

Communications Strategy

For the

Central Appalachia Habitat Stewardship Program
Greenbrier Watershed, West Virginia

9-3-19



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Background

This communication strategy is part of a larger effort to reverse declines of at-risk species native to the Central Appalachian region. Specifically, this communication strategy is designed to encourage private, non-industrial landowners to seek technical and financial assistance (primarily through Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Farm Bill programs) to identify and implement habitat management projects that promote Cerulean Warblers (CERW), Golden-winged Warblers (GWWA), and the suite of other species that share their habitat requirements. Lack of young forest (and other early successional habitat types) has been identified as one of the most important factors in the decline of these two warblers and a host of other species.

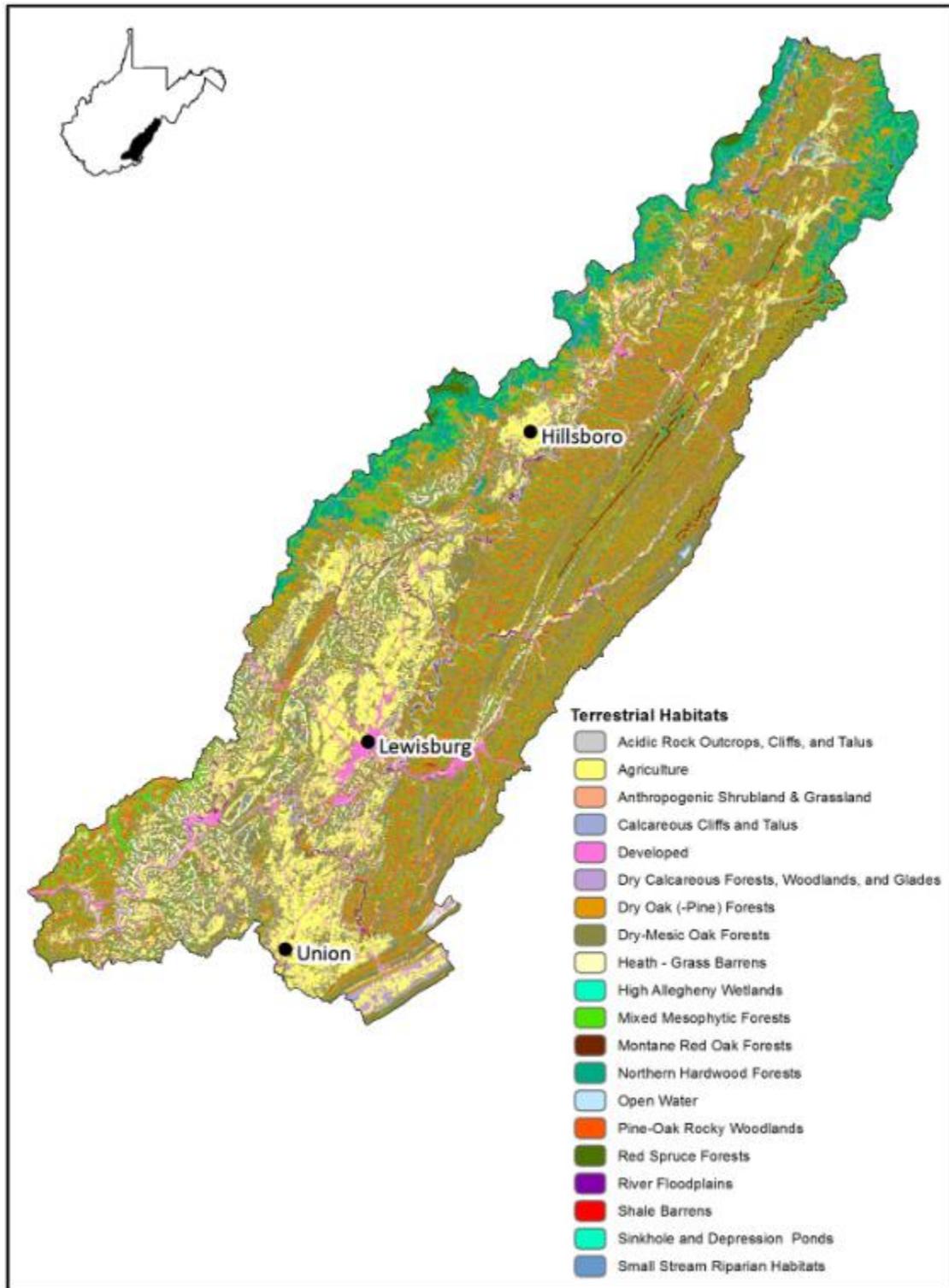


This work will be done in the Greater Greenbrier Conservation Focus Area (hereafter CFA or focus area) in eastern West Virginia. This watershed was selected based on its importance to the West Virginia State Wildlife Action Plan, the American Forest Foundation and the Appalachian Mountains Joint Venture.

Greater Greenbrier Conservation Focus Area

According to the West Virginia State Wildlife Action Plan (2015), the Greater Greenbrier CFA encompasses the Greenbrier Watershed from the joining of the East and West forks at Durbin downstream to the Greenbrier River's confluence with the New River (Figure 1.). Allegheny Mountain, whose crest forms the border with Virginia, defines the eastern boundary of the landscape, with a series of parallel shale and sandstone ridges running west to the karst region. In the karst region, the presence of surface water is limited due to numerous sinking streams. The Greenbrier River and its major tributaries to its east are the main surface streams. The Greenbrier River is the longest undammed river in the Central Appalachian Mountains. Elevations are generally moderate but rise to over 4,000 feet at higher summits. The Greenbrier Valley is in a rain shadow and has lower precipitation than most portions of West Virginia. The karst region was originally forested by deciduous forests interspersed with limestone glades, which have been largely displaced by farmland with scattered woodlots and towns such as Lewisburg and Union. The shale and sandstone ridges remain largely forested, especially on public land, with small farms and communities in some valley areas. Some of the most extensive intact forest blocks (primarily Dry-Mesic Oak) in the Central Appalachians ecoregion occur in this eastern portion, where the largest landowner is the US Forest Service. Most private forestland exists as small to medium-sized, non-industrial holdings. A few large, corporate-owned tracts exist in the vicinity of White Sulphur Springs. Residential development is expanding around Lewisburg and second home development is expanding along the Greenbrier River and locally elsewhere.

Figure 1. Greenbrier Conservation Focus Area, West Virginia.



How the Plan is Organized

This Plan has the following hierarchical structure:

Conservation Goals – What are we trying to achieve overall?

Communication Goals – What are we trying to achieve with the communication effort?

Objectives – Specific things we want to accomplish in order to achieve the goals.

Metrics – Things we measure to see if we achieved the objectives.

Strategies/Actions/Tasks – Nested layers of actions to be completed.

Conservation Goals

The following conservation goals are the ultimate or overarching goals that we hope to achieve by and through successful implementation of this communication strategy. *Communication goals and objectives may only indirectly impact these overarching goals, but it is important to keep the big picture always in our minds as we communicate with target audiences.*

1. Increase amount of forest management conducted on private lands in the focus area.
2. Achieve the stated acreage goals for habitat:

Cerulean Warbler (FY 2015-2020): 12,500 acres (includes WV, PA, and MD)

Golden-winged Warbler (FY 2017-2021): 1,925 acres in WV

As of January 2019, West Virginia has enrolled contracts for:

1,600 acres for CERW

600 acres for GWWA

Communication Goals

Following are the specific goals of the communication effort:

1. **Increase the number of private landowners who seek agency assistance in managing their forestlands.**

[This goal is all about getting landowners interested enough to “look into” the agency programs. It’s about getting possible program participants “into the hopper.”]

2. **Increase the number of acres enrolled in GWWA and CERW programs.**

[This goal is about making the sale—moving a landowner from “looking into” a program to signing a contract.]

Communication Objectives

Following are the objectives to be accomplished to achieve each of the communications goals. Immediately following each objective statement is a *Metric*, (the specific thing that we will measure to determine whether or how well the objective is achieved), followed by nested strategies/actions needed to accomplish the objective.

1. Goal: Increase the number of private landowners who seek agency assistance in managing their forestlands.

Objectives:

- 1.1. Compile lists of private landowners in the focus area we can contact for potential participation. (May require non-disclosure agreements, or perhaps the groups will send information out on our behalf).

Metric: No specific metric. Did we get enough lists to feed our outreach efforts?

Strategies/Actions:

- 1.1.1. Outreach Forester to work with partners to mine program databases.
 - 1.1.1.1. Participants in West Virginia Forest Stewardship Program (Geographic Information Systems layer from Division of Forestry).
 - 1.1.1.2. NRCS—program databases.
 - 1.1.1.3. National Wild Turkey Federation.
 - 1.1.1.4. American Forest Foundation (tax role data).
 - 1.1.1.5. Ruffed Grouse Society.
 - 1.1.1.6. West Virginia University Extension/Master Gardener groups.
 - 1.1.1.7. Hunting Clubs, Birding Clubs.
 - 1.1.1.8. West Virginia Department of Agriculture (Ag land protection?).
 - 1.1.1.9. West Virginia Conservation Agency.
 - 1.1.1.10. Woodland Owners Association.
 - 1.1.1.11. Tree Farm System—inspectors and participants.
 - 1.1.1.12. Association of Consulting Foresters.
 - 1.1.1.13. The Nature Conservancy (landowner targets in the focus area)?
 - 1.1.1.14. US Fish and Wildlife Service Partners Program.
 - 1.1.1.15. Wildlife Management Institute (list of landowners they have worked with).
 - 1.1.1.16. West Virginia Land Trust and other land trusts.
 - 1.1.1.17. Ruritan clubs/other civic organizations.
 - 1.1.1.18. Watershed groups-Greenbrier Watershed Association.
 - 1.1.1.19. Cave and karst groups.
 - 1.1.1.20. Local conservation non-governmental organizations (e.g., West Virginia Highlands Conservancy).
- 1.1.2. Consider developing a centralized database (that is sharable among/between agencies) to house information about target landowners.
 - 1.1.2.1. Consider using the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI) “Tracker” tool for this purpose. [The group decided that the WMI database has more data than currently needed for most of these projects. The database is

- sharable between agencies and non-agencies, which may be the only advantage.]
- 1.1.2.2. The American Bird Conservancy (ABC) may have an agreement for sharing personal information. Jesse Reese is following up with Todd Fearer (emailed 5-2-19) to find out whether outreach forester will have access to NRCS personal identification information.
 - 1.1.3. Use large intact forest block GIS layer and Digital Courthouse to identify large landowners and hunt clubs.
 - 1.1.4. Use GIS/tax records to identify landowners adjacent to known sites of occurrence/enrollment and encourage/facilitate word-of-mouth networking between existing enrollees and their neighbors.
- 1.2. Make *personal* contacts with 200 selected landowners each year statewide to encourage them to reach out to agencies for technical and/or financial assistance. Give priority to those who own parcels of land that meet optimal program criteria (see *Target Audiences* below for criteria). These landowners would be the highest priority for contact.
- Metric:** Number of personal contacts with priority landowners per year. Also, we should track the number of hours spent on specific outreach efforts so we can document return on investment and relative value of outreach efforts. All practitioners should report their hourly investment numbers to Outreach Forester annually.

Strategies/Actions:

- 1.2.1. Personal emails.
- 1.2.2. Personal phone calls.
- 1.2.3. Direct mailings (may require some purchased mailing lists).
- 1.2.4. Initial site visits by Outreach Forester (but recognize he/she may not have the technical expertise to answer some of their specific questions).
- 1.2.5. Outreach Forester maintains Facebook page. Messages will come through that page from landowners. (This is not intended to be two-way communications with broader publics.)
 - 1.2.5.1. Outreach Forester should consider discussing with Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA) coordinator on how much effort this takes, and possibly getting some training on protocol.
 - 1.2.5.2. Need to develop a promotion strategy for the Facebook page.
- 1.2.6. Develop/customize information/materials for use in each contact. Use Tools for Effective Landowner Engagement (TELE) to customize material.
- 1.2.7. Host or attend field events and workshops. Demonstration areas.
- 1.2.8. Conduct events at state wildlife management area demonstration areas.
- 1.2.9. Develop centralized database (that is sharable among/between agencies) to house information about target landowners. There appear to be two options for doing this:
 - 1.2.9.1. Work with existing databases (contingent upon the sharing agreement)
 - 1.2.9.2. Develop a new database that meets the needs [Consider using WMI's "Tracker" tool for this purpose. Need to identify what info we want to collect from people who contact us.]
 - 1.2.9.3. Clearly define roles and contact info for all parties.

- 1.3. Make contact with targeted landowners by attending 7-10 existing face-to-face opportunities that landowners are already attending. [Outreach Forester should develop this list and a calendar of events. Need to triage the list to identify meetings that have greatest chances of success.]
Metric: Number of existing landowner meetings attended.
- 1.3.1. West Virginia University (WVU) Extension local dinner meetings. [There are 1-2 annually in Greenbrier Valley.]
- 1.3.2. American Tree Farm regional meetings. [There is one annual meeting in Summersville; people from Greenbrier Valley attend it.]
- 1.3.3. NRCS local work group meetings. [There are 3-4 annually in Greenbrier Valley.]
- 1.3.4. Other similar meetings that the partner biologists think are good opportunities. (This could include hunt clubs, fishing clubs, church functions, bird clubs, conservation nonprofits, etc.).
- 1.4. Contact additional private landowners through less selective means (articles, mass media, etc.).
Metric: This objective won't have a specific metric because it could vary tremendously depending on the outreach method used. But it will be very important for the Outreach Forester to ask these contacts how they first heard about the program. This will provide an index to the relative value of various non-selective outreach methods.

Strategies/Actions:

- 1.4.1. Print articles. Use and effectiveness varies widely depending on the medium. For example, the *Wonderful West Virginia* article generated a LOT of interest, but much of it was outside the focus area. Is that okay? Do we want more of that?
- 1.4.2. Social media. Haven't had a lot of response from social media in general, although the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Facebook page did well.
- 1.4.3. Radio [very little response previously.] Need to focus very locally.
- 1.4.4. TV spots [very little response previously.]
- 1.4.5. Web page – possibility of adding a page to the WV DNR website that provides more/better/more specific information on the programs available. Maybe host this page on NWTF or ABC (or both?), to appeal to specific types of audiences.
- 1.4.6. Newspaper articles.
 [There is a lot of room for expansion in the section above to other audiences. The Outreach Forester will be the lead.]
- 1.5. Work with NRCS offices, encouraging them to help spread the word to landowners. Aim for ~30 landowner references/year.
Metric: Number of landowners referred to partner biologists.

Strategies/Actions:

- 1.5.1. Host a personal meeting with each of the three NRCS field offices within Greenbrier CFA, emphasizing the role of NRCS field office staff in meeting goals of the State Wildlife Action Plan. (This may be a joint task for the Outreach Forester and WV DNR).

- 1.5.2. Host a workshop with NRCS field offices to provide more details into the how and why of habitat management for priority bird species.
 - 1.5.2.1. Promote habitat benefits to all wildlife.
 - 1.5.2.2. Consider providing continuing education credits. [NRCS has a new system called Job Approval Authority (JAA). This training could be part of achieving JAA.]
 - 1.5.2.3. Consider making it broader than just NRCS (e.g., DNR, DOF, Extension).

2. Goal: Increase the amount of GWWA and CERW habitat on the ground.

Objectives:

- 2.1. Convince 75 landowners per year to contact an agency or organization for assistance.
 - Metric:** Number of landowners who seek assistance (Partner biologists keep a list).

Strategies/Actions:

- 2.1.1. Targeted direct mailings. This has been the most efficient and effective method to date. In previous experience, the Division of Forestry list had the highest response rate (~12%). Also sent to NRCS program participant list and hunt club list. Consider doing more of these, even to audiences you have already contacted (multiple impressions usually are needed, even for an interested party). Spread them out over time to spread out the response. [Consider: how frequently do you send? What messages/images do you use? Have you tested response?]
 - 2.1.2. “Maple Syrup Approach.” How and where does the maple syrup belt overlap with the GWWA/CERW target audiences and priority habitats? Are there additional opportunities for implementation?
- 2.2. Conduct 150 personal meetings/site visits between landowners and assistance providers per year.
 - Metric:** Number of meetings conducted. (Partner biologists keep a list).

Strategies/Actions:

- 2.2.1. Face-to-face contacts. Meetings, field days, and other events where professional staff can get face-to-face with target landowners have proved very effective. Meetings work best when you can get several professionals together—especially foresters or others who already have credibility with landowners. New demonstration areas should help a lot.
- 2.2.2. Create a Landowner Network—a registry of small woodland owners who are engaged in young forest management and willing to be champions for it. Encourage/empower them to contact their friends and neighbors.
 - 2.2.2.1. Create “Ask me about my young forests” business cards and provide them to landowners.
 - 2.2.2.2. Create virtual tours/demos/testimonials using willing landowners from the network. Post on website, YouTube, DVDs).
- 2.2.3. Create more “leave-behind” print materials that appeal to a variety of landowner interests. (Use TELE information to develop effective materials).

- 2.2.3.1. Compile and deliver basic information about benefits of young forest management to multiple different audiences/interests (hunters, birders, “land health” community, etc.) and how a landowner can implement.
 - 2.2.3.2. Laminated “before and after” photos in different situations (forest, pasture, etc.) to show landowners on site.
 - 2.2.3.3. Laminated photos of various kinds of wildlife (CERW, GWWA, and others) that benefit from treatments.
 - 2.2.4. Hire an additional GWWA biologist to handle the increased volume of applications that will result from increased outreach.
- 2.3. Enroll 750 acres of land in CERW program and 150 acres of land in GWWA program per year. [Note: These are statewide acreage goals].
Metric: Number of acres enrolled in each program per year.

Strategies/Actions:

- 2.3.1. Develop instructions for helping landowners know what to do after signing a contract. Create a 1-pager to help people through it. Provide lists of contractors, nurseries, etc.
- 2.3.2. Work with partners (e.g., NWTf) to offer incentives for sign-ups.

Target Audiences

The primary target audiences for this communication strategy include:

1. [For GWWA]: Private landowners in the Greater Greenbrier Focus Area of West Virginia who own more than 10 acres. Preference given to each of the following habitat parameters:
 - a. Property located < 5 miles from known breeding populations and < 1 mile from other early successional patches (e.g., timber harvests, old fields);
 - b. > 60% (preferably > 70%) deciduous forest cover within a 1-1.5-mile radius of the site, preferably close to other early successional patches;
 - c. > 2,000 ft elevation;
 - d. limited co-occurrence with Blue-winged Warbler.
2. [For CERW]: Private landowners in the Greater Greenbrier Focus Area of West Virginia who own more than 10 forested acres (those ten acres must be contiguous with 60 forested acres, but the landowner does not have to own all of it). Preference given to each of the following habitat parameters:
 - a. Forested regions with greater than 70 percent forest cover.
 - b. Predominance of white oak, chestnut oak, hickories, sugar maple and cucumber magnolia.
 - c. Dense understory vegetation (currently present or ability to create).
3. Agencies and organizations in the Greater Greenbrier Focus Area of West Virginia that have direct contact with forested landowners.

Note on Audiences: Private landowners in the Greenbrier Valley seem to fall into two general categories—people whose families have been in the area for multiple generations (tend to be farmers) and people who are “new” to the area (tend to be hobby farmers, second home owners, hunters, retirees, etc.). The messages and mechanisms needed to effectively approach these two types of people may be very different.

Key Messages

Getting small woodland owners to adopt young forest management is a big challenge. Most bought their land for beauty/scenery, and there usually is no way to convince them that a clearcut is as pleasing to the eye as mature woodland. Messaging will need to focus on the other benefits provided by young forest management.

The following should serve as general guidance. Messages should include these elements (guidelines are numbered for ease of reference; they do not necessarily indicate priority order):

1. Young forest management conserves wildlife and nature for future generations. [This was a strong motivator for most landowners].
2. Young forest habitat contains high plant and animal diversity. [Landowners want to contribute to healthy ecosystems].
3. For hunting audience: We can give you bucks to cut your forest—which will lead to other bucks that live in your forest.
4. Cutting trees can provide income. [This won't matter to some landowners but may be important to others].
5. Young forest management may be ugly to you (for a short time), but it's beautiful to a host of important wildlife and plants. [Address the potential negative right up front and jump to ecological benefits].
6. The cutting of a woodland and the subsequent regeneration is a neat and fascinating process to watch. [It can be a real challenge to communicate this to landowners].
7. Focus on species of local or special interest to engage audiences — some landowners will care much more about creating good deer hunting habitat than they do about warbler conservation (and vice-versa).
8. Messages should use this wording:
 - a. “Young forests”— focus group participants liked this wording; it invokes a sense of a healthy, vigorous ecosystem
 - b. “A diversity of wildlife requires a diversity of habitats”— this was the top-rated message as identified by focus group participants

9. Messages should NOT use this wording:
 - a. “Early successional”—most people do not understand what this term means
 - b. “Shrub” or “Scrub”—both these terms had negative connotations for most focus group participants
 - c. Jargon, such as SGCN, SWAP, etc. Nothing makes people lose interest in a message faster than seeing an acronym they don’t recognize. It tells them that they are not the intended target audience, so they don’t need to pay attention.
10. Emphasize that active forest management can enhance forest health, promote the growth of valuable timber species, promote regeneration of oaks and other shade-intolerant species, and promote native species over invasive woody plants. (Some landowners are not motivated by wildlife but rather want to take care of their woodlot for its own sake and/or for the value of future timber.)
11. Some landowners have concerns about exotic plant invasions following forest management, (stiltgrass, etc.). We should have messaging to respond to this.

Guiding Principles

The following guiding principles should be considered during the planning and implementation of all communication efforts. They are drawn from project interviews, landowner survey results in the Northeast and from communications theory. The list is numbered for ease of discussion—the numbers do not indicate priority order.

1. Communication efforts should feature broad groupings of animals and plants that rely on young forests—NOT on CERW, GWWA or any other single species. Support for warbler conservation alone probably is not enough to achieve habitat goals. Support for other plants and animals of young forest habitats can assist tremendously (e.g., animals that are hunted—deer, turkeys, etc.).
2. The messages you use *really* depend on your audience when you are face-to-face. You have to be sensitive to this. For instance, increasing the deer population may be positive for some landowners, but negative for others.
3. Communication efforts should focus on the fact that young forest habitat is necessary for the survival of a host of declining species of wildlife and plants, and active forest management can enhance forest health, promote growth of valuable timber species, promote regeneration of oaks and other shade-intolerant species, and promote native species over invasive woody plants. Surveys show that next to beauty/scenery, the highest-rated reason for owning woodland property for most landowners was protecting nature. A simple description of young forest ecology will be compelling for many landowners.

4. Many private woodland owners have negative perceptions about how early successional forest management (especially clear cutting) will make the land look. Most bought their land for beauty or scenery, and they are concerned that heavy cutting will create an eyesore. It will be important to communicate to them the management options (techniques, spacing, timing) that will address concerns.
5. Active communications efforts to encourage private landowners to establish and maintain young forests on their lands must be conducted forever. Young forests are always growing into old forests, and it will require continual effort to communicate the benefits of young forest management to landowners and their heirs.
6. Many woodland landowners have harvested trees on their property—at least for firewood. This suggests that they are not opposed to harvest per se; however, asking them to implement a clear cut is very different from asking them to cut some firewood or have a selective cut. They will need to understand how early successional management can fit with their other objectives.
7. For many woodland owners, financial return is not a primary motivating factor for owning their lands. However, the financial implications of implementing young forest management (lack of sufficient return, poor timing of return, etc.) might be an obstacle to them changing the way they view this management.
8. Many woodland landowners do not “speak the language” of natural resources conservation. Many have limited or erroneous understanding of even the most basic ecological concepts — not to mention forest management techniques and programs. It is critical that the conservation community begin with very basic, nontechnical, “non-jargon” approaches to communicate the benefits of early successional management with this audience.
9. Focus on making the treatments more pleasing to landowners.
“Feather” the edges (no hard, discrete lines between cut and forest).
Demonstration forests that show landowners the before and after places (or pictures).
Visualizations are important. Have pictures in hand (or on a website). Arrange opportunities for landowners to talk to their peers who have gone through this process.
10. Call it an “overstory removal” instead of a “clearcut.” In most cases, a shelterwood or other cut that leaves residual trees is preferable to a pure clearcut, anyway.

Resources

Following is a list of selected resources available for helping communicate with landowners about habitat management. The Outreach Forester will be responsible for developing a dedicated web page to house these and other materials. Partner Biologists and the Outreach Forester will share these resources selectively with landowners and field office staff at their discretion.

General Communication Guidance

- The Language of Conservation (The Nature Conservancy)
- Key Words and Communication Guidance (Metz & Weigel 2013)
- Clean Air and Water, Human Health, and Economic Benefits go Hand-in-Hand with Bird Conservation (NABCI)

Working with Private Landowners

- Determinants of Private Forest Management Decisions (Joshi & Arano 2009)
- Motivating Woodland Owners to Take Action (SFFI)
- Reaching Woodland Owners with Messages that Resonate (SFFI)
- Multiple publications from Ashley Dayer

Golden-winged Warbler Habitat Management Resources (from GWWA Working Group)

- GWWA Habitat on Grazed Forestland and Montane Pastures in the Appalachians
- Golden-winged Warbler Habitats in the Appalachian Region

Cerulean Warbler Habitat Management Resources

- CW Management Guidelines (Wood et al., 2013)
- Foresters Guide for CW (AMJV 2014)

Flyers, handouts, and other outreach material

- Cerulean Warbler Flyer (USDA NRCS)
- CERW One-page Fact Sheet (USDA NRCS)
- Golden Opportunities for WV Landowners (Golden-winged Warbler Initiative)
- GWWA Flyer (USDA NRCS)
- WV Cerulean Warbler Forest Enhancement Project Guidance (USDA NRCS)

General forest mgmt. resources (invasive species, etc.)

- Restoring Old-Growth Characteristics (UMass Extension)
- Forest Landowners Guide to Tree Planting Success (Penn State Extension)
- Young Forest Guide (WMI)
- Multi-flora Rose Control (Ohio State Extension)
- Non-native Species Control (WVU Extension)
 - Japanese Barberry
 - Tree-of-Heaven
 - Autumn Olive

West Virginia-specific resources

- West Virginia's Forests 2008 (NRS-61)
- WV Forest Stewardship Operating Plan and Guidance Document (WVDF)
- WV Songbird Forest management Guidelines (WV DNR)
- WV National Woodland Owner Survey Results (US Forest Service)
- Profile of Woodland Owners in Central Appalachia (SFFI)

Evaluation

Anyone who completes tasks as part of this communications effort should strive to measure the effectiveness of every action. The success of the communications strategy should be judged by how well the objectives were achieved. Every objective above has a metric associated with it. At predetermined, periodic intervals (quarterly, annually, etc.) someone should review the plan and assess how well the objectives are being achieved. This will provide guidance for where changes and mid-course corrections are needed.