



## LOCATING PROPERTY BOUNDARIES

### FOREST STEWARDSHIP MANAGEMENT NOTE #1

#### INTRODUCTION

The first step in developing a land management plan is to determine the size of the property and the location of its boundaries. For general planning purposes, it is sometimes not necessary to locate boundaries accurately. However, for most management actions, it is essential to locate property boundaries accurately and to mark them clearly. Not only will this prevent wasting time in the long-run, it may prevent costly legal problems.

Attempting to locate property boundaries is a useful exercise for landowners who want to be a good steward of the land. If they are successful, it may save some money. If not, it will at least help them get to know their land better and motivate them to maintain boundary markers once they are established by a professional.

#### BOUNDARY LOCATION AND MARKING FOR LANDOWNERS

If you have the time and interest, it may be possible for you to locate your property boundaries or, at least, to gather some of the information a professional will need. The following is a suggested do-it-yourself procedure for landowners.

1. **CHECK PLAT BOOK AND DEED** - Start by finding your property in a recent plat book of the relevant county (#3). If you are not familiar with land descriptions, study the introductory information in the front of the plat book. The pamphlet, "Land in Michigan," (#2) is also informative. Plat maps show the location, acreage, shape, and owner of each land parcel. You should also always check your deed (land contract, etc.) to be sure the plat book has been properly updated.
2. **FIND CORNERS** - To locate property boundaries it is essential to first locate "corners". Property corners, especially corners of sections, are often permanently marked with posts, pipes, rebar, or more elaborate surveyors' monuments. Because such markers are often low to the ground or buried, their location is frequently indicated by signs, blazes, paint marks, and/or ribbons attached to nearby trees. If the plat map proves insufficient, try the following sources of information:
  - Previous owners of the land.
  - Adjacent landowners - addresses available from property tax rolls.
  - County Road Commission or Michigan Department of Transportation - if a public road borders your land.
  - Surveyors - see yellow pages.
  - Topographic maps and aerial photographs (FSMN #43).Use as many information sources as possible. If you have any doubts, seek professional assistance (see below).
3. **RUN LINES** - If you locate a corner to your satisfaction, you may then be able to "run the line" to the next corner. Running a line without a good corner to start from is a waste of time, unless you are just trying to get a rough idea of the boundaries. Once you have found a corner, you can then often find boundary line markers (or vice versa). Old fence lines often run along property boundaries, but beware - multiple, parallel lines are sometimes marked, none of which may be accurate. Running lines requires a good compass and the skills to use it. Also be aware that in some areas compasses are not accurate due to iron ore deposits or other local magnetic attractions. You must also have a means of measuring distance to the next corner, unless all the corners are clearly identified. A long, flexible tape measure is a good way to do this.
4. **MARK LINES** - Until boundaries are accurately located, it is a good idea to mark them only temporarily with something like flagging tape. Once they are well-established they should be marked more permanently, unless they coincide with roads or other fixed features and their location is obvious.

It is much easier and cheaper to remark an existing line than to find a lost one. And by periodically checking your boundaries, you can review the condition of your land. In earlier times, it was customary for landowners to walk the boundaries of their property on Rogation Sunday (preceding Ascension Day). The youngest child was reminded to take note of the corners and stones were added to the markers.

The most common options for marking boundaries include painting spots or erecting signs on trees that are close to the boundary (see FSMN #43 for suppliers of paint, signs, etc.). It is helpful to make the marks visible from inside your property and as you walk the line in either direction. Brightly colored markers are typically used to make boundaries visible from a distance, but more subtle colors can be used if preferred for aesthetics reasons.

## **PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARY LOCATION**

Registered surveyors are the only people legally qualified to establish property boundaries. However, surveying is quite expensive and is often not necessary if caution is exercised.

Consulting foresters and loggers often provide boundary location services that are accurate enough for timber harvesting and most other land management practices (FSMN #18).

## **NOTIFYING ADJACENT LANDOWNERS**

To be on the safe side, it is a good idea to notify adjacent landowners when you are planning management practices, such as logging, near property boundaries that could cause problems if you accidentally go over the line. A simple letter to adjacent landowners stating your plans and requesting that they confirm the location of the common property boundary will help avoid possible problems.

## **REFERENCES**

FSMN #'s refer to other Forest Stewardship Management Notes in this series.

- #1 Estopinal, Stephen. A guide to understanding land surveys. A concise guide to interpreting land surveys & requesting surveying services.
- #2 Michigan Department of Natural Resources. 1988. Land in Michigan. 20-page pamphlet on land surveys, state owned land, tax foreclosure land sales, etc.
- #3 Rockford Map Publishers, Inc. Updated frequently. Land Atlas & Plat Book - Your County, Michigan. Available from Rockford Map Publishers, P.O. Box 6126, Rockford, IL 61125 815/399-4614 and generally from local County Extension offices.

**CITATION:** Burnett, Christopher D. 1994. Locating property boundaries. Michigan Forest Stewardship Management Note #1. Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Forest Management Division.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:** This project was supported, in part, by a grant from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the USDA Forest Service.