

Nonindustrial Private Landowner Interviews

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Introduction

Although the nonindustrial private forest landowner (NIPF) literature is extensive, little is known about NIPF interest in selling materials for bioenergy feedstock or how this views tie to the larger sustainability-related issues surrounding their values, beliefs, and goals for managing their land.

We conducted six pilot NIPF interviews to test our interview protocol and then conducted ninety-seven randomly sampled NIPF interviews with landowners with at least 20 acres of land within the 150 mile boundary of the Mascoma Frontier site believed to be economically viable for transportation of feedstock. This combines to 103 total interviews. Canadian landowners were excluded from the sample.

Since the individuals were sampled from county plat books, presence of forests on their lands could not be established before the interview. As discussed below in more details, most, but not all, landowner had forests on their land. The interviewed landowners came from counties across the northern Lower Peninsula and eastern and central Upper Peninsula. More detail for the sample is provided in Appendix A. Appendix B lists the interview questions asked of all the interviewees.

We sent selected owners a letter explaining the project and asking for their participation. A form with space for their contact information, including a telephone number, was included with an SASE envelope. About twenty-percent of those selected returned the form. Past research has suggested that the people most interested in or comfortable with a topic are most likely to respond to a request for a survey or interview, thus these interviewees are probably more interested in forest or land management than the average NIPF. All interviews were conducted by phone and recorded. These recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were coded, sorted, and analyzed so that the responses for each question from each interviewee could be seen together and patterns could be established.

Results

Q1: Can you tell us about your land? How many acres do you own? How much is forested? How much, if any, is farm field? Old fields converting to forest?

Ninety percent of the landowners had forests on their lands and about one-third also had active or former farm fields. About 40% owned between 20 and 50 acres of land, 33% had 51-100 acres, 10% had 100-200 acres, 8% 200-500 acres, and 2% had 500 or more acres. A few went certain how many acres they owned so these numbers do not add up to 100%.

Q2 and 3. What are your main reasons for owning your land? What do you like to do on your land?

Interviewees could offer more than one answer to this question, so responses do not add up to 100%. About 36% bought the land for hunting and 34% bought it for a primary residence. Out of the variety of answers offered, including for second homes or farming, only eight percent said that their primary reason for owning the land was for commercial timber harvesting. Eight percent owned the land in order to protect it. About two-thirds (66 out of 103) told us that they liked to hunt and/or on their land and most of these people (49) told us that this was one of their favorite aspects of it. Thirteen percent cut firewood out of their forest.

Q4: Some people view themselves as actively working with or managing their land to make it the way they want; others are more “hands-off”. Do you see yourself as either of these?

About 50% of interviewees saw themselves as hands on/active managers, 30% as hands off managers, and the rest generally saw themselves as somewhere in between the two.

Q5: What are your goals for your land? What would you like it to be like in 10-20 years?

Only 13% said that harvesting timber for a profit was an important goal. An additional 4% had the goal of harvesting timber to improve the health of their forest. Thirty-seven percent wanted to maintain their land as it was while 14% wanted to achieve natural succession in their forest through no active management. About 20% were interested in improving wildlife habitat on their land. A few mentioned specific forest management goals, such as encouraging poplar regeneration (a few of our interviewees were professional foresters or had some forestry education).

Q6. Do you have any problems happening on your land or any concerns for the future?

More than half told us that they had a problem with their land and the most frequently mentioned concern (about 25%) was some form of forest disease. The rest of the problems were mentioned by just a few people each, and included concerns about trespassing and invasive species.

Q7: Have you ever met with a forester or logger to discuss management of your land? [If yes] Why? Do you have a management plan for your land? [If yes again] Can you tell us about the management plan and what it contains?

About half (53/103) of the interviewees had met with a forester or logger at some point. About 25% had met with them to discuss a commercial harvest. Sixteen percent had met with one to discuss overall management and forest health goals. A few had met with them to discuss wildlife management goals. Only 12 of the interviewees had a written management plan and most of those who had one had it in order to enhance their forest’s value with regard to commercial harvesting.

9. Have you heard of the term “invasive species”? [If yes] What do you know about them? Do you know if you have any invasive species on your land?

Eighty percent of interviewees said that they were familiar with the concept. About one-third could provide a reasonable definition of the term. One-third said that they had invasive species problems on their land.

Q10. Have you ever cut trees on your land? [If yes] When did that happen? For what purpose?

About 90% of the NIPFs had cut trees on their land. Twenty-percent had harvest trees five to ten years before the interview whereas ten percent had done so within five years. About one-quarter said that they harvested trees occasionally as desired, probably mostly for firewood. Forty-percent had done a commercial harvest. About a third had harvested for firewood. About one-quarter had done selective thinning to enhance the commercial value of their timber and twelve percent had done so for other reasons.

Q11 and 12. Do you plan to cut trees in the future? [If yes] Can you describe your plans? For what purpose, personal firewood or selling timber/pulp? How many acres? Would it be clearcut or selectively thinned? [If they planned a harvest] Are you worried about negative impacts on the things you value on your land?

About a third definitely planned to harvest in the future, fifteen percent thought that they might, but weren't sure, and about 44% didn't plan to harvest in the future. Twenty-five percent of the total group planned to do a commercial harvest some time in the future, 23% planned or would like to have periodic selective harvests, and 12% planned to harvest firewood (people could express more than one of these plans). About 15% planned a harvest but worried about that activity having negative impacts on their land.

Q13 and 14: Have you heard of government programs where forest landowners get a tax break or shared costs to manage their forests? Would you consider enrolling your land in any of these programs? Why or why not? Q18: Are you familiar with any government programs that are available to help landowners manage for wildlife by improving habitats or restoring wetlands?

Two-thirds of the interviewees said that they had heard of these programs. Only four were enrolled in an incentive program. Most of the people who could describe the focus of one of these programs described programs focused on wildlife, agricultural, or wetland protection. Only nine were aware of specific forest management incentive programs, such as the Michigan Commercial Forest Act. Seventeen percent said that they were reluctant to enroll in such a program because they didn't want government controlling their management or strangers coming on their land (the Michigan Commercial Forest Act requires participating lands be open to public fishing and hunting). About forty percent said that they would not consider enrolling in the future. Another forty-one percent said that they would consider enrolling, but most of these said that they would need more information in order to do so. (Our research team put together a booklet on state and federal land management incentive programs and mailed it to all interviewees who said that they would like a copy.)

Q15: What kinds of wildlife do people see around there?

Almost everyone interviewed mentioned large or small mammals, such as deer, rabbits, or coyotes. About half mentioned various kinds of birds, such as hawks or partridge.

Q16: Are you interested in managing for wildlife on your land? [If yes] Do you feel you have a sense of things you could do on your land to attract wildlife or give them good habitat? Do you do this already? What do you do?

Fifty-eight percent were managing for game species at the time of the interview or planned to do so in the near future. Nineteen percent were managing for overall biodiversity. About one third had no plans or desire to engage in wildlife habitat management.

Q17. Are there any wetlands, streams, or ponds on your land? [If yes] Please tell us about them.

Sixty-five percent had some type of water resource on their property.

Q19. Have you heard the phrase “energy independence”? [If yes] What have you heard? What does it mean to you? Do you think it’s an important goal? Why or why not?

Eighty-percent of the interviewees were familiar with the term. About fifty-percent could define it as freedom from foreign energy sources. Eighteen-percent thought it was a good goal because it could provide economic benefits. Nineteen-percent liked the idea because we would be using our own energy sources. Eleven-percent liked this goal because they were concerned about being dependent on regions of the world that did not share US interests. Overall, only one interviewee did not think it was a good goal.

Q20. Have you heard of the term “woody bioenergy”? [If no, explain] It basically refers to energy produced from plant materials, such as trees, grasses, or corn. [If yes] How about woody biofuel or cellulosic ethanol? What have you heard?

About forty-five percent said that they had heard of woody bioenergy. Fifty-four percent said that they had heard of cellulosic ethanol. About one-third of interviewees defined cellulosic ethanol accurately.

Q21. There are several newer companies in the U.P. that use forest materials to produce energy, including a power plant in L’Anse, a couple of wood pellet manufacturers, and a facility in Kinross that will be producing cellulosic ethanol for cars. They might be interested in buying forest materials from landowners such as you to produce energy. Have you heard about these types of companies in our area?

Forty-five percent had heard of at least some of these plans. Twenty-percent had heard about the Frontier Kinross facility.

Q22. Do you think you would be interested in cutting trees from your land to sell to these types of companies?

Fifty-six percent said that they would definitely be willing to sell timber to a biofuel or bioenergy facility, eighteen percent said that they might but had concerns, and twenty-seven percent said that they would not be interested in selling timber from their land. When asked to explain their decision, thirteen-percent said that they were interested but worried that such a sale might require clear cutting their land or losing control over the type of harvest. One-quarter said they had no concerns as long as the price was competitive. Thirteen-percent were willing to sell timber to this type of industry as long as it came from a selective harvest of their land.

Q23. Some people are planting fast growing trees, such poplar, or grasses like switch grass, in order to produce fast growing material that could be used for bioenergy. Is this something that you think you would ever do? Why or why not

Twenty-one percent were interested in energy cropping if they felt that there was a definite market for the materials. An additional twenty-one percent were not sure if they would and felt that they would have to think about it. Forty-six percent said that this was definitely not something that interested them. Twenty-one percent were not interested because they felt that it would interfere with their other management goals. Twenty-percent were not interested because they don’t have any open land and didn’t want to convert existing forest to this type of use. Six-percent were willing to try it on a small portion of their property and five percent were willing to consider it but would need more information.

Summary

Most of these landowners had forested land, with about 53% holding 50 or more acres of land. Only eight-percent cited commercial harvesting as an important reason for owning their land but a few more (13%) saw commercial timber harvesting as an important goal for their land. About half saw themselves as active managers. About half had interacted with a forester or logger at some point, but only 12 interviewees had a formal management plan. About one-quarter planned a future commercial harvest of their timber. Most were managing for some form of wildlife, but they defined this broadly as including bait piles and bird feeders. Nearly all of the interviewees liked the idea of energy independence. Nearly half were aware of the developing woody bioenergy industry. More than half said that they would be willing to harvest timber from their land for a cellulosic ethanol or other woody bioenergy plant. Only a minority were clearly interested in energy cropping.

Most of these landowners could be potential sources of feedstock for the Frontier plant. However, very few have a management plan that could put that harvest in a context of overall, long-term sustainable management. Most valued their land for its ability to produce a range of valued resources, from timber to wildlife. However, the lack of development of a management plan for their land makes their land more vulnerable to quick harvesting decisions that might not be in the long-term interest of sustainable resource management.

Appendix A: Interview Sampling Rules

Sample size for each county is based equally upon each county's privately-owned timberland area and the estimated number of rural property owners. "Rural" property owners are defined as those whose names are listed as plat owners in the index of each plat book (therefore excluding owners of small city lots).

The mathematical formula is simple. Each county's private timberland area and estimated property owners are calculated as percentages of the totals for ALL counties in the study area. These percentages are then multiplied by the pre-determined total number of letters to be mailed. The mean of these two numbers is the sample size for that county.

Example: Assume total sample size of 200 for all counties

"Smith" County:

Privately-owned timberland = 547 km² (equals 10% of total for all counties)

Private property owners = 5825 (equals 16% of total for all counties)

Sample size =

$$\frac{[(200 * 10\%) + (200 * 16\%)]}{2}$$

Which equals 26.

Property owner selection is based on the now-known sample size for each county. Using the Smith county example, we know we need 26 names of property owners, and we know the estimated number of private property owners is 5825. Divide 5825 by 26 to see that we would select every 224th name from the owner index.

If we reach the end of the owner index and still need more names (indicating that our initial estimate of owners was off), return to the beginning of the index and select remaining names at the mid-points of the original increments. In the above example, we would return to the beginning of the index and select #112, then #336, and so forth until we reach 26 names.

If we select the name of an owner (say, #224) who does not own at least 20 acres, go on to the next owner in the index (#225) and see if this person owns at least 20 acres. If not, continue down the list until reaching an owner who owns at least 20 acres. This is the owner selected. In this example, the next name selected would still be #448, regardless of how many owners we had to go past #224 to find a suitable one.

Additional rules & notes:

Do not count public lands or those owned by businesses, religious organizations, hunting/recreation groups, common subdivision areas, parks, etc. Only count plots owned by individuals, married couples, families, living trusts, or any combination thereof.

Count persons owning multiple parcels only once.

Count husbands and wives together only once. Some county indexes list spouses separately, but most list them together. Pay attention to this in the indexes.

For logistical and practical reasons, parcels located on islands (for example Drummond Island) were excluded from the list of potential landowners.

The Schoolcraft County equalization department was visited in person to collect the mailing addresses of landowners selected from the plat book listing. Addresses for all other counties were obtained by phone, email, fax, or regular mail.

Sampling increments for each county were written at the top of the first page of each county's owner index for future reference (example "every 250th").

Obtaining addresses and phone numbers was accomplished by contacting county clerk (or equalization) offices with our final owner lists for each county. They provided us addresses where possible, but in many cases a small percentage of owners on our list were no longer valid for an assortment of reasons – property was sold, owner died, no such name on record, and so forth. For this reason, beginning with the Lower Peninsula mailing list, we oversampled by about 35% to assure each county would return enough useable names and addresses for us.

On the "Master mailing list" spreadsheet, note that the property owner number column (column A) for each county begins with bold numbers. Bold numbers reflect our target amount for each county, and owners associated with bold numbers are our primary samples. The last few names for each county, with owner numbers not in bold, represent over-sampling. These names can be used if any of the primary names are not useable.

Phone numbers were rarely provided by the county clerks. We found the phone numbers we could use using on-line searching (such as whitepages.com).

Appendix B: Interview Questions

A. General

1. Can you tell us about your land? (**Probes:** How many acres do you own? How much is forested? What kinds of trees?)
2. What are your main reasons for owning your land? What are some of your favorite things about it? How long have you owned it?
3. What do you like to do on your land?
4. Some people view themselves as actively working with or managing their land to make it the way they want; others are more “hands-off”. Do you see yourself as either of these?
5. What are your goals for your land? What would you like it to be like in 10-20 years?

B. Land Management [transition]

6. Do you have any problems happening on your land or any concerns for the future?

(**Probe:** For example, some people we meet mention concerns about soil quality or erosion, insects or other nuisance species, tree diseases, fire, human activities, etc.)

[**If yes**] Do you know of anything that could be done about it? Are you doing anything to address these concerns?
7. Have you ever met with a forester or logger to discuss management of your land?

[**If yes**] Why and when? Do you have a management plan for your land?

[**If yes again**] Can you tell us about the management plan and what it contains?
8. As you think about other people who own land, maybe neighbors or friends, are there people who come to mind that you think take really good care of their land?

[**If yes**] What is it that you like about what they do?
9. Have you heard of the term “invasive species”?

[**If yes**] What do you know about them? Do you know if you have any invasive species on your land?

[**If yes again**] Are you concerned about these?

C. Forest Management [transition]

10. Have you ever cut trees on your land?

[**If yes**] When did that happen? For what purpose?

11. Do you plan to cut trees in the future?

[If yes] Can you describe your plans? For what purpose, personal firewood or selling timber/pulp? How many acres? Would it be clearcut or selectively thinned?

12. **[If any sort of harvest is planned]** You mentioned...(things they value from question #2)...Would you worry that cutting activities could impact those things? Are there things that could be done to minimize any possible impacts? What?

13. Have you heard of government programs where forest landowners get a tax break or shared costs to manage their forests?

[If yes] What have you heard?

[If no, explain that they exist]

14. Would you consider enrolling your land in any of these programs? **Why or why not?**

D. Wildlife management [transition]

15. What kinds of wildlife do people see around here?

16. Are you interested in managing for wildlife on your land?

[If yes] Do you feel you have a sense of things you could do on your land to attract wildlife or give them good habitat? Do you do this already? What do you do?

17. Are there any wetlands, streams, or ponds on your land?

[If yes] Please tell us about them.

18. Are you familiar with any government programs that are available to help landowners manage for wildlife by improving habitats or restoring wetlands?

[If yes] Which programs? Would you consider enrolling in one of these types of programs? Why or why not? **[If no, explain that they exist]**

E. Bioenergy [transition]

19. Have you heard the phrase “energy independence”?

[If yes] What have you heard? What does it mean to you? Do you think it’s an important goal? Why or why not?

20. Have you heard of the term woody “bioenergy”?

[If no, explain] It basically refers to energy produced from plant materials, such as trees, grasses, or corn.

[If yes] How about woody biofuel or cellulosic ethanol? What have you heard?

21. There are several newer companies in the U.P. that use forest materials to produce energy, including a power plant in L'Anse, a couple of wood pellet manufacturers, and a facility in Kinross that will be producing cellulosic ethanol for cars. They might be interested in buying forest materials from landowners such as you to produce energy. Have you heard about these types of companies in our area?

[If yes] What have you heard?

22. Do you think you would be interested in cutting trees from your land to sell to these types of companies? **Why or why not?**

23. What do you think of when you hear the terms "climate change" or "global warming"? **[If not clear]** Do you think it's not happening, is part of natural cycles, or is caused by humans? Do you think it will be a problem?

[If yes] Would you be interested in managing your land to help prevent it?

[If yes] Have you heard of carbon offset programs?

[If yes] Would you be interested in selling carbon offsets from your land?

G. Closing questions [transition]

24. What do you do (or did) you or your spouse do for a living?

25. How far did you go in school?

26. Would you like any additional information about any programs related to land management?

27. Do you have any questions for us?

28. [Any questions from note-taker?].