Forestry 101: Dealing with Ice and Storm Damage

by Doug McLaren and Carol Spence

The ice and wind storms of winter 2009 will be permanently ingrained in the memories of many Kentuckians. The loss of life and the homes that were lost or severely damaged affected lives across the state.

The storm confined many woodland owners inside, where they listened helplessly to the barrage of trees crashing down and limbs snapping under the tremendous strain caused by ice and high winds. They could only imagine what damage was being created in their woodlands. When landowners could survey the severity of the damage, some found their hardwood stands had numerous treetops and limbs severely damaged or completely broken off, and they wondered how the storm's damage would affect the value of their timber.

Storm events can have a significant impact on woodlands. However, the damage may not be as bad as it appears; woodland owners should work with a professional forester to assess storm damaged woodlands.

Photo courtesy: Susan Fox, Lyon County Extension Office

As a timber owner, don't rush into making rash decisions concerning the need for timber cutting based on your initial assessment. Forest trees are very resilient, with a natural ability to recover from the damage. A tree's survival is usually related to the extent of the damage to its live crown. Much of the damage created in winter storms does not become fully evident until the crowns of the trees are completely leafed out in the summer. Many of the stems that looked severely damaged back in the winter may not look as bad now that the canopy has filled in.

Woodland owners are strongly encouraged to work with professional foresters in the management of their properties.

Photo courtesy: Billy Thomas

Typically, trees with less than 50 percent of the live crown damaged or removed will probably be suitable to continue in an established forest management plan. Owners should consider harvesting or making improvement cuts in trees that lost more than 50 percent of their crowns.

Other factors play into the decision about which trees need to be removed from the stand. Species, age, quality, and general health of the tree all play a role in the future management in the stand. Younger trees will survive better than older ones. Unhealthy stems are less likely to continue to grow. Trees known to have the highest value—those that could be used for veneer, for example—should be evaluated first. Remember that during the life of any forest stand, thinnings are often prescribed. Thinnings will always increase the growth of the remaining stand. It is possible that these recent storms might have provided a natural thinning that can be beneficial to the remaining, more valuable trees in the stand. Remember also that the management of a tree in a woodland setting is extremely different from the management of a tree in an urban setting.

Woodland owners should not rush into making any rash decisions about timber harvesting due to January's ice storm, and they do not have to face the dilemma of determining the future of their damaged woodlands alone. The first priority is to take care of safety concerns and then to rely on the advice of a professional forester who can adequately evaluate the degree of damage within a stand. The forester will evaluate and prescribe the cuttings that are necessary to improve the woods.

For your benefit and the benefit of your woodland stand, proceed with deliberate care, and contact a professional forester to help you make the right decisions. State foresters can be found by contacting the Kentucky Division of Forestry at www.forestry.ky.gov or 502.564.4496. Consulting foresters can be found at www.kacf.org.

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