A WORKING WOODLOT IN MANITOBA

MORE THAN JUST 'BUSHLAND'

By Bob Austman, Past President, Woodlot Association of Manitoba, Manitoba Chair, Canadian Forest Owners

In 1986, I had an opportunity to acquire 160 acres of wooded farm property: 40 acres of open farmland and 120 acres of mostly hardwood, a mix of birch, ash, and trembling aspen. I loved being out in nature, and since I was heating my home with firewood, I decided to pull the trigger and buy it.

I did what a lot of Manitobans were doing… looking for a backup in case the economic woes of the 1980s got worse. It was a time of high interest rates, with mortgages at around 21 percent, rampant inflation, and a whole lot of economic uncertainty. The entire country was entering a period of recession.

I worked in the woodlot every spare moment I had. First on my list was converting a small granary into a simple cabin where I could stay overnight. I had to do that. I lived 120 km from the woodlot. Then I started the 'grunt work' - laying out trails to access the standing timber, mostly on weekends.

I rented out 40 acres of open field to a local farmer. I harvested enough firewood to pay the property taxes. Each fall I harvested deer, grouse, and waterfowl so that I could have some extra food in the freezer. I bought an old tractor and put in a garden, although the deer, bears, and raccoons helped themselves to it when I was not around. The woodlot became my home away from home.

My job as a high school biology teacher allowed me to save enough to make monthly payments. In the mid-1980s, farm commodity prices were low, and land in southeastern Manitoba was not in big demand. At the time I bought my first woodlot, I recall co-workers asking me why I bought 'bushland' instead of putting the money in the bank. At the time 'bushland' was synonymous to 'wasteland', something meant to be bulldozed, burned, and turned into farmland. I told my co-workers that I would rather have "money in the bark, rather than money in the bank". Today, in 2026, after 40 years of ownership, land prices have surged tenfold.

In 1992, with the help of Forestry Technician Ken Fosty, who worked for the Manitoba Forestry Association, we cruised the timber together and developed a woodlot management plan. A few years later, in 1996, I harvested a 20-acre stand of mature trembling aspen that netted the last $8,000 I needed to completely pay off the loan. That poplar stand was over-mature, and thankfully, there was a market for the logs at the Norbord oriented strand board mill, located just over the border in Barwick, Ontario. The 'money in the bark' now paid off the money I owed to the bank.

The 320-acre woodlot not only provides ecological goods and services such as wildlife habitat, biodiversity, carbon uptake, and watershed integrity, but also provides the landowner with recreation, healthy food from the garden, wild game, berries, and a bit of rental income from the farmland (80 acres out of 320).

Aerial view from a drone of Red Pine plantation #1 looking east. Plantation #2 can be seen at the upper left. 10,000 seedlings were planted in 2008 and now stand over 20 feet tall.

In 1996 I purchased the adjoining quarter section. I converted some of the less productive land into a red pine plantation (10,000 seedlings), of which about 8,500 still survive despite several years of drought and a close call with two nearby wildfires.

In the early 1990s, I became involved with the Woodlot Association of Manitoba. Natural Resources Canada, under the Canada-Manitoba Forestry Agreement, had set aside a small amount of funding to support the development of the association. We also obtained support from the Manitoba

Plantation #2 as seen from a drone in 2015.

The author (Bob Austman) stands atop Jack Pine saw logs harvested during a salvage cut from the ice and windstorm the previous winter.

Forestry Association, which provided us with office space and a Forestry Technician to help develop woodlot management plans. From 1992 until 2018, the Manitoba Forestry Association assisted us with landowner workshops, field trips, education, and outreach.

In 2018, we saw the closure of the Manitoba Forestry Association, the loss of our only provincial tree nursery, the end of the Manitoba Model Forest program, and the closure of Tembec Industries (formerly Abitibi Pulp and Paper), the largest paper mill in Manitoba. The shock of losing our largest market for pulpwood, combined with the loss of our office space and our only seedling nursery, was too much for our small organization to bear. We lost many members when the only forestry technician moved on. When the pandemic lockdowns started in 2020, it was the 'straw that broke the camel's back'. We have been limping along with an aging board, looking for partners to work with us.

We still have an active website where landowners can download and print support materials to help manage their woodlot. The search for partners is ongoing, but many other non-profit organizations are fighting their own battles, trying to hang on.

In 2012, a massive snow and windstorm struck the entire southeastern region of Manitoba. Mature Jack pine suffered massive damage. Trees were uprooted, and many had their crowns snapped right off. A salvage harvest was conducted to clean up the damage and reduce the risk of fire or insect infestation. Natural regeneration has begun to restore the harvested blocks.

Woodlot owners across Canada face a barrage of forces that no human can stop. We cannot stop invasive species, climate change, drought, floods, ice storms, or punishing windstorms. We can work towards mitigating some types of damage from things such as wildfire. Fortunately, woodlot owners can now purchase woodlot insurance (see Brokerlink.ca)

We also have economic forces working against us, from tariffs on our wood and lumber to general downturns in the economy. We are, after all, price takers rather than price makers.

But that does not stop us from returning to the woodlot – year after year. We nurture our souls when we visit our woodlots. Seeing our young seedlings reach the 'free to grow' stage, or watching nesting birds, or a young fox emerging from its den, brings about the feeling that all is well in the world.

When I leave town and drive (160 km) to the woodlot, the first thing I do is step out of the truck and inhale that fresh air – that unique feeling you get when you let yourself enter the realm of 'forest bathing'. From the smell of budding poplars in the spring, to the smell of rotting leaves in the moist fall soil – these are things that keep me coming back. Seeing the tree canopies gently swaying in the summer breeze restores me and reminds me that we are but a tiny speck in Earth's ecosystem, and that if we carefully manage our woods in a sustainable way, we can feel that we have given something back.

I was 32 years old when I bought my first woodlot, and 42 when I bought my second. Now at age 72, I feel blessed that I can still cut firewood with my trusty chainsaw, hunt white-tailed deer in cold weather, and hike the trails that took decades to create. I have roughly the same or slightly more standing timber than when I bought the properties, even after harvesting roughly 1,400 cubic metres of pulp, sawlogs, and firewood. Without sounding too philosophical, I will leave the reader with this quote I recently came across:

"HE IS LIKE A KING ON A THRONE, HE WHO HAS LAND OF HIS OWN".