

Salvaging Timber: Landowner Do's and Don'ts

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Hurricanes, wind storms, ice damage and other weather-related disasters can damage millions of dollars worth of timber. In one day, as much as 1 to 2 years' of annual harvest for the state of Texas can be blown down or damaged. On September 24, 2005, Hurricane Rita damaged approximately 533 million cubic feet of timber (about 6 percent of the total growing stock in Texas) worth about \$462 million. Private, non-industrial forest landowners hold some 65 percent of this forestland. As a result, private individuals and families, many of whom were relying on timber income to pay college tuition, supplement income during retirement, or pass on to the next generation, faced critical decisions on how to respond to this catastrophic event.

Weather-related disasters pose many challenges for landowners, foresters, timber buyers, loggers and mills. Two major challenges are 1) having an adequate logging workforce to salvage as much of the timber as possible, and 2) having the wet storage facilities to store the material before it is sent to the mill. The recovery period after a storm is very dynamic. New information becomes available almost daily, so landowners should check often with Texas Cooperative Extension and Texas Forest Service representatives for updates.

Here are some “Do’s” and “Don’ts” to help landowners make informed decisions about handling damaged timber.

DO – Get help from a qualified forester

A forester will help you make management decisions regarding your timber, such as whether or not to harvest (salvage) damaged timber. A forester can also help estimate the value of lost timber for tax purposes. See publication ER-038, “Selecting a Consulting Forester” (Texas Cooperative Extension).

DO – Get started promptly

Downed timber (particularly snapped trees) degrades in quality rapidly and loses considerable value in the first 60 to 90 days. Trees that are alive and still attached to the root ball may have some salvage value for up to 1 year.

DO – Focus on high-value forest products

Focus particularly on sawtimber, chip-n-saw, and other higher grade logs. These are most valuable to the forest landowner and should receive the most attention. Do not waste recovery efforts on pulpwood logs.

DO – Make a sale attractive

Do whatever is necessary to make a timber sale more attractive to potential buyers, if possible. This includes locating property lines or corners, having a good road system, and perhaps even offering a deer camp as a place for the logging crew to stay.

DO – Work with your neighbors

Consider collaborating with an adjoining landowner on a timber sale, particularly if both of you have small tracts of timber. If you have 20 acres and he has 15 acres, your combined 35 acres is more attractive to the logger as a single sale. Make sure you and your neighbor agree on how to split the proceeds, and request a copy of all gate receipts.

DO – Expect lower prices

Expect lower prices for salvaged timber than for comparable sales before the storm. This is a function of the higher logging costs, higher fuel prices, larger volume of available timber, and greater degree of uncertainty at the mill about log quality.

DON'T – Panic

Even if damage has been considerable, forests may still contain many undamaged and manageable trees. Disasters naturally thin forest stands. Trees that survive will grow rapidly because more resources (light, water, nutrients) are available to them. In several years, the damage will be hard to identify in many stands.

DON'T – Expect full timber value

Landowners will likely receive less income from storm-damaged timber products. With the high logging costs that result from extensive and dangerous chainsaw work, income from pulpwood may be small or zero.

DON'T – Harvest undamaged trees

Save these for when the market improves, and it will. Retain your undamaged timber to take advantage of the opportunity that will develop when the market turns around.

DON'T – Expect too much aesthetically

Do not expect your property to look like a park when the logging is finished. The salvage operation will improve the appearance of the stand, but it will not be pristine. However, in a short time, generally 2 to 5 years, it will look much better than it does now.

DON'T – Neglect tree health

You will likely see insect and health problems with your trees. Bark beetles may attack stressed pines the spring following a disaster. Be vigilant in monitoring the health of your forest.

DON'T – Burn yet

Do not burn any brush piles until the weather improves. Even though your area may have received several inches of rain during a storm, the fire danger may still be high, and burn bans may be in effect. One ember from a brush pile could ignite the large amount of fuel downed by a storm.

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