

## **The Liquidators: “The Devil Made Me Do it!”**

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**I** offer my congratulations and support to SWOAM and others who have had the courage to rise before us, to speak out, and to demand action on liquidation harvesting. As I see it, liquidation consists of stripping and subdividing tracts of forest, often in places ill suited for housing or whatever other development may follow. There are other definitions. But confusion over definitions is no excuse to pretend the problem away.

The Maine Forest Service estimates 16,000-64,000 acres of land per year are stripped and resold each year. This is in addition to conversion to urban land uses. Many of these parcels are resold in a host of tiny pieces, often only 40 acres. The essence of liquidation is not the stripping it is the parcel fragmentation. Liquidators are creating lots that will again grow trees, but are not likely to be actively managed again. They are even less likely to support commercial wood crops. At this pace, we will watch an area equal to Baxter Park be deleted from availability for commercial wood production each decade. The fact that another buyer retrieves an occasional stripped tract, apparently for long-term management, is fine. But it hardly makes the problem go away.

Exploitive liquidation is like having termites -- in any one year, there is no problem. Nobody considers that an argument for inaction once their house is infested. Nor do they worry about counting exactly how many termites there are.

The worst of it is that liquidation has been institutionalized. Liquidators scour the landscape for properties of suitable size and situation to offer an immediate profit opportunity. A landowner planning to manage for sustained yield simply cannot compete with a liquidator. The continued and spreading privatization of the Maine forest, its recreational potential, and access for hunting, fishing, and walking is happening fast enough. We do not need to accelerate it by tolerating forest destruction motivated entirely by greed.

We hear that actions to restrain liquidation will have unintended consequences. This is true, but doing nothing will also have unintended consequences. I'd like to hear somebody explain exactly how it is that effectively deleting an area the size of Baxter State Park from the commercial timber supply each decade will improve the business climate for the logging infrastructure, for sawmills, and for paper mills. If somebody has the answer to this, they could use it right now in the Pacific Northwest.

Defenders of liquidation love to try and shift the blame. This reminds me of the TV character Geraldine, on Flip Wilson's Show -- "The Devil made me do it!" she would say. It is true that perverse public policies contribute to the liquidation problem. But it is unconvincing to finger the government as the sole cause of exploitation whose true cause is private greed.

Property tax reform comes up again and again. For decades we have debated this and found no solutions. Let's try a little thought experiment -- give all the forest landowners complete freedom from all property taxes. Does anybody believe that the annual acreage of forest stripped would change by as much as a single acre?

Most of us agree that liquidation is a complex problem with multiple contributing causes. Certainly, better information is needed and would help us measure the trends, understand causes, and debate solutions. Acting in haste to put the liquidators out of business is not necessary. Ending the practice is. If this requires suitably targeted regulations and taxes, so be it.

While we argue the contentious points, we should be building on the substantial areas of agreement and the constructive suggestions that are out there. Everybody agrees that there is an issue of availability and quality of management and that a variety of educational and other steps are needed. Most people agree that certain perverse aspects of land use policies should be addressed.

Does the future of the forest matter to Maine? Anyone saying that Liquidation is not a problem, or that we should do nothing -- is answering this question with a NO. They are saying, let's just blame the Devil and let the termites keep eating.