

Landowner Do's and Don'ts in Salvaging Timber Damaged from Hurricane Katrina

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Hurricane Katrina roared through Mississippi on August 29, 2005, damaging about \$1.3 Billion worth of timber. In one day, between one to two years of annual harvest for the state of Mississippi was down or damaged. Most of the heavily damaged counties are in southeast Mississippi, and private, non-industrial forest landowners hold some 65% 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 are faced with critical decisions on how to respond to this catastrophic event.

Katrina poses a challenge for landowners, foresters, timber buyers, loggers, and mills. Individuals and companies have invested considerable time in assessing the damage and developing the ability respond to an almost unprecedented amount of damaged timber. Two major challenges are 1) an adequate logging workforce to salvage as much of the timber as possible, and 2) wet storage facilities to store the material prior to sending to the mill. As with the entire Katrina recovery effort, this has been a very “dynamic” situation, with new information available almost daily.

Below are some “Do’s” and “Don’ts” for landowners needing to make informed decisions on handling hurricane damaged timber:

1. DO get help from a registered forester. He or she will help you make management decisions regarding your timber. These decisions include whether or not to harvest (salvage) damaged timber, as well as provide an assessment of the amount of damage for tax purposes.
2. DO get started promptly. Timber left down, particularly snapped trees, degrades in quality rapidly and loses considerable value in the first 60-90 days. Trees still attached to the root ball will last till next spring or early summer before losing value.
3. DO focus on high value forest products, particularly sawtimber, plylogs, and chip-n-saw. These are more valuable to the forest landowner, and should receive the most attention.
4. DO what you can to make a timber sale more attractive, 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. Housing in south Mississippi is currently in short supply, so this would be helpful.
5. DO consider going 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.

6. DO consider putting your high value products in wet storage as soon as possible. There are wet storage areas being made available, and some mills will accept wood stored in ponds due to the limited amount of wet storage facilities compared to the large amount of down and damaged timber.
7. DO expect somewhat depressed prices for salvaged timber compared to comparable sales of 2 months ago. This is a function of the higher logging costs, higher fuel prices, and greater degree of uncertainty at the mill about log quality.

In addition to the above, there are some “Don’ts” that landowners need to consider:

1. DON’T panic or over-react to this damage. Yes, damage has been considerable, but our eyes are attracted to the broken or blown over trees. In most forests there are still a lot of undamaged or manageable trees. Katrina has naturally thinned them. Those that remain will grow more rapidly due to more resources (light, water, nutrients) now available to them. In several years, it will be hard to locate damage in some stands.
2. DON’T expect significant income from pulpwood. With the high logging costs necessary due to extensive and dangerous chainsaw work, landowner income from pulpwood is small.
3. DON’T harvest undamaged trees. Save these for when the market improves, and it will. The Gulf Coast, New Orleans, and Katrina-affected communities will be rebuilt. This will increase demand for forest products in this area. Retain your undamaged timber to take advantage of the opportunity that will develop when the market turns around.
4. DON’T expect your property to look like a park when the logging is finished. It didn’t look that way when Katrina left, and logging equipment will cause some disturbance. However, in a small amount of time, generally 1-2 years, it will look much better than it does now.
5. DON’T forget about insect and health issues with your trees. With pines, bark beetles may come into stressed trees the spring following the hurricane. Although this was generally not a problem with other hurricanes, the lack of rainfall may increase stress and pose a problem next spring.
6. DON’T burn any brush piles until the weather improves. We have not had significant rainfall since Katrina, the fire danger is high, and burn bans exist in many counties. One ember from a brush pile could ignite the heavy fuel downed by Katrina, and Mississippi Forestry Commission equipment is not designed for the heavy fuels we currently have.