergone many changes. For example, the short course curriculum has increased from one short course in 1984 to 11 in 2000. The number of short courses conducted reached a high of 46 in 1999. Due to our assessment of and response to the diverse needs of Mississippi forest landowners, forest landowner short courses have become one of the primary educational methods of Extension forestry programming at Mississippi State University.

Future programming needs will continue to be met through short courses, forestry field days, and other traditional programming methods. However, with an increasing emphasis in distance learning coupled with decreasing budgets, program methods and techniques will likely include greater use of the Internet, live video, and satellite technologies. The strategies involved in short course development should combine well with these new and emerging technologies, which will further increase the outreach capabilities, effectiveness, and efficiency of Extension programming.

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