

# Forest Property Line Management

► Over time, fences fall, markings on trees fade, and property lines in forestland may not be evident. As with all forest management activities, landowners should think about managing and maintaining forest property lines long term to avoid timber loss and land loss through adverse possession. Marking and maintaining forest property lines can help you protect your forestland asset.

Forestland is an asset, and one easy way to protect it is by maintaining your property lines. Landowners are most likely to think about forest property lines when they buy or sell land, at which time a survey is often conducted. The surveyor uses a deed description to locate property lines and mark boundaries and property corners by clearing lines through understory brush, cutting marks into tree bark, using plastic flagging tape, or placing metal or wooden stakes in the ground. Once the survey is complete, the landowner should mark property lines using paint or fencing.

For land passed from generation to generation, a survey is not always completed. In addition, over time, fences fall, markings on trees fade, and property lines may no longer be evident. As with all forest management activities, landowners should think about managing and maintaining forest property lines to avoid timber loss or possible land loss.

## Locating Property Lines

Landowners who do not have a survey can use deed descriptions to reconstruct and locate boundary lines and corners; however, corner markers may not always be present. If there is any question about corner or line locations, have a professional survey conducted.

Property deeds can be obtained from your county probate office in person or using a written request mailed to the office. Keep in mind that professionals in the probate office can help you locate a deed but do not provide legal advice, provide surveying services, or settle disputes between landowners.

## Marking Property Lines

Once the location of your forest property lines is established, property lines need to be clearly marked. Fencing is an option, but it can be expensive. Painted property lines are a common, cost-effective alternative in forested settings. Fall and winter months are the best seasons to check and paint property lines because fence lines and line markings are easier to see when leaves are off trees. Whether you are using a survey or other accepted and established property lines to mark the property boundary, first flag the line using colored plastic flagging tape before painting. Contact your neighbors if you are unsure of line locations, and resolve any concerns and problems before marking with paint. Once you and your neighbors are satisfied with line locations, establish a marking system to paint your forest boundary.



## Line-marking schemes

Trees can be marked in a variety of ways to designate property lines. Some generally accepted guidelines are that markings are usually about eye level, or roughly 5 feet above the ground, and trees are painted directly on the line or just inside your property line. Do not paint neighboring landowners' trees without permission from them. Markings can be done in any way the landowner sees fit but should be consistent. Some examples of line-marking schemes are as follows:

- Trees directly on the property line can be marked with a vertical line in the direction of the property line that is on the side of the tree not facing into your property or out to neighboring property.
- One band *facing out to the adjacent property* can be used to designate entrance to your property from an adjacent property.
- Two or three bands *facing into your property* can be used to designate exit from your property and entrance to an adjacent property.
- Three bands painted around a tree are often used to mark trees on property corners. Witness trees are trees that are marked to assist in finding property corners. They can be marked with a band around the tree and an X on the tree facing in the direction of, or pointing to, the established corner.

Yellow, red, blue, and orange are commonly used paint colors for property lines, but other colors or even color combinations can be used as well. For example, a landowner might choose to mark lines with three stripes using a yellow/blue/yellow combination or two stripes of different colors such as one orange and one blue. It is important to pick a unique line-marking scheme, particularly one that is not being used by other landowners in the area, and then use that scheme on all your landholdings.

## The purple paint law

A property line paint color you may have seen used is purple, but you may not be aware of its significance. In 2016, Alabama made it legal for landowners to use purple paint on trees or fence posts as a substitute for no-trespassing signs, although the use of posted no-trespassing signs is still encouraged. The advantage of purple paint is that it is inexpensive, is an easy-to-see supplement to no-trespassing signs, and is difficult to remove. One disadvantage is that many Alabamians may be unaware of this law. Another disadvantage is that purple markings mean different things in different



Figure 1. Preparing a tree to paint



Figure 2. Painting a boundary line tree

states, ranging from no trespassing to no hunting, fishing, or trapping, so be sure to be familiar with laws when traveling from state to state.

According to the Alabama code, in order to signal no trespassing, purple must be painted in vertical stripes that are at least 1 inch wide and 8 inches long. Stripes must be located 3 to 5 feet above the ground on a tree or post and must be facing out from the posted property

so that markings are easily visible. Markings must be spaced no more than 100 feet apart in forested areas and no more than 1,000 feet apart on open lands such as fields and pastures. Special consideration must also be made for rights of way. Consult deeds and right-of-way agreements to make sure property lines are designated properly in these cases.

## Painting lines

Painting property lines is easiest when done by two people. One person uses a machete or draw knife to scrape the outer layer of bark off the tree to create a smooth surface to paint. Each scraping should create a strip 3 or 4 inches wide and 5 to 6 inches long. Be careful not to cut too deeply so that you cut into the wood of the tree.

The second person comes behind the first, painting the freshly scraped trees. Paint specifically made for marking trees and boundary lines can be purchased in aerosol spray or gallon cans. Solvent-based, exterior paint works well and may last up to 5 years. Water-based exterior paint works but can be expected to last only about 3 years. While aerosol cans are efficient, most people choose to use a paintbrush to apply paint to fresh scrapes. Latex paint can be thinned using water, and an appropriate paint thinner can be used for oil-based paint if necessary. Paint can be applied to scraped areas using an inexpensive pump-style garden sprayer as well.

## Maintaining Property Lines

Check the integrity of painted property lines at least every 2 to 3 years, and plan to have lines repainted about every 5 years. Check property lines after wind and storm events and before and after land sales, timber harvests, and other forest-management activities. Contact neighboring landowners as soon as you notice anything out of the ordinary or if you have concerns about your property lines.



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