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Ice-damaged woodlands will benefit from professional assessment

By Carol Spence

LEXINGTON, Ky., (Feb.4, 2009) – To many Kentuckians, the memory of the 2003 ice storm was still fresh when the 2009 storm struck in the final days of January. Once again, vast areas of the state were subjected to a severe winter storm resulting in the loss of power, water and communications and, in many instances, serious property damage.

After nearly 36 storm-drenched hours, the state experienced .25 to 1.5 inches of ice on tree limbs, compounded by one to 10 inches of snow. The weight of that much ice and snow sent limbs and entire trees crashing to the ground. Some trees split down the middle or had their crowns snapped off.

While the loss of landscape trees can be an expensive and often heart-breaking headache to homeowners, the loss of timber producing trees can deal a severe economic blow to the woodland owner.

Doug McLaren, University of Kentucky forestry specialist, recommends that landowners work with a professional forester from the Kentucky Division of Forestry or a forest consultant to evaluate the damage in a private timber stand.

“A forester can design a harvesting plan or manage work that needs to be done because of ice damage,” he said. “Not every tree is equal in importance when viewed commercially. Red maple could be used as an illustration. Many foresters would consider management options that favored other species above red maple. Depending on your location and local forest markets, many red maples that are lost or damaged are not going to cause a major concern.”

In most forests, there are too many trees growing in any one location, meaning they often crowd themselves out and don't have the space to develop into harvestable timber. Having storm-damaged trees in such a location may actually benefit the landowner in the long run, since their removal could provide space for other timber-producing trees to mature properly.

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Not all trees of the same species are equal in value. Some may have grown into a poor shape or have some type of defect, such as butt rot due to previous fire or insect attacks. If damaged by the ice storm, these trees are not considered a loss.

Limb damage does not necessarily affect the value of the tree. The main bole is the part of the tree that is primarily evaluated at the time of a timber sale, not the limbs. If the outer ends of the tree's crown are damaged, a professional forester may recommend that the tree be harvested before the crown damage can damage the bole.

A damaged tree can actually add to the life of the forest, since it can be very attractive to wildlife. Trees with cavities offer shelter for a variety of mammals. Even the insects that thrive in the fresh wounds will attract insect-feeding birds. It's not uncommon for landowners to leave damaged trees on their properties to attract and protect wildlife.

Landowners should contract with reputable loggers with full workers' compensation insurance to harvest their timber. Logging is extremely dangerous during the best of times, and the recent ice storm makes it even more so.

McLaren recommends landowners take time to seek out professionals to do the job safely and in an economically viable way.

"One great advantage that timber has over many other agricultural crops is that damage created to these stands will not deteriorate and lose more value within in the next several months," he said. "You do have time to have a forester come and make a thorough evaluation of your damaged timber before you make those decisions for future timber management in your woodlands."

The UK Cooperative Extension Service is offering the Master Tree Farmer series, "Forest Risks and Risk Management" March 2, 9 and 16. The three sessions will cover the topics: Understanding and Managing Natural Disasters and Changing Climate; Managing and Mitigating Invasive Plant Species, Insects and Diseases; and Taxes, Policy, Regulations, Law and Land Use Change.

"As January's storm taught us, problems with ice damage, wind damage, invasive species and timber theft – all of those issues are ongoing in Kentucky and important to woodland owners, regardless of their objectives for their property," said UK Forestry Professor Jeff Stringer, who will lead the series of workshops. "This program will provide

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woodland owners with information that helps them deal with those issues and the protection of their property and assets.”

For more information about the Master Tree Farmer Series call 859-257-7597 or visit <http://www.ca.uky.edu/forestryextension/MTF.php>.

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