Forest Management for Small Landowners

Surveying Corners & Property Lines

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Surveying Corners and Property Lines

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Introduction

If you own forest land or are in the process of purchasing land, you need to know where the property corners are located and have some kind of property line markings.

If you think the corners have been installed at some point in the past, you can check with your county's Auditor's office.

- Many counties have digitized their historical records, so you may be able to search online for the information rather than visiting their office.
- If you hire a surveyor:
    - Give him any maps and photos of the property that you have, and a copy of the property deed.
    - He will be able to research and find anything you don't provide.
- Historically the surveyors marked the property lines by blazing the trees on either side of the line. This is not done as much anymore, but when looking for your property line in the field, keep this in mind.

If some or all corners and lines need to be established, you will need to hire a Professional Land Surveyor (*PLS*) to do the work. When they are done with the job, they will record their work with the County Auditor's office so that is available to future landowners and other surveyors.

Why you need to know your exact property lines

- If you harvest your timber, you want to be sure you do not cut trees that belong to your neighbor. The penalty for harvesting timber that is not yours can be three times the cut tree(*s*) standing value.
- Conversely if your neighbor harvests their timber, you do not want them to take any of your trees as part of their operation.
- In addition to timber harvesting, there also can be issues with fence line location, neighbor's landscaping of your property, and or building a home or outbuilding on or over your property line!

Ask neighbors to share in the cost

Before you contract with a surveyor, contact the adjacent landowners to see if they will split the cost of setting a corner or running a property line. If they do, then it generally is understood that the surveyor's result will be accepted by both parties. However, they may not want to pay because of the cost or because they are happy the way it is!

Issues can often arise, especially if you are just purchasing the land and the neighbors have owned theirs for some time.

- Neighbors may claim their line is somewhere that does not match what you believe or have been told.
- Old fences and cutting lines are not necessarily on the correct line! If the previous landowner had been using a fence line as the property line for a long time, then you may have difficulty changing to the correct property line.
- In many cases "line trees" are left during logging to avoid trespass across an unknown line. Just because your neighbor left trees along the line does not mean you now own them. If the property line goes through the middle of the tree, it is typical to take every other tree as your tree. If the property line goes through the edge of the tree, then the landowner that owns the majority of the tree owns the tree.

  If you suspect or know of property line issues, then tell your surveyor before proceeding with a survey. There may be things you or the surveyor can do that will help your case.

Finding a Surveyor

You need to find a surveyor who knows and understands forest land surveying as compared to residential surveying. The principles are the same but there are some techniques in finding corners and moving through the woods that usually are not important inside city boundaries. If a surveyor does both types on a regular basis, then you should consider them. However, many residential surveyors do not want to go out and fight the brush like a forest surveyor does as part of their everyday work.

- Other forest landowners can be a good source of recommendations.
- If you don't know anyone to ask, then contact timber companies in the area and ask for someone who handles their property lines. Even if they do it internally, they will know who is in the business in your area.

If you are installing new property corners and property lines, you need a Professional Land Surveyor. They are licensed by the state and held to a rigid set of standards. If your property corners or line work ever comes into question for accuracy and it ends up in court, you will likely lose the case if you used someone without the proper license.

Marking the corners and property lines

Surveyors mark corners in a standardized manner, with a piece of rebar driven into the ground and plastic cap that identifies the surveyor. In a western Washington forest, this will become invisible due to vegetative growth in a very short time,

When surveyors mark property lines, they use wooden stakes and ribbon which will disappear within a few years. You will want the corners and lines more permanently marked. You can either pay the surveyor to do it or do it yourself soon after the line is established. Various methods of marking can be used.

Fence post with white PVC as property line marker and a "line tree" behind the PVC pipe.

- A piece of rebar or a metal fence post can be driven into the ground on the property line and a 3- to 5-foot length of white 1", 2" or 3" PVC pipe placed over the rebar. The white PVC gives much better visibility than a post that will be rusty after a few years.
- Others use 4- to 6-inch wide, curved fiberglass stakes that are used on County and State highways.
- I recommend marking your lines every 50 feet if you have lots of neighbors. It will help to have close markings when your neighbor does anything near the line, and if you wait 10 years to do any maintenance, you can get lost between markings 100 feet apart.

Property line maintenance

On the west side of Washington, the vegetation grows so fast that within 10-20 years all signs of a previous survey may have vanished. If you waited too long (or just purchased the property) here are some recommendations for refreshing the lines.

- If you can't find any line markings, then start with a corner. Once it is found, brush it out and refresh the paint and ribbon (ribbon will only last about 5 years). You don't want to damage or destroy your corner markings in the process, but you can go a few feet on either side of it (on your lines) and place a rebar with plastic post or a fence post. Two such posts within a few feet of the corner will help the next time!
- Once the corner is in, using a compass and a 200-foot plastic measuring tape (*look for the wind-up kind in your local hardware store*), brush out a line to the first marker. If that is 100 feet, then when you get to 100 feet, stop and start looking around. Depending on how good of a job you did 20 years ago, you should be able to find something.
- Once you have found it, then brush out that 100-foot distance so you can string your plastic tape between the corner and the line marker you just found. You then can use the plastic measuring tape as a guide to keep you "online" for the next marker. If this does not work, then repeat the above steps.

- Hopefully you will not need to do this much work on all the line markers, but in some cases, it may be a long and difficult task. If you do have to do a lot of work to reestablish your line, then consider returning sooner next time.
- If you did not mark your line, or just can't find enough former markers, then consider calling on your surveyor and ask them to re-flag the line.
- In the long run, it will be much easier and cheaper to do a proper job of property line maintenance!

If you walk your property line every few years with a chain saw in hand, it will be much easier than waiting 20 years or until you are ready to harvest. If you are in an area where development is occurring, you will be less likely to have property line issues if the joint line is well marked, especially if you have installed plastic tags telling your new neighbors how to contact you.

Moving corners or line markings

If your neighbor has corners marked and line locations flagged, under no circumstances should you move any of the markings to where you think they should be. Contact a surveyor to see what your options are to possibly make changes. The work of a previous survey is recorded with the county and you or your neighbor can get into more trouble than you want if you or they move any corner or line markings!

Property line signs

Clearly marking property lines with small plastic signs (4" x 4" is a good size) provides additional assurance that people understand the significance of those stakes in the ground. You can purchase generic "Property Line" signs from local companies or online, but personalized signs are better. J.L. Darling Co. is a Washington company that can make custom signs that include your tree farm name and a phone number below "Property Line". Wire these to your fence post or the plastic pipes, preferably in the direction that faces away from your property so your neighbor can read it from their side of the line. This is not required or absolutely necessary, but to me it makes sense and may help prevent problems with your neighbors

When you have a well-marked property line, you can feel comfortable knowing that all neighbors will know exactly where your and their line is, and it will help eliminate accidental trespass. Also, when it comes time to log up next to your property line you will not have to rush out and hire a surveyor who may or may not be available to mark your line.