

# Timber Sale Fundamentals

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Family forest owners control over 57 percent of South Carolina's forest land. Most of these owners harvest timber. A timber harvest is not a single event, but should be part of the owner's management strategy and goals; it has huge silvicultural implications and impacts the future productivity of the tract. Unless the owner is well-versed in timber sale requirements, a professional forester's services will likely be well worth the investment. If the forest is well-managed, the owner will have a forest resource management plan and a supplemental timber harvest plan.

Even forest owners who never plan to harvest timber often find that a timber harvest is necessary for a variety of reasons that have nothing to do with converting timber into cash and serves to tailor the forests into one that meets the owner's objectives. A timber sale is more than a "cash machine." It can create the wildlife habitat to encourage wildlife species preferred by the forest owner; it is an important tool to ensure forest health by removing potential disease and insect problems; it can provide opportunities for recreational trails and vistas; and it can help in maintaining forest productivity.

The forest resource management plan is the fundamental document that impacts on-the-ground forest management. It will include the forest owner's goals and objectives and these will largely control the timing of timber sales due to silvicultural, financial, forest health, wildlife, recreation, and forest protection issues. For most forest owners, development of a forest management plan is not a do-it-yourself project. Likewise, a timber sale is not something most forest owners will want to supervise on their own. A forester will provide crucial oversight and has the expertise to properly consider silvicultural considerations, harvesting requirements, and forest management implications. Foresters have expertise in timber markets and know how to obtain the best timber prices; they know how to deal with loggers to obtain the best results for the forest and for the owner; they provide oversight that only the timber intended to be harvested is cut and that all the timber sale proceeds end up in the "landowner's pocket"; and they ensure local and state harvesting regulations are met.

There are two main sources of foresters that provide services to forest owners in South Carolina. One is the South Carolina Forestry Commission (SCFC) that can provide stewardship foresters to assist forest owners in management planning (information is available on the web at: [www.state.sc.us/forest/mstew.htm](http://www.state.sc.us/forest/mstew.htm)). A second source is the Association of Consulting Foresters (ACF). These are foresters that

work with forest owners on private lands. Consulting foresters charge a fee (information is available on the web at: [www.acf-foresters.org](http://www.acf-foresters.org)). Not all consulting foresters are members of ACF. The SCFC provides useful information on selecting a consulting forester on the web at: [www.state.sc.us/forest/mconsult.htm](http://www.state.sc.us/forest/mconsult.htm). Below are specific considerations that ought to be included in any timber sale decision.

- **Do you have a timber sale plan?** Perhaps, it is part of your overall forest management plan. Before you undertake actions with financial and silvicultural consequences that will determine future forest conditions, a plan needs to be in place that specifies exactly what timber will be harvested, how it will be marketed and sold, and what the forest will look like post-harvest. Actions taken today will determine the financial outcome of the timber sale and the future options for managing the forest.

- **Are the property boundaries and timber sale boundaries clearly marked?** It is important to absolutely identify the trees to be cut and to eliminate the major problem of accidentally cutting on your neighbor's property. You want only the trees actually sold to be the ones harvested.

- **If only some trees are being sold (a partial sale), does the contract specify exactly which trees are to be cut and uncut?** Again, you want only the trees actually sold to be harvested. Foresters have techniques to determine if any timber is "accidentally" removed that was not included in the sale.



• **Do the adjacent neighbors know about the sale?** It is simply polite to notify them and it could avoid a misunderstanding. Plus, there will be other people in the area that know what is going on, perhaps helping you keep track of timber removed from the tract.

• **Do you have a written, proper timber contract to protect your interests?** This is crucial for a timber sale. For more information, see Clemson Extension publication FNR 100.

• **How will your timber be advertised?** Did a forester market your timber? Will bids be sealed or oral? How will the winning bid be selected? Sometimes a lower bid from a quality logger may be the better one. Do you have a proper timber sale prospectus to best sell the timber? This can be a complex document, best developed by a professional.

• **Did you obtain the best timber price?** The advantage of using a forester is their contacts and experience to best market timber. They can determine if your timber is best sold “lump sum” or by timber volume actually cut and whether or not to use sealed bids as a means to maximize timber price. Utilizing a forester will usually result in increased bids, and that will produce the highest timber prices.

• **Do you actually know the market value of the timber you sold?** Units of timber measurement can be tricky (cord, MBF, tons, cubic feet). There are many log rules and that means there are many kinds of MBF’s. Some timber species are worth much more than others. Average tree diameter at breast height (dbh) of a tract will largely control price, but tree quality is another big factor. Again, this is not a do-it-yourself operation for most owners.

• **What type of timber sale will you use to obtain the highest price?** An owner can harvest the trees himself or supervise a harvest and sell the timber directly to a mill. Few forest owners have the expertise to log their own forest, but this is an option. Most forest owners will sell stumpage (selling the trees on the stump) and let a logger harvest and transport the timber.

• **If you sell the stumpage, is the timber sale on a per unit or pay-as-cut basis, are there controls to ensure the proper trees are cut and that you get paid for all of them?** These controls can also specify the owner is paid on a regular basis, where logging roads and decks will be located, that sensitive areas are protected and even things like shutting down operations in bad weather.

• **Are you certain that a quality logging firm will be operating on your property?** There are many truly competent professional loggers in South Carolina and a few that are not. The owner will regret letting a “not” operate on his or her property. Poor logging could result in violations of state Best Management Practices (BMPs). BMPs are established practices that offer protection to your property and reduce soil erosion from harvesting operations. The forest owner is ultimately responsible for voluntary BMP compliance. The choice of logger has a huge impact on meeting BMPs.

• **Is someone going to monitor the timber sale?** Only by regular visits can the owner or forester be certain contract provisions are being met. A good logger will have to interpret the contract to fit the many conditions on the tract. Sometimes the logger’s interpretation differs from the owner’s interpretation. Plus, often the logger can suggest contract modifications that will increase profit.

• **Will a final inspection establish the tract has been left in the condition specified in the contract?** Does logging slash meet requirements? Have all marked trees been harvested and are all unmarked trees uncut? Are any specified erosion control practices in place? Even for a tract left in good condition, the owner will have erosion and water pollution concerns, as this is a time the tract is vulnerable. There are post-harvest BMPs that must be put into place. Of course, regeneration is often part of the post-harvest planning.

The key requirements of a timber sale have been stressed. They start with a forest resource management plan and the expertise of a professional forester, if needed. Care must be taken that the timber is adequately marketed, that the actual amount of timber being sold is known, what that timber should be worth, and that the forest owner is paid for all the timber sold. It is also crucial that the forest conditions after the harvest are what the forest owner expected, so that the new forest can be developed. Proper forest management must include proper management of a forest owner’s timber sales.

## Additional Resources

• A Landowner’s Guide to Forestry:  
[www.state.sc.us/forest/sfilg.pdf](http://www.state.sc.us/forest/sfilg.pdf)

• Your Timber is Valuable  
[www.state.sc.us/forest/timberval.htm](http://www.state.sc.us/forest/timberval.htm)

• Before You Sell Timber  
[www.state.sc.us/forest/sell.htm](http://www.state.sc.us/forest/sell.htm)

• Current SC Timber Price Reports  
[www.state.sc.us/forest/mprice.htm](http://www.state.sc.us/forest/mprice.htm)

• Extension Forestry Agents in South Carolina  
[www.clemson.edu/extension/natural\\_resources/people](http://www.clemson.edu/extension/natural_resources/people)

• Timber Sales: A Planning Guide for Landowners  
[www.ces.ncsu.edu/forestry/pdf/ag/ag640.pdf](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/forestry/pdf/ag/ag640.pdf)