Timber Theft: A Serious Problem … How You Can Help

Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service
TIMBER THEFT

A SERIOUS PROBLEM...
HOW YOU CAN HELP

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Who are the Victims of Timber Thieves?

1. The most obvious victim is the person whose timber is stolen. Timber theft usually results in a complete loss to the owner. The “fair market value” of the stolen timber CANNOT be written off against the federal income tax. The deductible loss is limited to the cost basis of the timber.

2. However, we are all victims. Timber theft discourages landowners from growing timber. This reduces timber supply and drives up the price of the many products produced from wood. Foresters report numerous cases of landowners who have sold their timber to get their money out before it is stolen. Timber should be sold when it provides the maximum benefit to the landowner, not when the owner is scared into it by thieves.
Why is Timber Theft a Serious Problem?

1. The value of timber, especially "high-value" trees, has increased dramatically.

   Figure 1 shows that the value of veneer quality black walnut logs has increased over 730 per cent in the last 20 years. And, Figure 2 shows that the value of veneer quality white oak logs has increased over 300 per cent in the last 20 years.

   These rapid increases in value have resulted from increased demand for veneer quality timber by local and foreign veneer manufacturers and a limited supply of veneer-quality trees.

2. Many landowners are not aware that they own very valuable trees. These are generally black walnut or oak trees which contain large logs (18 inches or more in diameter and 8 feet or longer) with few surface defects.

   *Percentage change in price of prime veneer logs, 18 to 23 inches in diameter, delivered to a mill.
3. Although most of the thievery occurs in isolated areas, thieves have been known to take trees from the front lawns of homes. The absence of roads is not a deterrent. Thieves will cut fences and drive great distances across fields to reach their target.

4. Thieves are generally well equipped. They use chain saws modified with several mufflers and a truck with a boom loader. Although most thefts occur at night, thieves have been known to operate during daylight hours. Neighbors may see the thieves in operation but pay no attention because they think that it is a legitimate logging operation.

5. High-quality logs find a ready market. Thieves may haul logs hundreds of miles to sell them. Although members of the forest products industry usually check the source of the logs they buy, the logs may pass through several dealers before they reach the final processor. In addition, individual logs are hard to identify unless the real owner has taken the time to mark his trees.

6. Law enforcement officials report that most thefts are not discovered until several days after they occur. The logs have been sold and may be on their way to an exporter before an investigation can begin. Although the forest products industry has organized to assist the law enforcement officials, your help is also needed.
How Can You Help?

1. Locate and maintain a record of your valuable trees. The record should contain the information shown here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tree No.</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Diameter at 4.5 ft. above ground</th>
<th>Height to first large branch</th>
<th>Species</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>North pasture</td>
<td>10 inches</td>
<td>24 feet</td>
<td>Black Walnut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yard</td>
<td>32 inches</td>
<td>30 feet</td>
<td>White Oak</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition you should record any distinguishing characteristics of the bole of the tree. Better yet, stand a graduated pole beside the tree and take a picture of each side.

You can also mark your trees. If the appearance of the tree does not matter you should paint a stripe down one side of the tree. Start as high up as possible and paint all the way to the ground. Use a paint that will not wash off and make certain that it soaks into the cracks and crevices.

If appearance does matter you should mark your trees with phosphorescent paint. Use an artist’s brush to apply a unique identifying mark. Keep a record of the mark used. Phosphorescent paint can be procured from Natmar, Inc., 4026 Cherry Street, Cincinnati, OH 45223, telephone: (513) 541-3010. Ask for Fantom Foil Cream No. 4. Police agencies are equipped to read these marks.

2. Join your neighbors in a cooperative protection effort. This should include the following activities:

   a. Show your neighbors the location of your valuable trees and learn the location of their valuable trees.

   b. Keep each other posted. Tell them when you will be away. Take turns patrolling the portions of your properties which are not visible from your residences.

   c. Inform each other of upcoming timber sales. Any time you hear a chain saw check it out.

   d. Make certain that your property boundaries are clearly marked. Many timber “thefts” result from misunderstandings over the location of boundaries.
3. If a theft occurs you should:

a. Record the date, time and location of the activity. If you become aware of suspicious activity obtain as much evidence as you can.

i) Record the license numbers and descriptions of the trucks involved.

ii) If possible get a description of the individuals.

iii) Once you have obtained the best evidence available report the incident to the landowner and the State Police.

The best evidence to convict a thief is eyewitness testimony.

b. Report the theft to the State Police as soon as possible. Early detection is necessary to locate the logs and obtain the identity of the seller. The State Police will call upon a cooperating member of the Indiana Hardwood Lumbermen’s Association (IHLA) to assist in developing a description of the logs. It is possible to develop a description of the logs and physically match the log and stump even if the large end of the log has been cut off. This description and the circumstances of the theft will be phoned in to the Indiana Division of Forestry (317/633-6517). This information will be sent to all mills and log buyers who may be contacted by the thieves. This program has been established by the Indiana Hardwood Lumbermen’s Association, the Indiana Division of Forestry, the Indiana Farm Bureau and the Cooperative Extension Service of Purdue University, Indiana and all surrounding states are included.
Where Can You Obtain Further Information or On-the-Land Assistance?

Help in identifying and scientifically managing your valuable trees is available to all private woodland owners in the state of Indiana.

Educational programs and pamphlets are available from:

Cooperative Extension Service
Department of Forestry and Natural Resources
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana 47907

On-the-land technical assistance is available from:

Indiana Division of Forestry
Department of Natural Resources
613 State Office Building
Indianapolis, Indiana 46204

Professional consultant foresters are available for applying management practices in the forest, planting trees and appraising the value of trees growing or the value of those that have been damaged or stolen. A list of consultant foresters may be obtained from either the Cooperative Extension Service or the Indiana Division of Forestry.