Preventing timber theft

Timber theft is more common than many forest owners realize. When large sections of forestland go unchecked for months or years, valuable trees can be removed either unintentionally or by criminal act. Though New York has new laws increasing timber theft fines, prevention of this problem is still important. From timber theft, landowners suffer nearly permanent economic loss. Forests suffer as large, irreplaceable, and genetically superior trees (most often removed) are eliminated from the ecological community. The more timber theft is prevented, the less of a problem it will be.

**Best management practices to prevent timber theft**

**Mark your forest boundaries.**
Most property boundaries in forests are obscure, giving timber thieves a good excuse for removing trees through unauthorized logging. Your forest boundaries should be clearly marked with a combination of ownership signs, paint marks, posted signs, flagging, and fencing, where appropriate. Posted signs should be placed conspicuously, without creating a visual nuisance. New York’s posting law requires a sign every 660 feet, with your name and address marked on the sign. If forest property boundaries are made clear, the crime of timber theft is both more pronounced and easier to prosecute.

**Obtain current survey or deed description.**
Surveys and deed documents will include a legal description of property boundaries. Use them to locate benchmarks, such as iron pins and roads. Sometimes, the deed or survey will use natural features, such as a woodland edge or ravine to express property boundaries. If these documents are readily available, suspected timber theft can be investigated with accuracy.

**Walk the boundaries in the forest, looking for potential timber theft targets.**
Trees removed illegally are usually within a few hundred feet of the property boundary - close enough to make removal easy and under a convenient cloud of uncertainty. The trees most susceptible to theft are straight, clean, and of a desirable species. Make a written or photographic record of the trees. If necessary, wrap flagging around the trunk to suggest monitoring is taking place. Do this work when the foliage is off the trees.

**Invite neighboring property owners to double check and agree to property line.**
As a good will gesture and to indicate your earnestness about protecting your assets, invite the neighboring property owner to walk with you and agree to the position of the
property boundary. If any areas are in question, hire a professional survey crew to set the property line. Mark the line with flagging or paint only after agreed upon or professional survey. Too often, adjacent property owners play boundary tag, removing and posting boundary limits when the other is not around. This may actually encourage timber theft activities.

**Patrol your property.**
Forest owners should make a habit of actively patrolling the boundaries of their woodlots. If there is logging activity in the vicinity, the patrols should be increased.

**Gather information about suspected timber theft**
If you want to report and prosecute timber theft on your property, you need to collect as much information about the trespasser(s) as is possible. You should record in writing the following:

- Time and date of the suspected violation
- Identifying features of the suspect or vehicle
- Location of violation
- Description of the violation
- Number of suspects
- Type of activity

Any law enforcement agency in New York State can make an arrest for and prosecute trespass violations. Environmental Conservation officers will follow up on timber theft allegations.

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