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## Bogus cruises: How do buyers protect themselves? Part V

By Curtis Seltzer  
Landthink contributor

The previous four columns have discussed different ways that the volumes and monetary values in a timber cruise can be inflated. Timberland buyers need to protect themselves from seller-supplied information of this type. How does a buyer go about doing this?

Acquire basic knowledge. Timberland buyers should think of themselves as consumers. Whether you're a first-time timberland buyer or experienced, you should become familiar with the timber characteristics, markets and idiosyncrasies of the area that you are prospecting. Forest types differ, often within counties. So a timberland buyer must focus on learning about a particular area. Basic, general information can be obtained from: Extension foresters in the area. These university-based folks can provide publications and general answers to your questions. They will not review a cruise for honesty. They can point out things to look for on tracts in a particular area, such as infestations and damage from fire or wind storms. Contact the county's local office of the state's cooperative extension service, or online through the forestry department at a state's land-grant university. (! HYPERLINK "<http://www.naufrp.org/>" ¶ [www.naufrp.org](http://www.naufrp.org/)<sup>⊥</sup>, click on members for university contacts)

These departments also have forestry specialists on matters ranging from timber taxation to invasive species.

County forester. Most states have county (local) foresters who work with the public, primarily with landowners. They will not review a cruise, but they will be familiar with local conditions. (! HYPERLINK "<http://www.stateforesters.org/>" ¶ [www.stateforesters.org](http://www.stateforesters.org/)<sup>⊥</sup>)

Some states have begun a landowner mentoring program for new forest landowners that may be open to new timberland buyers as well.

County Soil Survey. This document provides soil maps for an entire county. It is free, and available either online or in hard copy. Each soil type is ranked for its productivity for growing local timber. The higher the "site index," the more productive the dirt. The Soil Survey will show a land buyer what a property's soils are and are not suited for. Contact the local office of the USDA's Natural Resources and Conservation Service. (Local contacts through ! HYPERLINK "<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sclocator.asp>" ¶ [www.nrcs.usda.gov/sclocator.asp](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sclocator.asp)<sup>⊥</sup>, and ! HYPERLINK "<http://www.rcdnet.org/>" ¶ [www.rcdnet.org](http://www.rcdnet.org/)<sup>⊥</sup>, click on council directory, log in as guest.)

State's timber market reports. Many states support a reporting service through their forestry division that tracks prices for stumpage, that is, recent prices paid for various

species and types (veneer, sawlogs, pulp, etc.). These reports may lag current prices by a quarter or more, and they are averages for an area. Stumpage prices on state or federal lands are almost always lower than prices paid to private landowners owing to the requirements imposed. (! HYPERLINK "<http://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/econ/data/prices>" ¶ [www.srs.fs.usda.gov/econ/data/prices](http://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/econ/data/prices)<sup>⊥</sup> ; !! HYPERLINK "<http://www.tmart-south.com/>" ¶ [www.tmart-south.com](http://www.tmart-south.com/)<sup>⊥</sup> ; !! HYPERLINK "<http://www.forest2market.com/>" ¶ [www.forest2market.com](http://www.forest2market.com/)<sup>⊥</sup> ; search for stumpage prices by individual states)

State forest-landowner groups. Many states have non-profit organizations of forest landowners who are actively involved in promoting private timberland interests. A buyer might find a member in the area he's targeted who's willing to discuss local conditions and personalities. (National: !! HYPERLINK "<http://www.woodlandowners.org/>" ¶ [www.woodlandowners.org](http://www.woodlandowners.org/)<sup>⊥</sup> )

Publications. A number of books and publications are available on managing timberland, forest health, harvesting techniques and issues and related topics. Sample contracts are available that provide a general approach for a landowner to hire a logger and a consulting forester. Relatively little material is available that explains how an inexperienced buyer should approach buying timberland and evaluate seller-supplied cruises. I devote several chapters to this subject in my book, *How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property*, but my discussion is limited to deconstructing a hardwood sawtimber cruise. Different issues arise in northern hardwoods, pine plantations and West Coast timber.

Consulting foresters. Once a novice timberland buyer acquires basic knowledge through these sources, he should develop a relationship with a consulting forester who works the target area. PART VI will discuss how to find and work with a private consulting forester.