

Forestry Ethics

Walt Wood evaluated a 1,000 hectare oak-hickory forest and found that a partially constructed road had 20 undersized culverts and the number of fords were excessive (15 fords could have been avoided if a longer alternate route had been used). Excessive siltation would result if the road was opened for use, and, therefore, Walt recommended the road be abandoned. To comply with the voluntary BMP's, Walt recommended the company spend \$200,000 to build a new road with one bridge and no fords. After reviewing Walt's report, the company decided to sell the property, but after learning that his church might buy the land, Walt immediately told his boss that conflict of interests might occur (Canon 9).

Walt's boss (also an SAF member) said the company should not withhold pertinent information to prospective buyers (Canon 4). She allowed that Walt could and should provide the church with a free copy of his report. This pleased Walt since it would be unethical to voluntarily disclose the information without his boss's expressed permission (Canon 8). The boss told Walt that he should point out to the congregation that neither Walt nor his boss work for the land sales division. In addition, Walt told the congregation that he would not vote on any church matter dealing with the property. So far, so good.

But after giving the report to the church elders, Walt was informed that the church plans to sell all the timber (to help pay for the land) and to establish a 1,000 hectare cotton farm. According to Canon 1, Walt must advocate land management that is consistent with ecologically sound principles. He realized that any land-use conversion must be conducted in an environmentally sensitive manner. However, as a forest engineer, Walt did not have the educational background to determine which land management practices are inconsistent with ecologically sound principles.

Walt had taken university courses in dendrology, forest measurements, and forest economics, but none in ecology or silviculture. Therefore, in accordance with Canon's 6 and 11, Walt decided to obtain input from other experts in forestry and ecology. Walt contacted the local university's school of forestry and the SAF office, but neither provided a list of ecologically sound principles. Walt then asked an ecologist for such a list. The ecologist said several ecological principles were involved in the conversion the church wanted to make. She noted that harvesting the trees would reduce the habitat for wildlife and that planting a single crop (cotton) would reduce both biodiversity and the stability of the ecosystem. The ecologist indicated that converting the forest to a cotton farm would reverse the "normal" direction of change (e.g. , soil erosion versus soil development) and therefore was not consistent with any "good" ecological principle. She added that cotton farming was basically an economic enterprise and is not consistent with a commitment to the wise management of natural ecosystems.

Walt told his boss that the land sales division should not sell the property to the church since this would not be good stewardship of the land and would be in violation of Canon 1. His boss replied, that the ecologist's arguments represent a narrow view of sound ecology. She said that Canon 1 should not be interpreted literally; from an ethical viewpoint, a literal reading of Canon 1 results in some ambiguity. She said that Canon 1 was not intended to determine the highest ecological value.

The land sales division went ahead and sold the property to the highest bidder. As it turned out, the tract was sold to a developer who cleared the land to make a residential area. Approximately 93% of the trees were removed to make way for roads and parking-lots (17% of the area), houses and commercial buildings (25%), lawns and landscaped areas (30%), a park playground (10%), a school (5%), a drainage canal (5%) and a shopping mall (8%). Although Walt initially believed the change in land use was a violation of Canon 1, he finally concluded the development was serving the best long-term interest of society (Canon 2). Especially since the world was adding a billion new people every 11 years.

This paper can be cited as follows:

Argow, K., Burns, A.F., Humphries, B. Jones, S., Finley, J. South, D. and Tinknor, W.D. 1995. The Case of the Missing BMPs. *Journal of Forestry* 93(9):18-21