

DOVETAIL COMMENTARY

FIELDS AND FORESTS

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Since the advent of agriculture there has been an economic, social and environmental tension between man's need for land managed in a highly controlled system for food and industrial crops, and land held in more diverse ecosystems such as forests. Globally, there has been a trend of decreasingly diverse ecosystems, i.e. toward fewer forests and more fields for almost 10,000 years. More recently, there has been a divergent trend between developing countries and developed countries in this regard. That is, forest-agricultural land uses have roughly been in balance in most developed countries (with even some recovery of forest land in some regions) while there has been a continued conversion of forest to agricultural land in many developing countries. The conversion of forests to agriculture is the number one reason for deforestation globally today.

In the past, fields and pastures in America were carved dominantly from land that was once forested. For almost 300 years farmers cleared an average of 2.4 acres for every individual added to the "U.S." population. Farmers labored to cut trees and remove stumps to make room to grow food and raise crops. About 75 years ago this relationship changed, and farmers became great champions of trees - planting millions of miles of windbreaks to prevent erosion, growing fruit and nut crops in tree orchards, and establishing forests to provide wildlife habitat and other benefits.

Currently, farmland makes up over 900 million of America's 2.2 billion total acres. About 75 million acres of that farmland is categorized as woodland, which represents about 10 percent of total U.S. forestland (of 751 million acres). There have been many efforts to support woodland management in the U.S. over the last 100 years – including tax incentives, diverse voluntary programs, technical assistance, and outreach and educational programs. These efforts have been aimed at both farmers and the other private forest land owners that together own 56 percent of all forest land in the U.S.

However, today the relationship between people, farms and forests is more complicated and appears to be reverting to more historic trends. New uses for agricultural materials (e.g. ethanol) are affecting this economic balance. Although research data is unavailable, it appears that windrows and woodlands are being threatened by strong demand and pricing for major agricultural products. Opportunities for increased annual returns, improved cash flow (including crop insurance), and other economic conditions are leading farmers to expand their cleared acreage.

In some cases these economics have even led farmers to acquire additional land to clear for crops. A recent example of this is the sale of a 1500-acre area of forest in northern Minnesota. In this case, farm interests outbid forest managers such that the land is now on track to be converted to potato fields.

This purchase stands as a reminder of the precarious balance between forestland and farmland. It also is an indicator of the importance of the economic value of materials derived from a forest to maintaining that forest as a complex diverse natural system. Whether land use conversion is a major long-term trend or simply a short-term adjustment, we must always remember there is a pecking order to natural resources and human consumption – air, then water, then food, and finally shelter. When push comes to shove, food will always be a higher priority than wood. And multiple use food crops such as corn tend to generate higher economic value than either just food or just wood.

If we really want more forests, and really want to support the continuation of diverse natural forest ecosystems we must make retention of those ecosystems more attractive to landowners. Part of the answer may be in farmer-oriented incentives or support systems patterned after agricultural support programs. Yet the solution may also lie in stimulating demand for a wide range of wood products. A number of studies in recent years point to the positive role of valuing forest products. Perhaps if we desire forests, then we have to want wood.