

Family Forests, Communication and Land Transfer to Generation NEXT

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Millions of acres of family owned forest land will change hands in the next ten years. Seven million acres of forestland in Virginia alone (70% of the total) are owned by individuals 55 years or older. Twenty-seven percent of Virginia's forest landowners are individuals 65 years or older. Many of these folks intend to pass their land on to younger generations.

On a family level, this intergenerational transfer process is personal, intricate, and emotional while at the same time holds promise to meet family goals beyond wealth inheritance. The transfer of forest land is a sensitive issue in part because many current and/or previous family owners have made significant investments in financial resources and sweat equity to own and maintain the forest land. A perfect estate plan in the legal sense is only part of a successful land transition. Will family values which contributed to the accumulation of financial assets and the successful operation of the forest land over previous generations be transferred to the next generation? The answer to this is important but often answered too late.

Different generations often share different values regarding ownership of the forest land. The older generation may hold favorable memories of family gatherings and the pride of owning and maintaining the property that has become part of the family's values and heritage. Younger generations are less likely to have grown up in an agricultural/land based society. The younger generations may have few, if any, emotional ties to their family's land. Within a family, siblings may hold opposite views on perpetuating ownership and it's not uncommon for adult children to have little interest in the land because live far away and consider maintaining and owning the land a burden. Conversely, there may be children who consider the forest land a family heirloom and are interested in preserving the property for future generations. Effective communication between the generations and siblings is crucial in preserving forestland ownership.

A family meeting is an excellent way for family members to express their feelings towards maintaining ownership of the forest land. To start the process, the older generation must be willing to share their hopes, dreams and management goals for the property. Thoughtful planning of a family

meeting will set the tone and standard of future meetings. The following tips are helpful in planning the first meeting:



Organization and planning can facilitate family meetings, especially when difficult topics must be discussed. Photo by: Kathy Dixon, Virginia Farm Bureau.

- The older generation prepares a written agenda that is circulated to family members before the meeting.
- Identify a respected family member to moderate the meeting
- Each family member brings an updated resume to the meeting – personal and professional accomplishments, personal goals for themselves and their immediate family. This helps family members to have an updated view of their siblings as an adult.
- Determine who will record the minutes of the meeting
- Establish that family members will come with open minds and leave the past behind.

To help the meeting succeed, all family members should commit to the following these basic family communication rules:

- Establish and stick to time limits
- Share control over the meeting
- Speak one person at a time
- Avoid interruptions and side conversations
- Participate as equals
- Allow all members have a chance to offer ideas
- Listen with sensitivity, speak with respect for feelings and never use put-downs
- Avoid making assumptions; ask questions to get the facts

If the family is unable to make progress because the family members cannot agree on a plan, a trained facilitator, neutral to family dynamics and history, may be brought in to moderate. The facilitator serves to keep the discussion on track and make sure everyone's voice is heard. Likewise, having an outsider present tends to promote better behavior.

Past participants of forest land owner transfer workshops have found that communication between family members is key for developing a forest land transition plan. Family meetings provide a forum for the older generation to share their dreams and wishes to transfer real and personal property to family members.

Likewise, these meeting enable the younger generation to share their dreams, goals and values with their parents and siblings. All family members should be open and respect other family member's values and goals. When family members share common goals and values for the forest land, a solid foundation is put in place to realize long term goals; even to the point of perpetuating family values, traditions and land ownership for generations to come.

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Editors note: An upcoming “Family Forestland Shortcourse: Focusing on Land Transfer to Generation NEXT” will explore family communication and other land transfer tools such as legal structures and conservation planning. See the calendar in this newsletter for more information.