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In the last ACF column article, I left you with a quote from Aldo Leopold, so as a segue, I will begin this article with one more from a piece that he subtitled "Axe-in-Hand".

"I have read many definitions of what is a conservationist, and written not a few myself, but I suspect that the best one is written not with a pen, but with an axe. It is a matter of what a man thinks about while chopping, or while deciding what to chop. A conservationist is one who is humbly aware that with each stroke he is writing his signature on the face of his land."

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1949)

For a consulting forester, perhaps the best equivalent of the axe is the tree marking gun & paint. With it, we can impact the forested landscape for years if not decades to come. The actual tool is not too important in terms of choice, though different foresters tend to prefer different paint guns and tree marking paint brands for reasons of economy, durability, and personal preference. With time, some foresters dislike marking timber – too much effort, and often, doesn't make economic sense when a logger-select harvest will suffice. Other foresters, however, see marking timber as an enjoyable blend of forestry art and science. And, it comes with the added benefit of keeping one physically fit! Personally, I have always enjoyed marking timber, prefer it even to cruising timber. There certainly have been times even in the not too distant past when marking pine stands with dense understories of gallberry, lyonia, and saw palmetto tied together with grape or smilax vines, that I would doubt this sense of enjoyment when in the heat of the battle. However, seeing the stand subsequently thinned and the offending understory temporarily laid flat becomes a great emotional salve and the toil is soon forgotten.

A forester must see both the individual trees and the forest stand, knowing which trees in the stand have the most potential to respond favorably to a thinning harvest and increase in value for the client, reading clues in the tree bark and crown. We must watch for tree form plus signs of disease. We must consider the species of tree and their location in respect to other trees of the same species or other species. If the harvest is intended to regenerate a new crop of timber, we consider the potential for the residual "shelterwood or seed trees" to provide seed and pass along favorable genetics.

Marking timber takes time and costs money. While economics does not often favor marking timber to optimize rate of return on the timber investment, sometimes it can make economic sense especially for longer timber rotations. And especially for longer timber rotations, there is no doubt that the choice of "cut & leave", whether by forester or logger, will also impact the forest aesthetics and health. And not just the health of the trees, which is of paramount importance, but also the health of the forest ecosystem. For the management of a typical Stewardship Forest or Tree Farm, there are many questions to ask and decisions to be made. Other factors beyond economics-driven timber management can be of elevated importance to the non-industrial private landowner versus a more industrial or timberland investment ownership. For example, are we seeking a monoculture of a single-aged and single species of pine to simplify forest management and maximize economic return, or might the landowner desire to elevate other factors like species and age diversity, and potentially encourage more frequent yet less economically significant harvests? If we are managing for ecological goals in a forest community with southern yellow pine species like longleaf pine, are we leaving a sufficiently

dense stand of pines with favorable live crown ratios to provide adequate needle drop to enhance prescribed burning, yet not too dense a stand of pines to inhibit the heat of the fire to pass through the crown layer? Is the crown coverage low enough to encourage growth of an herbaceous understory preferred by certain species of wildlife like gopher tortoise, yet still high enough to capture a reasonable potential for timber production and keep the property well-postured for greenbelt? The choices and decisions are as varied as the biotic and abiotic stand conditions and the landowner goals.

So, should you have your timber marked or not? Unfortunately, there is no blanket statement to answer this question. But sometimes, the marking gun is still the right tool for the job when a forester writes his signature on the land!