

A Walk in the Woods – January 2012

By David Falkenham, UNH Cooperative Extension Grafton County Forester

The winter logging season has begun. Most of you have probably noticed a sudden flurry of log truck activity on the roads lately and wondered where it all is coming from. The answer is simple; during the months of late October through early December, it is very difficult to do any logging due to the wet and un-frozen conditions. As a result of no logging, the sawmills start to run low on saw logs, with no replenishment from the loggers who are effectively unemployed during the late fall.

The fall mud-season is a long time of no work for the loggers, and they are anxiously waiting for the first hard freezes of late December and the New Year. When these freezes suddenly happen, the loggers are ready to jump back to work in the woods and start sending timber to the mills again. This results in a sudden increase in trucking activity which is what we are all noticing lately. In the Haverhill/Pike area there are two large timber sales taking place on the national forest so that has added to the activity we have seen.

Landowners often ask me when the best time to cut timber is, and the answer is always “it depends”, and it depends on a lot of factors. The number one factor that determines when to cut timber on a certain parcel is the wetness of the soil. If you own 100 acres and the soil is wet for most of the year, then a winter cut is probably your only option. If your land is high and dry then a summer or fall cut will work fine, depending on access and the desired outcome of the timber cut. Some places are reasonably dry, but are too difficult to access during a snowy winter.

However the decision does not end here. If you want to do single tree selection cutting, then late summer/early fall, or the dead of winter is best. This is because you want to minimize the damage to the trees that you don't cut. Single tree selection cutting in the spring, early summer or a weak winter will result in potential root and bark damage to the remaining trees which will affect their growth and quality for the next cut in 15 years.

Patch cutting or clear cutting can be done any time of year as long as the soils will sustain it. However, if you are trying to regenerate young spruce, pine or oak it is best to cut in the fall when the seeds of these trees are falling to the ground. The scarification of the logging action will help these seeds to germinate the following spring. If you want a quick flush of hardwood regeneration then winter cutting is best because all the energy from the tree is in the roots during winter. Cutting hardwoods then will result in a sudden flush of hardwood regeneration the following two to three springs.

The answer to the question of when to cut wood involves many things to think about, so my very basic rule of thumb is that if the soil on your land can sustain a summer or fall cut, you should cut during the summer or fall. If not you should cut during the winter. If

you are lucky enough to own land that is very dry then you might be able to cut in the spring, right after the road bans come off. If this is the case then I would recommend cutting in the spring. This is a very basic rule of thumb. For a thorough explanation of when the best time to cut the timber on your land is I highly recommend contacting me at 787-6944 or dave.falkenham@unh.edu. I will come to your property, take a walk with you and give you my personal recommendation. It is a free service to all landowners in New Hampshire so why not take advantage of it. I promise it will be the most informative walk in the woods you ever take.