

Active Management for Small Landowners

ACTIVE MANAGEMENT IS IN THE INTENTION

A prescribed burn to maintain open prairie. An individual western redcedar selected to make bentwood boxes or a dugout canoe. A clearing in the woods with the logs used on-site to build a cabin. Freshly planted seedlings sourced from more southern seed zones to increase the forest's climate resilience. These are all examples of active forest management, a constantly evolving approach that has been practiced in the Pacific Northwest for thousands of years. While active management is sometimes used as a synonym for modern industrial management that optimizes timber revenue, the reality is that its goals, and the techniques used to achieve them, can be as varied as the owners of Pacific Northwest forestland.

Foresters often have a tendency to look at a forest and immediately start thinking about merchantability, log quality, and potential markets. While these things are important, they're not what many small landowners first see when they look at their woods. **People own and manage private forestland for a wide variety of reasons**—including conservation, habitat, recreation, aesthetics, and timber revenue. Happily, it's possible to manage a forest actively to enhance all of the unique values in the forest, without having to pick one value at the expense of others.

Many landowners default to passive management out of fear that active management might mean that they would have to clear cut their trees and that they would sacrifice the “natural” state of their forest. They may have owned their forestland for decades without undertaking any projects larger than clearing a trail or cutting up a fallen tree across their driveway for firewood. However, landowners are now realizing that their second- and third-growth forests are not in their diverse original state, and through active management they can more quickly and reliably enhance or develop the wildlife and habitat attributes they would like to see on their properties.

Active management doesn't refer to a single prescription, but instead requires a plan that details the landowner's intentions to play a regular role in the development of their forest to meet their goals, whatever they may be. If a landowner's goal is to increase wildlife habitat, thinning out small trees and creating habitat piles and constructed logs would be a type of active management to enhance habitat. If their target is to put their stands on the path to becoming an old-growth forest, active management might mean several commercial thinnings to eventually thin the overstory to a low enough density where understory regeneration can take off and build a multi-story canopy.



Small trees are pre-commercially thinned to make room for larger trees



A new seedling is planted in a burn

SHIFTING TO ACTIVE MANAGEMENT

One common goal among many small landowners is to grow bigger trees by restoring an overgrown stand or former plantation. But growing big trees takes time! Especially on a small property, there might not be something to do every year. In the case of a landowner looking to grow an old-growth forest, after their first couple of thinnings they might need to wait decades for the forest to continue developing.

Active management means having a plan and intending to follow it when the time comes. These long periods of waiting are still active, as they include regular monitoring and possible plan adjustments in response to changing conditions, such as disease outbreaks.



A habitat pile is built using pre-commercial thinned trees

Shifting to more active management will look different for each property, but may include the following steps:

- Identifying short- and long-term goals for a property,
- Working with a forester who understands your priorities for land management,
- Creating a management plan and updating it as the forest changes,
- Seeking cost-share support for restoration and land improvement projects,
- Learning about forest management practices from educators and from other landowners,
- Improving wildlife habitat through creation of habitat, like snags and wildlife piles,
- Planning thinnings and harvests in line with management plan objectives,
- Planting new trees or vegetation with an eye to species diversity and climate resilience, and
- Monitoring the forest and making note of changing conditions.

They say the best fertilizer is the farmer's shadow and that holds true in forestry as much as in farming. This is an advantage that small forest landowners have over their larger neighbors: increased monitoring of the property through proximity and care. A good plan that emphasizes active management creates an outline of the next few decades of management, but the actual decisions and activities should always be driven by the conditions in the forest, which might change unexpectedly. Anyone can learn to monitor their forest themselves, to be on the lookout for disease, crowding, trespass, and any number of other issues that can happen on forestland.

Active management, like all forestry, can take different forms on the landscape, but the key is that the activities that are being carried out support the ultimate long-term goals of the landowner. With their forester acting as a partner and supporter, small landowners have the potential to redefine what active management looks like in the Pacific Northwest.



**NORTHWEST
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Northwest Natural Resource Group is an ecological forestry nonprofit based in Seattle that specializes in working with nonindustrial landowners.

Additional free resources can be found on the organization's website and through its monthly newsletter at nnrg.org/subscribe. Questions can be directed to outreach@nnrg.org.

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