



South Dakota
Department of Agriculture
Division of Resource Conservation & Forestry

Can I Have Too Many Trees?

By
Parks Brigman, Service Forester

The short answer to this question is: “Yes!” One of the most common topics of my talks with forest landowners is how to help them get their forest to be the way they want it to be. A lot of landowners enjoy their forest and are nervous about management because they love the trees so much, they would hate to lose any of them, for any reason. People have told me, “Where I grew up, trees were so rare and special, we would never think of cutting one down!” However, the Black Hills have an amazing ability to grow Ponderosa pine trees. Just like a pasture can only support a certain number of healthy cattle, the same goes for a forested area. Certain pieces of ground can only healthily support so many trees. One of the main things I help landowners with is making the decisions of how and when to thin their trees.

A forest stand that is left unmanaged can result in any number of negative results. The trees can become stagnant in growth because they have exhausted all of the resources available to them and never grow into large trees. Forested areas with too many trees are more susceptible to disease or insects, such as the Mountain pine beetle. Firefighters can tell of the dangers of wildfire in thick stands of trees where the fire is impossible to control.

The best time to do this type of management is when the trees are still small, smaller than commercial size, which is generally 8 inches in diameter. This is why you will often hear this type of management referred to as pre-commercial or non-commercial thinning. As a general rule of thumb, the larger the trees are when the thinning is being done, the more space that should be left between trees. The type of soil and the terrain also factor into how much space to leave between residual trees. This will allow for the best environment for the remaining trees. They will have more available sunlight, water and nutrients. When selecting trees to remove during these thinning, try to focus on trees that are poorly formed or may be diseased. This way, when the remaining trees mature, they will serve as good seed sources for the next generation of trees, as well as possibly returning a higher value to the landowner in the case of a timber sale. While it may be an investment for a landowner to do this type of thinning project, the benefits in the long run are worth it.

Working with a forester on these types of projects is a great piece of advice for a forest landowner. Thinning stands at the right time will help the forest. It will help the forest be healthy, resilient, productive, and enjoyable for generations to come.

