Woodland owners own forestland for a variety of reasons, many of which focus on good land stewardship. However, relatively few landowners recognize they can better realize goals and keep their forests healthy by managing their forestlands with the help of a professional forester. Healthy forests do not just happen; planning and work are essential components in creating a healthy, productive forest.

A – ACTION PLAN

Now that you have the land, you should begin thinking about your forests goals or objectives. Do you want to manage the land for timber and/or wildlife? How about protecting it from diseases and wildfire? Regardless of your objectives, you will need a plan which will address how to achieve your goals. This type of plan is the road map for your forest. It tells you the steps to take to achieve your forest objectives.

Plans for forests are referred to as management plans or forest management plans, and there are several ways to obtain them. Arkansas Registered Foresters who practice private consulting (consultant foresters) offer plans for a fee. Free plans are available through the Forest Stewardship Program administered by the Arkansas Department of Agriculture-Forestry Division. Additionally, the Natural Resources Conservation Service offers cost-share programs that can provide landowners with management plans, called Conservation Action Plans.

B – BOUNDARY LINES

A forester will need to know where the boundaries are on your land before completing a forest management plan. Boundary lines are basically the perimeter of the land you own. Surveyors mark boundary corners. It is important to permanently mark boundary lines on your tract after a survey. Sometimes landowners can request boundary lines to be painted when securing a survey of their land. Marking boundaries can help make forest management activities possible and reduce the potential for accidental timber theft from adjacent landowners. Typically, boundary lines should be re-painted every five to seven years. Landowners should be aware of the difference between “posted” and boundary line painting and refer to Arkansas Code Annotated §18-11-403 before painting anything on your property.
When you have forestland, specifically a working forest which will provide income, it is recommended you contact your accountant and set up a proper accounting system for your land. This needs to be completed soon after you acquire the land. Your forest management plan will help determine your purpose for holding timber (personal, investment, or business) and, therefore, how revenues and expenditures are treated.

Cost-Share Programs
Healthy forests provide benefits not only to landowners but to society in general. Forests help purify water, maintain soil stability, provide habitat for wildlife and shade for aquatic species, to name just a few benefits. Due to these societal benefits, there are many cost-share programs available to forest landowners that encourage good forest management. You can contact your forester, local ADA-Forestry Division County Forester, or local NRCS office for details about the various programs available. Demand is very high for these programs, and the funds are limited. Some practices available for cost-share include site preparation, tree planting, control burning, forest stand improvement, firebreaks, wildlife habitat improvement, and Best Management Practices.

Liabilities
Perils are a natural part of life. It is essential to carefully evaluate your newly acquired forestland for any hazards on the land. A forester can help you look for risks inherent to trees, such as wildfire, disease, or invasive species. You or a professional can scout the land to look for other hazards that might exist. Some hazards that foresters have found on forestlands include old structures, open wells and evidence of trespass. Risks need to be identified and addressed prior to any prescribed management activities. In addition, you might find areas of special interest, such as old cemeteries or sites with Native American artifacts. These areas will need to be identified as well and thought given as to how to best preserve these areas.

Summary
Woodland owners have the opportunity to take an active role in achieving desired objectives on their lands. Even if objectives are minimal and non-economic in nature, forest management plans can help landowners keep their forests healthy. Landowners should strongly consider marking their property boundaries to minimize risk, creating a forest management plan to document methods to achieve their objectives, perform periodic land inspections to identify any forest health risk and evaluate current forest activities.

Organizations like the Arkansas Forestry Association and the American Tree Farm System provide numerous ways for landowners to further their forest knowledge and networking opportunities to converse with other Arkansas woodland owners, as well as foresters in the state.