MANAGING YOUR WOODLANDS

By Steve Rasmussen, District Forester

Nebraska's forests, also known as woodlands, comprise three percent of the total land base in the state. On an acre by acre comparison, woodlands provide more associated benefits for the landowner, society, the environment, and our quality of life than many other land uses. With the diversity of benefits from Nebraska's woodlands compared to the limited acres that they occupy, it is important to properly manage these areas for the sustained health and continued benefits the trees provide. These woodlands are dynamic and constantly changing with many factors contributing to the potential of the site.

Specific management practices vary with forest type, tree species, and objectives of the landowner. And no matter what type of trees are growing, there are some basic management considerations that should be considered. Most woodland owners in Nebraska would benefit from working with a professional forester to identify specific trees and woodland management needs.

DETERMINE AND LIST THE PRIMARY OBJECTIVES

Managing a woodland begins with determining all possible objectives and then selecting which ones can be achieved. Timber production will manage trees that grow best on the site and produce marketable lumber in a reasonable time. Wildlife enhancement will strive to diversify and encourage a completely different set of trees and shrubs. Site factors will influence choosing the objectives depending on the soil type, terrain, water resource, adjacent land use, existing trees, and other vegetation and access to the property. Labor and financial requirements to achieve the objective need to be taken into consideration, as well as having realistic expectations.

Many benefits that are enjoyed from woodlands complement each other so multiple objectives can be attained at the same time. Continued or improved health of the woodland should always be considered, and at the same time, do not consider objectives that will degrade the health and condition of the trees. List objectives and prioritize them. Being realistic and selecting objectives that complement each other is important in the process.

INVENTORY, EVALUATE AND RECORD

After the objectives are identified, the first step is to walk through the woodland to inventory and evaluate the factors influencing the potential to meet those objectives. The inventory should start with the following characteristics identified:

- Types, sizes and condition of trees and other major vegetation types that are present.
- Frequency (stocking) and distribution of the trees and shrubs.
- Past and current land use of the woodland.
- Undesirable or invasive plants.
- Soil types and conditions.
- Topography and other physical land features.
- Water resources on and adjacent to the site.
- Unique or unusual components of the site.
- Accessibility and any other factors that may play into the potential or limitations for the woodland.

The inventory and site evaluation information will provide the starting criteria in deciding which objectives are attainable and what management practices may be used to achieve the objectives.

IDENTIFY THE APPROPRIATE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

On a good site, trees will grow whether they are managed or not. However, there are management practices that can be implemented to increase the health of the existing trees and favor those trees that will produce the desired objectives. Management practices to improve the woodland's health and condition is Forest Stand Improvement (FSI). Some of the more common FSI practices used in Nebraska woodlands include:

- Thinning
- Protecting woodlands from destructive forces
- Controlling harmful and invasive plants
- Pruning
- Harvesting methods
- Establishment of desired trees

PROPER MANAGEMENT PRODUCES HEALTHY TREES

Good woodland management takes planning and work. A good manager will be "in-the-woods" several times each season checking on the condition of the trees and evaluating the needs of the stand. A woodland that has a diversity of trees, shrubs and other vegetation types will provide more benefits and be better buffered from damaging agents like insects, diseases, environmental changes, etc. than a stand that is heavily comprised of a more limited representation of plant species. A properly managed woodland will have healthier and more vigorous trees and will be a sustaining resource.