

Selective Cutting: Good, bad, or...huh?

By Andy Shultz, MFS Landowner Outreach Forester

Selective Cutting. That's a good thing, right? It's what everybody wants for their woodlots, and what many loggers use to describe their work.

But what does "selective cutting" really mean? Many foresters consider it a euphemism for exploitive cutting, often used to describe high grading, liquidation harvests, or diameter limit cutting. It begs the question: Who is doing the selecting, and what criteria are they using?

Professional foresters are taught in school how to use a number of **silvicultural systems**, including the selection system, as a menu of alternatives for managing woodlands. Forestry professors are quick to point out that "**selective cutting**" is NOT a silvicultural system. Unlike *selective* cutting or harvesting, *selection* implies a decision made on the basis of **silviculture**, which the Society of American Foresters (SAF) defines as: "the art and science of controlling the establishment, growth, composition, health, and quality of forests and woodlands to meet the diverse needs and values of landowners and society on a sustainable basis."

However, out in the wider world, there is a lot of confusion between "selection" silviculture and "selective" cutting. So, how do we proceed?

One thing is clear: woodland owners in Maine like the sound of "selective cutting," and they like it a lot. Respondents to the Kennebec Woodlands Owners Survey, a 2011 poll of nearly 400 woodland owners in Kennebec County, used the term dozens of times in answers to open-ended questions, and in an overwhelmingly positive way, as in "I want to enhance my land by doing selective cutting."

It may be simply that the word contrasts favorably with "clearcutting", which is a topic for a whole other essay. Or perhaps there is a perception that **good** decisions are being made about what trees to cut. So let's work with that and take the term to the next level:

Selective logging is good when:

- ✓ Landowners understand their property's future potential and how harvesting in the near term helps them reach that potential in the longer term.
- ✓ Harvesting achieves landowners' silvicultural goals, as outlined in a management plan or harvest plan, ideally developed by or with advice from a licensed forester.
- ✓ Landowners "select" a forester and a skilled, professional logger who understand the landowners' desired results.
- ✓ The "selected" trees are all removed with a minimum of damage to the remaining stand and ground.
- ✓ Trees to be cut are "selected" with care, to meet the landowner's long term goals.

- ✓ The reasons and methods for “selecting” the trees to cut are well-understood by all parties.
- ✓ The term is clearly defined and understood by the people using it.

Language is an important part of a culture. It can be a barrier to understanding, however, when technical terms don't line up with common usage. As we work to foster a culture of conservation in Kennebec County and beyond, let's build on a commonly held belief that “selective cutting” is a positive undertaking and make sure that good results really do happen.

If you are already working with a licensed forester who knows your land and your goals as a landowner, you may have a good understanding of forestry terms.

If you are not working with a forester, contact the Maine Forest Service ([LINK](#)) for information about forest management planning, cost share programs and a list of licensed foresters. You can also contact a KWP partner for help in maintaining and improving your woodlands.

The bottom line – for “selective cutting” to really be a good thing, it's vital to know who's selecting the trees to be cut, and why.