

The Answer is “Clear Cut”

It has been told that Paul Bunyan once clear-cut trees from the entire state of North Dakota in half a day by tying a rope to his mighty ax and spinning round and round. “Babe,” his blue ox, hauled them out as fast as Paul could cut them. Babe’s heart was filled with glee as they accomplished this feat. Why? Because when the trees were gone and the stumps “driven” into the ground, grass would be grown where the trees once stood. And, grass (the cool-season variety, especially) was Babe’s favorite food. He would eat at least 30 bales as a midmorning snack (wire and all). Right here, right now, we have some “Bunyan-prone” folks, poised and ready to clear their land in order to grow grass, forages, or cultivated crops (as long as their feet hold out?). We all know that “clear-cutting” forest lands to plant cultivated crops is wrong, right? We’ve all been taught that clear-cutting forests can lead to erosion, reduced soil fertility, diminished water quality control, reductions in “biodiversified” wildlife numbers, the eventual ebb of crop yields, and ultimately, famine, pestilence and economic despair.

Several of the “Bunyan-prone” folks have asked recently “What is really wrong with clearing the land for cropping or pasture?”. After all, our early American predecessors had to clear off most of the land that is now farmland (at least most of it east of the Mississippi River*) (*Which, you may recall, Paul and Babe actually built with help of their logging camp water wagon). The real answer to their question is not as “automatic” as our stock “environmentally responsible” response most often is. Truth is, there are times, places, and circumstances that can warrant and justify the clearing of forested land to convert to agronomical production. But, a real close look at the factors affecting land use and its impact, along with the associated economics, should be taken prior to engaging in such activity. Lets’ take a closer look, shall we?

No one asking these questions is planning to clear off old-growth forests, deforest ancient redwood groves, or engage in exploitive rain-forest logging and thin-soil conversions. No, these are landowners merely trying to open up space for agronomic enterprises from amongst the trees (activities that might have even been carried on in years past). In many parts of the Northeast, reforestation is increasing up to 1% per year...in New York, we’ve added 6,730 acres of forest per year since the 1950s, for a total of 3.5 million acres of additional forested land. Most often this is land that has grown up after the cessation of farming. In most cases it is marginal land, but a great deal of it is productive soil. It is often heard, “We need more pasture area for our livestock.” Or, “We want to reclaim the fields that have grown up in brush and timber the last 50 years.” In some cases, people’s motivation for clearing is focused solely on aesthetics, “We want a bigger, better, wider view.”

The landowners’ objectives for their place still come first. The second consideration is usually the affective economics. A minimum of 9.9% return on the investment placed in valuable trees is really hard to beat (with legal crops, anyway). Other inputs into the equation include: 3) soil type; 4) capability class (some prime farmland is in timber); 5) the tree species present; 6) slope of land; 7) proximity to waterways and groundwater; 8) regulatory issues; 9) type of crop to be grown; 10) impact on wildlife present on the land; and if livestock are to be involved – 11) what species and production tack will be undertaken? All questions to ask, and to be answered thoroughly, before “converting,” “clearing,” or “reclaiming.” This is an entire study in and of itself. Cornell Cooperative Extension of Greene County, through their Agroforestry Resource Center (ARC), includes programs that address these issues involved in the decision-making process for such undertakings. Wise land-use, and/or sustainable management is a prime directive in all our Cornell Cooperative Extension environmental resource conservation efforts. Call us at (518) 622-9820 if we can assist you in your land-use management decision-making. Or, we can possibly direct you to other supportive agencies and individuals that work within these realms. If Paul and Babe would have had such programs and had information to help them consider such things before going on their “slicing and dicing” tears, there would probably be a lot more trees in North Dakota...

By: Mick Bessire, Extension Educator, CCE Greene