

LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

Forest Views



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Every forest in Minnesota has experienced a disturbance, random events such as wind, fire, insects, and disease, hundreds of times since the glaciers receded. Over the millennia, Minnesota's flora and fauna have adapted to forest disturbances. Most Minnesota forests have experienced human initiated disturbances, such as logging or pasturing over the past century.

Humans tend to view forest disturbances as a destructive and tragic end to a forest, but it's actually a "new beginning" in the ongoing life of the forest area impacted. Having lived near the area hit by the massive 1969 tornado in northern Aitkin County (Minnesota) opened my eyes to the resiliency and longevity of the forest. I vividly recall the devastation I viewed as a child and today it's a healthy, mature 55-year-old mixed aspen/hardwood forest that most folks would have a hard time believing was severely impacted by a nearly mile-wide tornado!

Timber harvests, as part of a long-range, ecologically based forest management plan, are planned forest disturbances designed to perpetuate the forest. Natural disturbances and timber harvests are somewhat similar, but there are subtle differences. To address these differences, forest management guidelines have been established to retain key characteristics of a natural disturbance during a timber harvest. Responsible, ecologically based, forestry practices such as seasonal harvest restrictions to protect sensitive soils, forested buffers adjacent to lakes and streams, reserving patches of mature and dead trees within the harvest area and

retaining a percentage of the slash (tree limbs) on site, reflect many characteristics of natural disturbances.

The most common criticism I've heard regarding timber harvests is the way they look. It looks ugly - there is a lot of slash on the ground, and most of the mature trees are gone, you can hardly walk through it, are frequent complaints. But if you look at a major natural disturbance such as wind damage it looks ugly and messy as well. If applied properly, many of the aforementioned forest management practices can help to reduce short-term visual impacts from timber harvests.

In my view, the major difference between random natural disturbances and planned timber harvests, from a community perspective, is that timber harvests bring economic benefits while natural disturbances tend to be an economic liability, due to the damage and cleanup. Ecologically based forestry can not only provide important forest habitat features but can also be a tool to prevent major losses from disturbances, such as thinning for wildfire fuel reduction and having a balance of young and old forest across the landscape to reduce impacts from wind events or insect infestations. These practices must be applied consistently across all forest ownerships to be beneficial. I'm not certain that we have achieved that consistency.

The next time you see a forest area that has been harvested, view it as a planned disturbance to perpetuate the forest. It might appear as a shocking change to you, but it's just another new beginning for the forest!



"The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased, and not impaired, in value."

Theodore Roosevelt