Increasing forest productivity on the nation’s non-industrial private forestlands (NIPFs) is a perennial issue facing natural resource and extension professionals. While there are an abundance of programs to encourage private landowners to produce more wood on their land, the real challenge is how to convince landowners that wood production complements or even advances other landowner objectives such as aesthetics, wildfire management, recreational opportunities, and ecosystem health.

A forest landowner cooperative is made up of NIPF landowners who come together to jointly manage their parcels for multiple benefits. They may also co-own and/or control other forestry-related businesses that distribute benefits to members on the basis of use. There are many benefits to being a member of a cooperative including having conventional services provided at less cost, and having access to new services that are not normally available to the small forest landowner. We were interested in determining the extent to which forest landowner cooperatives are supporting NIPFs in the U.S., and identifying where forestland owners can go to obtain more information about forest landowner cooperatives.

The USDA Forest Service estimates that there are nearly 10 million NIPF owners, with 59 percent holding less than 10 acres. We expect that in the future there will be even more owners of smaller holdings. Only 5 percent of the NIPL owners have written forest management plans. Three percent hold their land primarily for timber production. The obstacles to forest management for NIPF owners are often identified as a lack of information, distrust of professional, small parcels that make management difficult, and lack of time and money. Forest landowner cooperatives offer a means of overcoming these obstacles.

Forestry landowner cooperatives are not a new idea. Europe and Japan have a long history of business cooperatives centered on private landowners. However, forestry cooperatives in the U.S. have fairied poorly since they first formed in the 1910’s. At their height, they numbered 68. Just prior to their resurgence in 1998, only two cooperatives were actively operating in the U.S. Based on preliminary data collected this year, there are 15-20 forest landowners cooperatives with several other groups considering some type of similar organization. Much of this activity is centered in the Upper Midwest. These forest landowner cooperatives, like those in the past, look to provide members with services otherwise unavailable, access to markets, and increased income. Unlike prior efforts, these organizations also foster sustainable forestry (e.g. forest certification), land protection, and ecological restoration.

We found that although several regional non-profit, government, and university organizations have stepped up to support and educate NIPF owners interested in forming cooperatives, resource and extension professionals nationwide have only cursory knowledge of the opportunities and barriers associated with these cooperatives. There is a need to educate professional about cooperatives so they can advise and/or assist landowners interested in forming a forest landowner cooperative.
Forestry landowner cooperatives offer non-industrial private forest landowners services otherwise unavailable, access to markets, and increased income.

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