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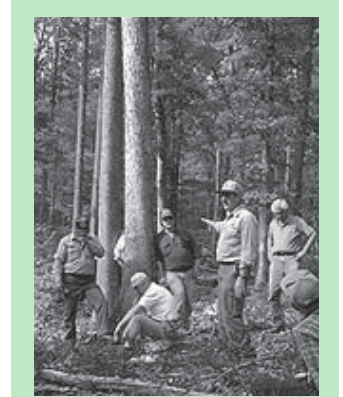
How are we doing ?

An assessment of VFLEP's impact in Virginia

Jennifer Gagnon, *Virginia Tech Dept. of Forestry* and Maminaiaina Rasamoelina, *Virginia Tech Department of Forestry*

In Virginia, private landowners own the majority of the Commonwealth's 15.5 million acres of commercial forestland (almost 12 million acres; compare to: forest industry - 1.5 million, national forests - 1.5 million, and other government organizations - 0.5 million). The implications of these landownership patterns are increased forest fragmentation and parcelization, and land use changes, making proper forest management extremely important in order to maintain functioning ecosystems. The Virginia Forest Landowner Education Program (VFLEP) was developed to provide these private landowners with information, tools and contacts to help them improve forest management practices on their lands. One way in which we try to do this is through our short-course program, which was implemented in the fall of 1997. As with any successful program, periodic evaluations to assess who we are reaching and the program's impacts and effectiveness are needed. The VFLEP is currently working with a PhD student in the Department of Forestry, Maminaiaina Rasamoelina, to do just that. Rasamoelina began his studies at Virginia Tech last year and is starting his second year of classes and teaching. He has conducted preliminary analyses on results from the pre- and post evaluations short course participants completed. The following is a summary of his results.

Almost 2000 people have participated in the three short courses offered from 1997-2003. Based on participant responses to the pre-course evaluation, 85% were landowners with a total of more than 334,000 acres (average ownership was 228, with a range of 1-6250 acres). More than half lived near their property and average ownership length ranged from 10 to 14 years. For a third of the participants, this was not their first forest education program, a third already had written management plans, roughly half had already sought technical and/or professional assistance, and half had harvested timber from their property at some point.



Landowners attending a Forestry Field Tour



Parcelization and development around Smith Mountain Lake

The exit survey had a 53% response rate. Ninety-nine percent of these respondents felt that they would be able to manage their natural resources more efficiently as a result of attending the short course, and anticipated earning an additional 30 to \$40,000 from improved management techniques. Additionally, 74-92% said they would seek professional assistance in writing a land management plan. The good news is, people who had harvested in the past were more likely to have participated in previous natural resource education programs and have sought professional assistance than those who had not harvested, increasing the likelihood of sustainable management occurring on these lands.

Since Virginia Forests provide over \$30 billion annually in benefits to the Commonwealth, managing these assets wisely is in every citizen's best interests. The VFLEP was formed to assist private landowners with their management needs and to increase awareness of sustainable forest management techniques. According to the preliminary data, we are working towards this goal. However, although we have reached almost 2000 landowners through our short-course program, with over 400,000 private forest landowners in Virginia, there is still a long way to go. Our ultimate goal is to reach as many landowners as possible and encourage all of them to seek professional land management advice, regardless of their management objectives. To find out more about our programs, check out our website www.cnr.vt.edu/forestupdate.

Maminaiaina Rasamoelina is a PhD Student in the Virginia Tech Dept. of Forestry.