Five Ways to Connect with Landowners and Increase Conservation Impact

By Elizabeth Greener

Like many other foresters from across the US, Brad Nail of Alabama fields incoming calls and meets with family landowners on a daily basis. And while his professional training is in forestry, another part of his job as a regional forester with the Alabama Forestry Association is outreach and marketing to create awareness of the conservation programs and opportunities available to landowners.

More than 60 percent of Alabama’s forests are owned by families and individuals. This makes reaching these landowners critically important to tackling some of the most significant conservation challenges across the state—such as creating better wildlife habitat and protecting fresh waterways.

Fortunately, most landowners want the same thing. They want to do right by their land and support nature, wildlife, and much more. But while there are programs and resources available to provide landowners with expert advice and cover the costs of conservation efforts, many times these resources are left on the table because landowners lack awareness. The challenge for Nail has been making a connection with landowners that delivers the relevant information to them that moves them to action.

The American Forest Foundation (AFF), which is focused on the sustainability of America’s family forests, is partnering with local and state organizations across the country to expand their outreach and increase the number of family landowners they are working with—all to grow the conservation impact being made on the land. Nail and his organization are among these partners.

Through a partnership called “My Alabama Woods,” AFF is collaborating with foresters like Nail, the Alabama Forestry Association, and other local partners to engage more landowners in shortleaf-pine restoration, a forest ecosystem important for wildlife habitat. Before the partnership began, very few family forest owners adopted shortleaf restoration in the area, as there was limited knowledge of the resources available. AFF, as part of My Alabama Woods, provides its expertise and experience from other projects across the country on reaching and engaging new landowners. Today, thanks to My Alabama Woods, more than 1,000 new landowners have participated in educational events,
more than 460 landowners have met with a forester, and more than 5,500 acres of shortleaf have been restored.

So, where do you start to build more-effective communications that reach landowners and inspire action? Here are five steps to move them toward sustainable stewardship and increase conservation impact, based on key takeaways from AFF’s work with dozens of partner organizations:

1. **Get specific about your audience.** If you need to reach landowners of a particular acreage size, consider that landowners who own 10–40 acres can have different goals than those with 200 acres or more. What motivates the landowners you need to reach? Are they interested in helping wildlife or bringing in income? What barriers have prevented them from achieving their desired goals?

Meeting landowners where they are will help you create more-effective messaging and marketing materials. For example, in the West, AFF’s research shows that offers to help landowners improve forest health and establish better wildlife habitat resonate more than messages about the impending threat of wildfire.

To dig into the motivations and interests of your target audience, tap into your own or other readily available research before you begin your outreach. Telephone interviews and focus groups will often provide the best information, as they allow for follow-up discussion and investigation. But these methods can be time-consuming and expensive. Another option is to conduct an online survey. This can be a cost-efficient way to identify what’s most important to your target audience and what barriers stand in the way to caring for their land.

Once you have established your target audience, you can leverage technology and marketing techniques, such as social media or AFF’s new WoodsCamp tool (see page 4). This can help you better reach who you need to reach, without a lot of wasted time.

2. **Build trust.** Some landowners, unfortunately, can be skeptical of forestry professionals. To overcome this, it’s essential to build trust. While building trust is an ongoing process, it can and should start with your initial marketing and outreach.

Prioritize ways to showcase how yours is a reputable organization or program, and that you are interested in helping them achieve their goals. Always include your logo, and any partner logos, and be transparent about the organization or programs mission and goals.

Another way to build trust is to share a story or testimonial from another landowner. Sharing the experiences of someone in their shoes allows people to connect and can eliminate mistrust.

Lastly, include a few tips on caring for native wildlife in your outreach. This illustrates that you provide expertise and guidance that relates to their goals, and that you are there to help.

3. **Provide a clear call to action.** What do you want people to do once they see your message? If a landowner sees your materials and is interested in engaging, but there is not a clear call to action, you risk losing that person.

On many of our materials, AFF offers free information about forest management, invitations to forestry events, or a complimentary visit from a natural-resources professional. These are tangible and specific ways a landowner can learn more. Plus, these are typically seen as low risk, which also make it easier to take action.

Being clear about your call to action will determine which messages to incorporate into your content. For example, if you are offering a free visit from a forester, consider including a testimonial from a landowner who has already had a similar visit, to help others feel comfortable taking that step.

Limit your call to action to one or two options. This will prevent “choice paralysis”—feeling so overwhelmed by options that no decision is made. Limiting the choices can increase your response rate.

4. **Repetition.** Repetition. Repetition. For anyone who has ever been to an event and can’t recall someone’s name, you know that repetition is key. The same applies to reaching landowners.
While you may worry that you are being too intrusive with your message, the opposite is actually true. The more someone sees or hears about your program or offer, the more likely they are to remember and take the next step. Repeating your message builds awareness.

Similarly, when people hear about a new program or opportunity, they may be interested but decide that it’s not the right time to act. If they do not hear about the opportunity again, they are likely to forget it.

Repetition, in addition to increasing awareness, also helps build trust. The more familiar people are with an organization or a program, the more comfortable they feel in engaging with it.

Plan to share the same message through a variety of marketing channels to your target audience. Send postcards, place an ad in your local paper, hand out flyers at community centers, and use targeted social media advertising. This multichannel approach will help create awareness and trust, making it more likely landowners will follow up with you.

5. **Continue engaging.** One of the biggest misconceptions about marketing is that the job is complete once a customer or landowner has responded to your initial postcard or ad.

This is not the case. The initial interaction is often not enough to create momentum that moves a landowner to implement stewardship activities on the ground.

Strategic follow-up and regular communications are essential to building a strong relationship and a sense of trust with each landowner, which can motivate them to act.

In many of AFF’s conservation programs, such as those in Alabama, the partnership sends regular e-mail communications with articles on seasonal management tips. Providing ongoing valuable content via e-mail or a newsletter can keep landowners engaged between forester visits, especially if there is a long process or lead time to completing an activity.

Another option is to conduct follow-up calls, or have a fellow landowner act as a peer mentor to check in with landowners and answer questions. This repeated outreach is vital to get a landowner through the journey to a completed stewardship action.

I hope these tips help you build awareness and trust with landowners and move more of them to engage with your organization or program. The more landowners you engage, the more likely you are to reach your conservation goals.

If you are interested in learning about AFF’s work with partners to engage more landowners, visit www.forestfoundation.org/aff-innovation.

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