

## **Increased demand for contractors to complete conservation forestry jobs on West Virginia private lands**

*By Jane Capozzelli, Avian Partner Biologist, NRCS/WVDNR*

West Virginia landowners are looking to hire loggers or contractors for conservation forestry work. The demand is generated through several USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) programs that provide technical and financial assistance for landowners who want to manage their forests.

Landowners who participate in NRCS programs are encouraged to hire independent forestry contractors to help implement certain conservation practices. With financial assistance from NRCS, landowner's out-of-pocket costs are lowered and thus they are often able to hire independent contractors. Once the forestry work is completed, the contractor provides documentation and an invoice to the landowners who then provides the documentation or notification of completion invoice to NRCS for certification and reimbursement.

### **Another income stream for loggers and forestry contractors**

Typical jobs are thinnings and clearcuts that benefit forest health and wildlife habitat. The merchantable timber is not removed. In these projects, the financial assistance is a predetermined fixed amount based on the annual market rate for equipment, labor, materials, and mobilization. The financial assistance in 2022 ranged from \$98.41/ac for herbicide-only thinning to \$276.00/ac for chainsaw-only thinning. For clearcuts, the 2022 assistance was \$701.10/ac.

Looking at conservation thinnings in the last five years, the average landowner thinned 24 acres and received \$4,750 of financial assistance for the work. Jobs like these are another income stream for West Virginia loggers and forestry contractors.

Because NRCS is a federal agency, landowners (and by extension the contractors they hire) must follow the Endangered Species Act. To protect rare bats, tree felling is restricted to November 15 through March 31. Den trees – white oak, shagbark hickory, or trees with visible cavities – cannot be felled at any time. However, any tree may be deadened with herbicide at any time of year because it benefits bats. Requirements for other threatened and endangered species may arise. Typically, the trees to be cut or retained will be marked ahead of time by a biologist or forester.

A main challenge for contractors taking on NRCS work is cost-effectiveness. Individual contracts typically cover relatively small acreages and do not have merchantable timber. Successful forestry contractors will have to employ creative strategies such as combining NRCS projects with nearby commercial harvests, selling firewood, or working with several landowners within a community.

### **A good fit for a rainy-day**

The greatest demand for forestry contractors is in winter because landowners are required to protect endangered bats and other wildlife. Winter weather is generally a restricting factor on

commercial logging, so loggers may have downtime November 15 to March 31 when landowners are hiring.

Since the work is not a commercial timber sale, it is not necessary to be a West Virginia Certified Logger. However, a Commercial Applicator license from the West Virginia Department of Agriculture is required in most cases to apply herbicides for hire. Liability insurance is not provided by NRCS, so these details should be resolved between the landowner and contractor.

Interested loggers and contractors should contact their local NRCS Field Office to connect with landowners in their area. For more information about NRCS forestry assistance, contact Kyle Aldinger, Forestry Point of Contact at NRCS; Christopher Evans, NRCS Forester in northern West Virginia; or Carl Gower, NRCS Forester in southern West Virginia.

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Conservation thinning with herbicide. The job created habitat for rare songbirds and endangered bats. *Photo by Kyle Aldinger.*



Conservation thinning with chainsaw. The objective was to create bird habitat, specifically for cerulean warblers. *Photo by Kyle Aldinger.*



Completed conservation clearcut. The job created young forest habitat, much-needed to support West Virginia's wildlife. *Photo by Kyle Aldinger.*