

PRACTICAL REASONS FOR CLEAR CUTTING

By Bob Kintigh

2005 Oregon Tree Farmer of the Year

2006 National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year

Former Oregon State Senator

Clear cutting is a sound scientific timber harvesting practice, but is very misunderstood. No other forest practice will bring a more emotional reaction than clear cutting. People don't like the way it looks.

My discussion will be from a background of over 60 years working in forestry including 50 years logging on my own land. The latter gives me a perspective that few people have. I know everyone will not agree with me but I hope to show that it is a sound silvicultural practices that when done properly will have minimal adverse environmental effects...

Clear cutting should not be used in all situations. But there are places where it is the only satisfactory method of harvesting timber and successfully establishing a new crop. One of these is the Douglas-fir region of the Northwest. If you want to grow Douglas-fir in this region there is no other satisfactory management regime.

Douglas-fir will not make even modest growth in shade. It will not grow there at a rate that will yield even a modest rate of return. Small seedlings may be found in a Douglas-fir forest but they will grow only a few inches a year and will eventually die. I have pictures of a tree growing in the understory on my tree farm that was only 7 feet tall in 15 years. This is very unsatisfactory growth. By contrast, trees I planted in a clear-cut have reached as much as 8 feet in three years.

My travels and inquiries have not found an example of successful long-term uneven age single tree selection management in west side Douglas-fir although many forest land owners have tried.

Clear cutting and replanting affords an opportunity to increase yields by using genetically improved planting stock. There are many seed orchards in the Northwest now producing seed for growing seedlings that will yield significant increases in growth in the next rotation.

It is unlikely one could produce quality lumber in an uneven age forest. By quality in this case I mean trees with few and small knots and close growth rings. This kind of timber can only be produced in an even age stand with trees that are approximately the same height and close enough together to cause the trees to shed their limbs and produce high-quality lumber. Likewise, close growing trees hold down the growth rate so that finer grain lumber can be produced. By contrast in an uneven age stand the larger trees will be far apart and retain their branches which are also much larger than in denser stands.

Another important thing I learned from my experience logging in mixed age stands is that cutting and yarding of the mature trees in the mixed age stand will cause excessive damage to the younger trees. No matter how skilled the logger is, it still takes a certain amount of area to lay a large crowned tree.

Similar situations occur in other sections of the country with other species. In the July/August 2009 Journal of Forestry an article about oak regeneration stated that while a selection harvest might be preferred by the landowners it is generally unsuccessful for regenerating oak. A friend in Maine said that in regard to white pine (one of their major species) "a lot of light helps". A forester friend in Alabama says without hesitation that the three major species there all require clear cutting for successful regeneration.

Planting western redcedar and ponderosa pine on appropriate sites gives us species diversity.

For those with an interest in wildlife, I would like to point out that recent research has shown that the early successional stages of forests produce more palatable and nutritious forage than mid and late successional. Many more kinds of song birds can be found in recent clear cuts than in mature forests. By periodically clear cutting blocks throughout the property a land owner can always have some prime wildlife habitat somewhere.

And finally our management plan is sustainable because we harvest only a certain number of acres each decade.