The Iowa Forest- At the Crossroads

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Although Iowa is one of the prairie states, original surveys show that about 6,690,000 acres, or approximately one-fifth of the state was wooded. The survey shows that in parts ninety-five percent of the land was originally covered with timber growth. The original cover of timber gradually decreased from the eastern and southeastern portions of the state to the northwest where relatively small areas of tree growth were found.
Since the early days, many small sawmills in Iowa have cut lumber and timbers for domestic use. In 1943, 1,087 sawmills were either operating or cutting lumber.

The earliest settlers quickly recognized the protective value of trees, and in the prairie sections many woodlots and shelterbelts were planted. The planting of trees through the years has not kept pace with the clearing of timberlands. Millions of acres of woodlands have given way for agricultural production or grazing crops.

The average woodland owner in Iowa has not usually considered his forest land as a particularly valuable part of his farm. This has been due to many causes including irregular markets for his surplus timber products and to the overshadowing importance of agriculture in the state as compared to forestry. It has been difficult to get the landowners to realize that forest land should be made to contribute toward the farm revenue the same as the better agricultural land (1).

This general statement of the Iowa forestry picture, written by “Prof. Mac” in 1944, could be made with equal accuracy today. The history remains, the trends and land use pressures are the same—only the acreage of woodland has changed. Forest Service survey information gathered in 1954 showed 2,600,000 acres of forest land in the state (2). A comparable survey in 1974, shows a total forest area of 2,000,000 acres (3).

Some adjustment, because of definition, between the 1954 and 1974 surveys is necessary, but the current rate of loss appears to be over one percent per year. It is interesting to note that this rate is comparable to that between 1854 and 1954 as we dropped from about 7 million acres to 2.6 million.

There are two factors which could increase the loss to over two percent per year in the next twenty-year period. The management level and the condition of the present woodlands will contribute. Grazing continues to be a severe problem to private woodlands. Many of the forested tracts with large trees will be lost because there are no seedlings to replace the mature trees.

In addition to the loss of timber through lack of proper management—a gradual process—the direct clearing of land for agricultural production is increasing as land values and agricultural crop prices escalate.

The needs of consumers have had a profound influence upon the woodland resource. Early settlers utilized crops from the forest for fuelwood, fence posts, and building materials. They knew the value of these products, but were also faced with the need for cropland. This led to a mixture of protection and utilization of the woodlands on rougher areas and to the clearing of level lands. Major building needs of the prairie areas of the state were, and are today, supplied by softwoods from the lake states and other parts of the country.

The early windbreaks and woodlots of the prairie areas have fallen into decadence or have been eliminated. There are fewer farmsteads as farms are consolidated with less need for the windbreaks, which were always a part of the Iowa landscape. The need for wind protection is recognized by this generation of owners and there are some new windbreaks being planted. This is an encouraging development in the face of the general decline of tree cover.

The number of mills processing Iowa timber had dropped to less than one hundred although their average size has increased. This demand for wood crops is likely to persist if the current acreage of forest can be maintained. However, present trends will result in loss of industry, loss of jobs, and loss of income to the landowners.

The upsurge in interest in burning wood for fuel as an alternative energy source will have an impact on the forest. It remains to be seen whether the possibility of selling fuelwood will encourage owners to use the income to pay for clearing or encourage them to manage for a continuous forest income. Those Iowans who do not own forest land hold a certain “public attitude” toward the resource. This attitude is perhaps best described as an uneasy disinterest. There is an appreciation of fall leaf color, pleasant landscapes, places where squirrel, turkey, deer, and grouse can be hunted. But, there is little knowledge of who owns the land, who controls the land treatment, and what role we all can play in controlling the amount of forest land in the state. We hear an occasional voice raised in alarm at the clearing of a familiar woods, but no effective way to prevent the loss has been developed.

The “official” policy with regards to forests and forestry in Iowa is not really a written policy at all. It could be stated “to encourage the planting and wise use of woodlands.” The “plan” to activate the policy includes several measures which were developed independently, rather than as a total resource plan. The early homestead laws, although not specific to Iowa, required tree planting in order to “prove up” on the land. Special property tax provisions have been in effect in Iowa since about 1870. The current Fruit Tree and Forest Reservation Act has been in existence since 1906. Taxes now range from forty to sixty cents per acre per year under the provisions of this act.

A state-operated nursery to provide low-cost planting stock to encourage tree planting has been in operation since 1912. Iowa State College fulfilled this role until the mid-1930’s when the Civilian Conservation Corps and the State Conservation Commission began nursery operations. Private landowners have planted from 1,500 to 4,000 acres each year from this source. These plantings have reduced the net loss somewhat, but have been no match for the loss to livestock and the bulldozer.
Cost-sharing assistance in tree planting and timber stand improvement has been available to private landowners since the 1940’s. The federal payments were from 75 to 80 percent of the cost, thus providing an incentive for woodland establishment or retention. This was another tool in carrying out the policy of woodland encouragement. Professional forestry advice has been provided to landowners since the 1940’s in some parts of Iowa through cooperative federal-state service forestry programs. All counties in the state are now accorded this service, which serves to assist owners with the management of their woodlands. This program, coupled with the informational and educational programs of Iowa State University, provides owners with the needed decision-making tools for best management.

The net result of the efforts to implement the forest policy is the continuing loss of over one percent per year of forest. Not an encouraging record nor a bright future for this resource, unless new measures are adopted.

The Report on the Iowa 25-Year Conservation Plan, written in 1933, discussed future needs for Iowa woodlands as follows: “Probably no other element of conservation planning is so important as ‘forest conservation’, the conservation of Iowa’s woodlands. This fact is due to the dependence of all other elements upon the restoration and preservation of trees and small growth. Erosion control, elimination of silting in the lakes and water courses, cover for wildlife and game, recreation places, and the landscape—all tie back to woodland conservation. The greatest difficulties in attempting to save Iowa’s wooded areas arise from two factors. First, land values are relatively so high that no public agency can now come anywhere near purchasing a large proportion of the remaining wooded areas; hence, we are driven in the main to measures for aiding the landholder to effect reasonable conservation himself. Second, insecurity of tenure renders it virtually impossible for the owner of today to take a long-term conservation point of view (4).”

The situation is very similar after forty years. One might ask whether we have wasted the efforts of a great many people and considerable sums of money in the attempt to encourage the woodlands? There are two facts which would indicate a negative answer. First, we cannot know what the woodland situation would be if the incentives had not been in place. Second, hindsight is considerable more enlightened than the foresight required by those who set in motion the incentives of the past generation. Another fork in the road has been encountered and it is we who must now chart the future course for woodland policy.

There has never been a “public” definition of the desirable amount of woodland for Iowa. Defining such a goal is a logical first step for any change in policy. Without it, there is no strong sense of a need for change. The discussion to adopt a forest acreage minimum must be made by all the people. Iowa land use policy legislation has set in motion the development of a state policy for land management and use. The forestry issue needs to be considered along with all others. Hopefully, a goal for forestry will be defined in this process.

If public agreement on the role of forest becomes a reality, some additional measures to maintain or increase our woodlands are possible. Legislation authorizing and funding state leasing of “timber rights” on private land, lower woodland taxes on steep land with high taxes for row crops on that land and regulation of the cropping on critical, erosive lands would promote woodland as a land use.

Iowa has a two million-acre woodland base from which to work. Will we maintain this resource, add to it or see it reduced to one million or a half-million acres? Will the only forest be on public lands? The crystal ball is somewhat cloudy at this point. There are many forces at play and the responsibility is not clear. The obvious benefits to society are not the responsibility only of the woodland owner. He cannot be expected to make individual sacrifice for society’s benefit. Yet, the very existence of the forest resource depends upon this private owner.

We must see to it that woodland ownership is rewarding to the owner, if we are to have it retained for those values we have all taken too much for granted. The Iowa landscape of the year 2000 is being formed today. To what extent will the familiar woodlands be a part of that landscape?

LITERATURE CITED


Gene Heretl—graduated from Iowa State University in 1950 with a B.S. in Forestry. He is currently the State Forester of Iowa and the immediate past president of the National Association of State Foresters.