

# Michigan's commercial forests cut below potential

To what extent will the public accept industrial harvesting of Michigan's timberlands?

Professor G. Robinson Gregory, a specialist in natural resource economics at the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources, notes that nearly half of Michigan's land area, or 18.6 million acres, is covered by commercial forest.

These commercial forest lands, he says, include nearly four million acres of state forest — the largest such holding of any state.

But in terms of productive use of its state forests — such as supplying timber by sale to forest products firms, and subsequent reforestation with high-quality, genetically superior trees — Michigan is outranked by many states, Gregory maintains.

ONE POSSIBILITY for improving forest productivity might be the development of long-term timber sales procedures, he suggests.

Such contracts, which could make use of the half of the land available cut from Michigan's forests that grows best, could yield each year a profit that would provide a strong incentive for forest product firms to establish major plants in Michigan, according to the professor.

"Modern wood-using firms require high investments, and new corporations are willing to make these investments unless the wood supply can be made reasonably sure," says Gregory.

A recent study by U-M natural resources graduate student Bruce Fox, designed under Gregory's supervision, investigated the possibility of such long-term timber sales contracts and

also evaluated public attitudes.

As part of the study, a survey indicated that many Michigan citizens had strong initial misgivings about such long-term contracts between the state and private firms. Fox found, however, that the public was more positive about the advantages and disadvantages of widespread forest management in the timberlands, they were likely to favor such proposals.

DESPITE THE initially cautious public attitude, Gregory believes that use of modern forest management techniques — including planting high yield species in state forests where soil conditions would support such growth — could help the appearance of Michigan's forests.

Also, he says, it would be compatible with most types of recreation, including hunting, fishing, boating, camping, sightseeing and cross country skiing. Private lands could remain untouched, he says.

Much of the timberlands now in Michigan, says Gregory, are second and third growth forests, which regenerated after the widespread harvesting of high-quality species, such as white and red pine, between 1850 and 1900. Michigan then was the leading state in wood production, providing wood for buildings throughout the Midwest and western plains states.

Once harvested, the cut-over areas became vulnerable to fire. Some of this land was eventually sold as farmland, much of which eventually reverted to the state for nonpayment of taxes, notes Gregory.

With the use of intensive forest management practices in the state, on both public and private lands — would eventually mean the prevalence of a "forest plantation" atmosphere on these lands, similar to the new high-yield forest plantations in southern states, notes Gregory.

"One could expect a mix of ages of trees on these plantations, and after a few years' growth, most people probably would not be able to tell the difference between these plantations and 'natural' forests. Harvesting schedules would require coordination with Michigan forest management officials. In order to enhance highway scenery, 50- or 100-foot stretches of natural growth areas could be permitted bordering highways."

Likely species in such forest plantations would probably include pines, high-quality hardwoods such as maple and yellow birch, and fast-growing hardwoods such as aspen and sycamore.

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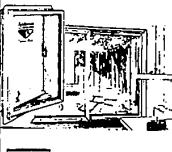
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