

A Consultant Looks at Michael through the Eyes of a Landowner  
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As the owner of a small consulting forestry company in the Live Oak – Lake City area, I make my living providing forest management assistance. In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Michael, my thoughts eventually turned to considering what services a consultant might be able to provide for a landowner in this difficult situation. As a native of the Panhandle from Calhoun County and the current owner of the family tree farm, I realized I would probably be my own biggest client. I sure hope the old adage about a man who represents himself having a fool for a client doesn't apply here!

Damage assessment was the first priority, but before I ever saw the timber I began calling timber buyers in anticipation of needing a salvage harvest. Making the drive from Suwannee County to Calhoun, I began to worry as we started to see damage near Quincy. My heart sank nearing Blountstown as I saw huge hardwoods and pines blown over or snapped like toothpicks. When we turned in to the old home place, I was stunned to see the 45-year-old cedars I had helped plant as a boy lying twisted and mangled across the drive. Making the damage assessment on our roughly 250 acres of merchantable planted pines was easy; it was a total loss. It was very clear that a salvage harvest was desperately needed.

Not every case is that cut and dried, and a consultant can assist in deciding which stands need to be salvaged and in what order. For example, our 35+ year-old slash and loblolly pines were more than 95% damaged with most trees being broken or completely uprooted. Those trees needed to be salvaged as soon as possible. This could mean selling the timber at extremely reduced prices, or in some cases giving it away, in order to salvage as much value as possible and reduce the site preparation costs for reforestation. On the other hand, our 11-year-old planted pines had a higher percentage of trees that were only leaning or partially uprooted and still with significant root-soil contact. While these trees will ultimately need to be salvaged, the soil contact will allow them to stay green longer, and it may be possible to delay the harvest until stumpage prices have somewhat recovered, thus increasing the salvage value and decreasing the loss.

A local consultant will be able to assist in securing a buyer for the timber to be salvaged. Local consultants deal with local timber buyers on a regular basis, and therefore, have contacts with timber buyers that the average landowner probably doesn't. Former Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam recounted the old saying that "extreme circumstances call for extreme measures". With more timber on the ground than the local mills could use in ten years, these are certainly "extreme circumstances", and it's clear that a significant portion of the damaged timber won't be salvaged. Reforestation costs on un-salvaged tracts could approach \$1,000/acre, so landowners need to utilize every resource available: consultants, personal contacts, calling in favors, or whatever it might be, to try to ensure a salvage harvest for their timber.

The next priority would be estimating the value of the timber lost. If a salvage harvest can be made for all the timber, this estimate is easily obtained. The loss would be the market value of the timber prior to the hurricane, less the salvage value received. If no salvage harvest is conducted, and recent volume data isn't already available, the valuation requires a timber cruise. Downed trees make vehicular and foot access for timber cruising very difficult. I know this from personal experience, but a local consultant can design and conduct a suitable timber cruise to estimate timber volumes. The consultant's knowledge of the local timber market will be helpful in applying appropriate stumpage rates to the estimated timber volumes to produce a final valuation. Determining a casualty loss for income tax purposes is a bit more complicated, because it's based on the landowner's basis in the timber. A consultant can help with this, but a tax professional should be consulted as well.

In many cases, consultants may use drone imagery to help assess and document damage, and to plan for management activities. It's a good idea to document everything with adequate photographs, and the emerging use of drones in forest management is a new, relatively inexpensive tool that foresters can use to assist their clients. It's especially helpful in this instance where ground access is limited by the mangled mess of downed trees.

The final recovery step for the forest landowner is to plan and execute a reforestation program. Again, consultants generally have a broader base of contacts with site preparation and tree planting contractors than do most individual landowners. Consultants can help a landowner "think outside the box" and recommend practices to clear and work around un-salvaged timber to get seedlings in the ground as efficiently and inexpensively as possible. They can also help with information and applications for cost share assistance from programs like the Emergency Forest Restoration Program, administered by the Farm Service Agency, or the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Hurricane Michael created an extreme situation that will require years and even decades of recovery. I encourage my fellow landowners to do everything possible to salvage their timber; use every contact and every available resource, call in whatever favors they're owed, think outside the box for solutions, and, in the words of the late NC State basketball coach, Jim Valvano, "Don't give up, don't ever give up!"