

# **CURRENT USE: Is It Time For A Change?**

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The forested part of Vermont's working landscape produces a wide range of goods and services. These goods and services can be grouped into three categories: wood products, non-wood forest products, and forest services.

The ownership of these goods and services can be private or public. Whoever holds the ownership of the goods and services is said to have the rights to them. When one owns a variety of the goods and services, they are said to possess 'a bundle of rights'.

On private lands the rights to the wood products are generally privately held. The wood products include sawtimber, veneer, fuelwood, smallwood, and charcoal. Historically the Current Use Program has mandated that landowners manage their lands for high quality timber as the default even though landowners often have other priorities for management. It is believed that this policy helps to make wood products flow out of the private forests. The policy probably does accomplish this but there are better ways to do so.

On private forestlands most of the rights to the non-wood forest products are privately held. These non-wood products include maple syrup, herbs, mushrooms, and perhaps animal products. However, the rights to some of the non-wood forest products are publicly held. These include the rights to the animals and the flowing waters.

On private forestlands the rights to the forest services are privately owned though many of the services have very significant public benefits. These include wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, water filtration, flood control, scenic beauty, and recreational opportunities. Conservation easements are commonly used to protect the public's interest in these privately held forest services.

The Current Use Program is essential if we are to keep private forests as forests in the long run so that they can continue to produce the wealth of private and public benefits. However, it is time to change the program so that it does a better job of accomplishing this.

Here are four simple steps:

1. Expand the definition of forest products and productivity beyond high quality timber production to include: other wood products such as fuelwood, smallwood, and charcoal; non-wood forest products beyond maple syrup such as mushrooms, ramps, other herbs, animals, and animal products; and the full range of forest services from recreation to carbon sequestration and from ecological reserves to watersheds.
2. Promote the careful management of the full range of privately owned forest products through education as opposed to the existing mandates, rules, and regulations.
3. Conserve publicly held forest products such as water supplies through education and clear, focused, and realistic rules and regulations just as we currently do with wildlife populations.
4. Reduce the amount of red tape associated with the program by eliminating non-essential paperwork and streamlining the reporting requirements.

These four steps would: increase the education of forest stewards; reduce regulation of privately held forest resources; conserve the commons including the ecological health of the public's streams and lakes; reduce the cost of government; and enhance forest health and productivity.

***May the forest be with you!***