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How Can I Prevent Timber Theft On My Forest Property?

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A weekly question/answer column

How Can I Prevent Timber Theft On My Forest Property?

Darren McAvoy answers:*

The history of timber theft in the United States goes back at least as far as the classic feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys, which one researcher found to be the original dispute between the two families. But it is still a common problem. Here are several steps you can take to protect yourself from timber trespass.

1. Know your property boundaries:

- The best alternative is to hire a qualified and licensed surveyor with the skills to locate and mark your boundary corners and lines.
- A second alternative is to obtain the assistance of a professional forester. It is important to understand that foresters typically use handheld compasses, as opposed to the highly technical equipment of a surveyor, and are not qualified to monument property lines and corners. But they may be able to help you locate your approximate boundary locations and take steps to minimize conflicts with adjacent forest land owners.
- Another alternative is to do it yourself. If you are familiar with using a map and a compass, this may be a good choice for estimating property boundary locations, but it is most helpful if the corners have already been surveyed and marked.
- Another alternative (which is not necessarily recommended) is to do what one couple from Idaho did: from previously surveyed property corners of their heavily-wooded 10-acre parcel, the husband and wife each started at opposite ends of the unmarked property line. By loudly banging together pots and pans while listening for each other and marking the way towards each other, they put a boundary line that later proved to be accurate within 20 feet!

2. Clearly mark the boundaries:

- The best protection is making your property lines clearly visible. This can be done by hanging brightly colored pieces of flagging within eyesight of each other along the line. These lines should be inspected annually to ensure that no trespass has occurred. Absentee owners might consider contracting a forestry consultant to make annual boundary line inspections. Also consider posting your property boundaries with appropriate signs.

3. When trespass occurs:

- Be certain of where the line is and that trespass did, in fact, occur.
- If the trespass is in progress, be courteous but firm, confront the violators and get as much information as possible about who they are working for, where the timber is being

shipped, and whose land they think they are operating on. If personal contact does not persuade them to leave your property, call your local sheriff immediately.

- If timber was removed from your property you are entitled to the value of the wood that was removed, and in some cases double or even triple the value. This is often determined by a stump cruise, where a professional forester will count, measure, and record the tree species of each stump found within the trespass area and develop a value estimate of the wood removed.

4. When you harvest timber:

- The best alternative is to be able to harvest up to an existing, well-marked line that was located by a professional surveyor, although most logging-unit boundaries are less well defined. In the absence of a survey line, set up a "cutting line agreement," preferably in writing, with the adjoining property owner.
- Contact the adjacent owner and explain the methods used to locate the line, who located the line, and offer to walk the line with the owner to ensure agreement of the line placement.

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* Darren McAvoy is Utah State University Extension Forestry Associate