



Ties to the Land  
Article 8

## Finding Estate Planning Professionals

By Clint Bentz

Many family forest landowners are “do-it-yourself” types. When it comes to estate and succession planning, there is a lot that you need to do yourself. You need to decide what you want to do, and what you want your family and your property to become over time. However, to actually create your plan will require the help of a team of qualified, competent professional advisors. These advisors will take your vision and help you create a pathway for success that also complies with our complex legal and tax system.

In our **Ties to the Land™** Seminars we stress the need to put together your own “Dream Team”, a team of professionals who will help you to achieve your dreams. This team would normally include an attorney to draft documents, a Certified Public Accountant to help with the income and estate tax aspects, a financial planner/life insurance person to assist you with your investments and life insurance, a forester to help with your forest management plan, an appraiser and possibly a family business consultant who can help you with your family meetings, strategic planning, and succession planning.

These professionals can be expensive and you need to use their time wisely. The more organized you are and the more you have thought through what you want to accomplish, the easier it is for them to help you get it done. That is why we provide several different worksheets in our **Ties to the Land™** Workbook to help you put your thoughts on paper in an organized fashion. This award winning book takes you through the succession planning process in a step-by-step manner using a case study drawn from my experiences working with families just like yours. It is available for sale at the Ties to the Land Initiative website at [www.tiestotheland.org](http://www.tiestotheland.org).

How do you find qualified, competent professionals to serve on your “Dream Team”? At this time there is no state or national registry where you can go to find the help you need. This is a highly specialized field of practice and it is likely that your current



attorney and/or tax advisor, while competent in what they do, will not have the expertise required to help you through this process.

In fact, the goal of most professionals who work in the estate planning field is to turn assets into cash and divide them among the heirs as quickly as possible. Most have little experience with families who are trying to preserve legacy assets across the generations.

Where do you start? The same way we start looking for anything important – we ask people we trust to give us referrals. A good place to start is your local or state small woodlands association. Other good places to ask people for referrals include your professional forester, your county extension agent, the professionals you are currently using, your church, and of course your family, friends and neighbors. Once you have a list of names, then you need to interview them to see if they have the interest and skills required to help you.

The community of professionals in all fields who have a passion for working with family business owners is fairly small, and they tend to know each other well. We often find we have more in common with each other in our different professions than we have with others in our “profession of origin.” What this means is that if you find a professional in any field who is passionate about working with landowners, he or she will likely have a network of other qualified professionals they can refer you to.

What are you looking for in a professional? First, you are looking for someone who has significant experience working with multi-generational family businesses. They need to have been doing this long enough that they have actually helped families through the transition process between generations. They need to specialize in the estate and succession planning process, and be current in their knowledge of this fast changing and complex field. It is helpful, but not absolutely necessary, if they themselves come from a family farm or forestry background. My experience is that if a professional did not grow up on the land, they have a difficult time understanding the complex emotions involved as the family works through this process together. Finally, they need to be someone you can trust and work with easily. There needs to be some chemistry between you, because you will be working together very closely on some difficult issues.



We use the word “Team” intentionally. Succession and estate planning is a very complex field with many moving parts. You need to have all of these folks in the room at the same time so they can hear what you want to do, understand the specific challenges of your situation, and then work together to find solutions that will accomplish your goals. I liken the process to having several people holding a large balloon. When someone pushes on one side of the balloon, people on the other side of the balloon need to watch to see where it bulges out. This is a complex process that requires many compromises between competing interests. By working as a team, we can watch out for the unexpected bulges and usually come up with a solution that none of us could have thought up by ourselves. Also, by working together we can come up with a unified recommendation that considers all of the complexities of your situation so you don’t have to be the mediator between your professionals.

With the help of the American Forest Foundation, the award-winning **Ties to the Land™** Seminars are rolling out across the nation this year. Plan to attend one as a family in 2010. If you can’t find a seminar near you, go online and purchase our workbook to help you get started. Begin working today to find and put together your own “Dream Team” to help you bring your dreams into reality.

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