

Clearcutting: Good or Bad?

By Anthony P. Quadro, Forester
Westmoreland Conservation District
Greensburg, PA 15601

There has been a lot of negative press lately regarding the practice of clearcutting. It can be a very emotional issue because of perceptions about environmental damage. But many of these perceptions are not accurate.

The principal objective of clearcutting is to regenerate the forest with healthier trees, not to harvest timber. Timber harvesting is a secondary objective. In a true clearcut, all of the trees greater than 2 inches in diameter are cut, as opposed to a commercial clearcut where only marketable trees are removed. Clearcutting is especially useful in regenerating species of trees whose seedlings cannot thrive in the shade of a forest understory. *Shade-intolerant* species such as black cherry need full sunlight for optimum development. Clearcutting actually mimics openings created naturally from tornadoes and fires.

Clearcutting does not cause soil erosion. Soil erosion is caused by poorly laid out road systems, whether or not the forest is clearcut or only partially cut. Clearcutting can be done without significant erosion or sedimentation if roads are pre-planned and built correctly by using accepted *Best Management Practices* to protect streams.

Logging companies do not clearcut just because it is the most economical way to harvest timber. In fact, many loggers dislike clearcutting because it forces them to spend time and money cutting trees they have no use for. Trees smaller than 10 inches in diameter are often stunted, poorly formed trees just as old as the larger trees. They are also likely to be genetically inferior specimens that have no chance of ever growing to a large size. It is obviously best not to leave them behind as residual trees taking up space in the next generation of the forest.

Clearcutting is ugly—at first. Yes, that's true, especially to the untrained eye. Diameter-limit

cutting, which is removing all trees over a selected diameter such as 14 inches (often called "select cutting"), leaves a lot of trees in the woods, and can look better than a clearcut, but it degrades the long term health of the forest because it does nothing to clear away the small, elderly, slow-growing "junk" trees.

Clearcuts can be beneficial to wildlife. New openings grow very quickly into small trees and berry- and seed-producing shrubs, which provide both food and shelter for wildlife. Clearcutting increases the biological diversity of the forest, which enhances the habitat for a variety of wildlife. Some species of wildlife actually thrive better in brushy thickets of seedlings and small saplings.

Clearcutting is not deforestation. Most of the time clearcuts regenerate initially into dense thickets with thousands of tree seedlings per acre, then gradually thin themselves out as the stronger trees show dominance and crowd out the weaker trees. Many of Pennsylvania's hillsides that are densely forested today originated as clearcuts in the early part of the last century.

Is clearcutting always the best way to regenerate a forest? No, but it is often the best approach in certain situations, especially if advanced regeneration (seedlings) is present. It then allows the forest to start over, usually with the healthiest, genetically superior trees outcompeting their slower-growing neighbors. Clearcutting is not the only way to regenerate a forest. Other traditional silvicultural techniques include the *shelterwood*, *seed-tree*, and *selection* methods. All four are important and viable tools to regenerate a forest. As long as a clearcut has been carefully planned using sound forestry principles, and is carried out using proper erosion-control practices, it is consistent with sustainable forest management.