TIMBER THEFT ON THE INCREASE IN THE APPALACHIAN REGION

Timber Security: theft
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INTRODUCTION: In the past several years, prices for hardwood logs—especially red oak, black cherry, and other valuable hardwoods—have increased dramatically. As a result, many landowners have experienced problems with timber theft. Several recent cases in the central Appalachians illustrate the problem for property owners in the region.

SECURITY BREACH/DAMAGE: Two separate incidents resulted in timber theft and property damage valued at thousands of dollars. In both cases, boundary line trees were cut, stands were high-graded, BMPs were ignored, and water quality was harmed.

RECOGNITION: In one case, a company forester noticed a log landing adjacent to his firm’s property. Upon inspection, it was clear that the so-called “logger” had crossed the boundary line, stolen timber, and created a mess by skidding on excessive grades and through streams. In the other case, a landowner discovered an operator stealing his trees, as well as trees from an adjacent property.

ACTIONS TAKEN: In both cases, company foresters asked the wrongdoer to stop operations. Consulting foresters were contracted with to evaluate property damage and determine timber value. Legal services were used to begin proceedings for timber trespass. One case was settled out of court, while the other has a pending default judgment hearing.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Forestland is often located in a remote area, sometimes isolated, and infrequently visited. Such situations create attractive targets for timber thieves. While not infallible, certain practices can deter timber trespass:

• Establish and maintain property lines.
• Periodically visit your property.
• Place ownership signs along roads and other highly visible areas.
• Erect gates if needed, and keep them locked.
• Know your neighbors. Provide them with contacts to report activities on your land.
• Know the local outlets for logs and wood. Make them aware of your presence in their operating area. Find out who supplies their raw material and where their jobs are located.
• Check on logging next to your property. Stop and talk with the operator. Make sure he knows you own the adjacent tract and show him the boundaries.
• Know your state foresters. There’s a good chance they are familiar with area loggers and where they are operating. Let them know where you own timberland.
• Establish a hunting or recreational lease on your property. Chances are hunters and recreational users will spend more time on your land than you will.
• Establish contact with local law enforcement. If a theft occurs, assist law enforcement in preparing a case for the prosecutor.

• Consider marking extremely valuable trees (such as veneer trees) with an “invisible” tree marking paint that glows when exposed to ultraviolet light. You may be able to track down your missing logs if you discover the theft before the logs have been debarked.

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