

Good Evening,

I am a staff member of the Current Use Program. My job title is Current Use Specialist III, which means I am one of the few people who process applications, withdrawals and answer phone calls from enrolled and prospective landowners. I have worked in the program for one year, before which time I spent 7 years working at the Vermont Land Trust as a paralegal drafting conservation easements and preparing for easement acquisition closings.

I have been listening with interest to the testimony before the House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife. It strikes me that the one question that you are having difficulty getting answered is finding out the percentage of landowners who are not enrolled that are likely to enroll if the program rules change to add an old forest category. While this question has some inherent unknowns, I believe that those who work in my position have a unique perspective because we process all of the applications, withdrawals, and have daily contact with landowners who have questions about their enrollments. It has been my experience working for the program for the last year that most of the people who decide not to maintain their current use enrollment are not making this decision because of concerns about harvesting their forestland. I have only gotten one call from a landowner who expressed a concern about harvesting in the past year and they ended up maintaining their enrollment due to the tax benefits. I have only seen one application withdrawn in the last year because of concerns about harvesting. Keep in mind that there was an extremely high volume of transfers in the last year, so this was 1 application out of around 650 that I have processed.

As I have only been with the program for one year I asked one of my more experienced colleagues what he believes the top reasons are that people decide not to enroll in the program. Here were his top three reasons, which are not in order, but are simply the most common reasons:

1. Perceived risk reward imbalance - people have a hard time wrapping their heads around the benefits of enrolling, or run the numbers and realize there won't be sufficient savings for enrollment. In some very rural towns, the value of the land can be low enough that the benefit or enrolling land is minimal. Sometimes landowners simply get overwhelmed with the math and the enrollment requirements and decide it isn't worth the overall hassle.
2. The landowner doesn't want to pay for a forest management plan. This is common with farmers, but it happens in other circumstances from time to time. Generally, this desire not to pay for a forest management plan is not connected to a concern about harvesting the forest.
3. The landowner doesn't want a contingent lien on their land from the tax department. This was the case for my grandfather who left my grandparent's land out of the current use program for his whole life as he was generally distrustful of the tax department, and wanted to have full control over his land. The benefits of enrollment of this property would have been enormous, but the idea of having a lien on the property stopped him from enrolling. This feeling is not uncommon.

After my colleague provided this list, I asked about withdrawals that relate to a desire to leave forests unmanaged. He stated that while this does happen, that this is much lower down on the list of reasons. This was generally my feeling as well and I was happy to have my thoughts

confirmed by my more experienced coworker.

This all said, I think that new enrollments to the program as a result of a reserve forestland category would be minimal. I don't think this is the primary reason people decide to forgo enrolling their land, and I don't think it would be a huge driver of new enrollments. I think cost estimates of program rule changes would end up being on the very low end of any possible total increase.

I hope you find this information helpful. I would be happy to answer any follow up questions if you have any.

Thanks,
Isaac