

The Habitat Corner

FAILING TO PLAN IS PLANNING TO FAIL!

I don't know anyone who wants to waste their time and money, but unfortunately we do it regularly. We are naturally habitual and do what our predecessors have always done without thought.

As new science and technologies provide us potential to improve land management efficiency and profitability, we utilize common sense, convenience, and cost considerations when selecting improvements to make. Or do we? The key to any successful plan is identifying clear goals, learning the subject matter, developing a plan and following through during implementation. Whether managing to produce cattle, crops, hay, timber or wildlife, many of us catch ourselves skipping ahead to implementation. This is normal because "we like doing stuff." However, if we resist the urge to act first and think second we can add intention to our efforts to keep busy, become successful, and often save money!

Considerations in a land management plan include: 1) what are your specific objectives? and 2) is the land suited to your objectives? Soil type, topography, and existing vegetation types all affect the use and profit potential of the land. For example, if your land is too steep to "run cattle" you may consider changing your objectives on that acreage to forest management. If you want to manage for upland wildlife, like the northern bobwhite, you should target uplands with open landscapes instead of bottomlands and forested areas where tree competition adds prohibitive cost and labor. There are many other examples of the necessity to learn about your interests before trying to manage for them.

Once you've gathered all the essential information, develop a written plan to accomplish your field and forest management objectives that accounts for your time and desired profit margin. According to the National Agriculture Statistics Service, the average farm in Tennessee spends \$11,000 of \$33,000 total annual farm expenses on feed, lime, and fertilizer. In many cases, hay costs more to produce in fertilizer, fuel, and storage than the benefits received.



Like hunting success, careful planning is also the key to land management success.

Aubrey Deck, TWRA Private Lands Biologist

Grazing as long as possible, however, minimizes wasted forage, time, and money. Livestock producers should consider UT Extension's advice to convert up to 30 percent of an existing cool-season forage-base (typically fescue) to a warm-season forage (such as native grass), interseed legumes, and stockpile grasses to extend the grazing season. Also, managed grazing and temporary cover crops prevent erosion, build the organic matter in the soil (increasing water holding capacity and saving

on fertilizer inputs), provide cover and food for wildlife, and allow water to infiltrate the soil rather than run-off (thereby improving water quality and plant vigor). Regarding forest management, most people believe not disturbing the forest is "the right thing to do for the environment." However, science has shown this is a common misunderstanding. Unmanaged forests that are also excluded from fire render an unhealthy ecosystem, low quality wildlife habitat, and waste a potential crop (timber).

When aesthetics are truly the primary objective non-traditional management methods can save time and money. For example, we commonly pay to destroy naturally existing plants, and then pay again to plant the same or similar species back. It may be desirable to use alternative methods to retain or naturally revegetate certain plants from an existing seedbank that a mower operator calls a "weed," but a bee keeper calls a "pollinator plant", landscapers call "wildflowers", and wildlife biologists call "food and cover." Or are we mowing so that the field doesn't "get out of control?" If so, consider that mowing actually encourages tire puncturing resprouts rather than killing saplings. Replacing a mower with an herbicide sprayer, disk or prescribed burn drip torch will allow you to accomplish your objectives and reduce management frequency to once every three to five years.

These are just a few examples of objective-based considerations for success that require intentional thought. Success is not going to "fall in our lap." If you manage your property with no objective it is literally impossible to succeed.

"Helping Landowners and Wildlife Through Habitat Enhancement"

The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency has Private Lands Biologists that will assist you in developing a management plan for your property and a strategy to implement it. See www.TWRAPrivateLands.org for who to contact for technical assistance and other useful information on habitat management and programs.