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A STUDY OF ABSENTEE OWNERS OF PINE COUNTY, MINNESOTA FOREST LAND

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Absentee forest-land ownership is an increasingly important segment of the Minnesota private forest ownership picture, especially in areas which are within a few hours driving time of metropolitan centers. This study was undertaken to obtain additional information concerning the absentee owner group. Pine County, Minnesota, the selected study area, is midway between the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul and the Twin Ports of Duluth-Superior. Forty-two percent of the privately owned land in the county was held by absentee owners in 1967.^{2/}

From the county tax rolls, a list of absentee owners was developed. Questionnaires were mailed to all absentee owners holding more than 160 acres, and to thirty percent of the owners holding 160 acres or less. In all, 534 questionnaires were sent and 265 were completed and returned.

It was not possible to determine from county tax records whether land was forested or not. Therefore, it was necessary to eliminate survey respondents who possessed little forest land. Thirty-three of the 265 owners responding reported that less than 25 percent of their acreage was forested. These were classified as "non-forested" ownerships. Analysis of the responses of the "forested" group and the responses of the entire respondent sample showed only minor differences between the two groups however. Absentee owners therefore appear to be a relatively homogeneous group in terms of ownership objectives regardless of the degree to which their land is forested.

Characteristics of Owners. Of the 1400 absentee owners within the study area, nearly ninety percent owned 160 acres or less. Those owners holding more than 160 acres held over one-half of all absentee owned land, although they comprised only a small proportion of the total number of absentee owners.

Nearly sixty percent of the owners resided in the Twin Cities Metropolitan area with another fourteen percent of the owners residing throughout Minnesota. The remaining owners were from out-of-state, primarily Illinois, California, Wisconsin, North and South Dakota and Iowa.

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^{2/} Because of the difficulty of determining whether county residents resided on their lands, only owners living outside the county were classified and studied as absentee owners.

Table 1. Pine County, Minnesota absentee land ownership distribution by acreage size class.

Acreage Size Class	Proportion of Total Absentee Owners	Proportion of Total Absentee- Owned Land
<u>Acres</u>	-----Percent-----	
10-40	47.9	11.4
41-60	40.6	30.9
161-640	9.9	22.6
641-over	<u>1.6</u>	<u>35.1</u>
	100.0	100.0

Approximately three-fourths of the absentee owners had acquired their holdings within the past ten years, and only eight percent had held their lands for more than twenty years. Acquisition by tax sale and purchase from outside one's family accounted for eighty-five percent of the acquisitions. Other owners obtained their holdings by inheritance, intra-family purchases, gifts, and other means.

The average age of the owners was forty-seven years, with their ages distributed approximately normally around the mean. Only one in five owners was sixty years or older. Businessmen and professionals accounted for over forty percent of the owners, and skilled and semi-skilled laborers an additional twenty-five percent. Salesmen, clerical and service workers, unskilled laborers, housewives, retired persons, and others made up the remainder.

Land Use. Because few owners acquired land for only one use, the respondents were asked to designate a primary reason for acquisition and also to indicate any secondary reasons. Hunting, investment purposes, and second home use were, in that order, the three most important primary reasons for acquiring their land. Only 8.8 percent had acquired their lands primarily for timber growing. Other reasons for land acquisition included: (1) satisfaction of owning land, (2) farming or ranching, (3) recreation other than hunting, (4) permanent residence, and (5) miscellaneous reasons. When both primary and secondary reasons were considered, hunting, investment purposes, and second home use were again the three most important reasons for land acquisition.

The most important primary present land use purposes at the time of the study were: (1) hunting, (2) holding for investment, (3) second home use, and (4) timber growing, in this order. As a secondary present land use purpose, timber growing ranked third behind hunting and holding for investment.

When asked about plans for the future use of their lands, absentee owners again gave hunting as a primary purpose of land ownership. However, timber growing ranked second as both a primary and secondary purpose of ownership. Second home use as well as investment holding also ranked high as intended future uses of absentee-owned land. The implication is that timber growing is likely to always have a subservient role in the land use plans of absentee forest land owners.

Willingness of Absentee Owner to Sell Timber. One out of three owners indicated they were unwilling to sell timber from their lands, and two-thirds were willing to sell under certain conditions. Of those willing to sell timber, twenty percent had no special sale requirements; one-fifth would require some form of selective cutting; twenty percent would require some form of cutting supervision; one-fifth would require reforestation practices; and the remainder would require slash disposal or some other conditions for timber sale. Of those unwilling to sell timber forty percent desired to maintain "wild land", have a natural setting, or "loved trees." Twenty percent felt that timber harvesting would destroy their hunting. An additional twenty percent felt their timber had no sale value, while the rest were unwilling to sell timber for miscellaneous reasons.

Absentee Owners Compared to All Private Owners. Compared to other private forest-land ownership groups,^{3/} these absentee owners: (1) have the same pattern of size of ownership, (2) have acquired their land more recently, (3) are younger, (4) are less likely to use their lands for timber growing, and (5) are more apt to use their lands for non-monetary uses such as hunting or a second home site.

In conclusion, it would seem that due to the apparent objectives and goals of absentee owners in Pine County, Minnesota, a considerable portion of the timber volumes reported by inventory data may not be available to the timber industry at any given time. In addition, many technical assistance programs, because of their emphasis upon increasing the land owner's income, may have little appeal to the absentee owner with non-monetary objectives of land ownership. Thus, if it should be desirable to have better forest management on these lands, and technical assistance programs are used to attain better management, it will be necessary to adapt the programs to the non-monetary objectives of many absentee owners. Timber harvesting and other management practices might be encouraged as an adjunct to deer habitat improvement, as an example, in view of absentee owner's strong hunting motivation.

^{3/} See McMahan, R. D. 1964. Private Nonindustrial Ownership of Forest Lands. Yale University School of Forestry Bull. #68 for a listing of studies dealing with the private forest land owner.