The author’s 140-acre Virginia hunting tract is among the first to be certified under QDMA’s new Land Certification Program. Here’s his look at the experience.

By Bruce Ingram

When professional forester Duane Means approached me this past October about seeing if my 140-acre tract in Craig County Virginia’s Sinking Creek Valley could become one of the first to qualify to be a part of QDMA’s new Land Certification Program (LCP), I was, at first, worried whether my land could meet the standards.

But that anxiety, after Duane explained the LCP to me, was soon replaced with the realization that I had been offered an exciting opportunity to become a better land manager. If areas existed where I could do better, the LCP would bring to my attention what needed to be done and show me how to implement those improvements. If I were doing well in certain areas, my efforts would be affirmed. Finally, I saw that the LCP would give me another way and incentive to spread the QDM message to the two landowners who border my land, both of whom own over 200 acres, as well as other neighbors.

I had a lot of questions, the first of which was – what are the program’s objectives? In layman’s terms, this is what the program will mean to QDMA members like you and me:

**Recognize** QDMA members who are working to implement QDM’s Four Cornerstones, as well as our conservation efforts. One of the aspects that makes me most proud to be a QDMA member is that what we try to accomplish as land managers is science-based and good for biodiversity. We’re much more than deer hunters. The LCP will help spread that message.

**Encourage** members to do additional management activities by providing suggestions on how to do so. Of course, all of us are trying to improve deer habitat and hunting, but LCP, through working with a certified inspector (and Duane is now mine), would give us specific management practices tailored for our individual situations.

**Inspire** others to do what we QDMA members are trying to do. I have corresponded with my neighboring landowners about the status of deer populations on our respective properties, but I have been searching for a way to show them that what I am doing on my land is good for wildlife from squirrels to songbirds. LCP makes it easier to spread that message.

Duane, who operates Arrow Forestry, is one of the first individuals to become a certified inspector to ascertain if properties merit inclusion in LCP. He told me the program was basically a response to landowners’ requests to take the QDMA philosophy to another level. The formal reasons why LCP was created are below, along with Duane’s explanations to me in quotes. LCP will help landowners:

1. Determine if their property meets a baseline QDM standard. “LCP will give land managers a checklist of criteria in three different levels,” Duane said.
2. Receive specific management recommendations on their hunting property from qualified QDM professionals. “Certified inspectors like me will help land managers make sound decisions on how to manage their properties now and in the future,” he said.
3. Promote QDM and the QDMA in their area by displaying a sign that recognizes their efforts. “These signs will help land managers spread the QDMA message, plus be a visual reminder that wildlife habitat on a particular property is being enhanced.”

For me, the LCP’s first objective allows me to see specific areas in which I am strong, adequate, or weak; the second
Objective is a guideline on how I can make improvements on my land; and the third is a way to open communication with my neighbors. Indeed, as of this writing, I have already contacted one adjoining landowner and sung the praises of QDM, LCP and Duane, and the gentleman has expressed interest in learning more about the program from the forester and working with him and me. The gentleman seems enthusiastic, and I’m hopeful that he will join QDMA.

Overview of Sinking Creek Property

To understand how the LCP has been helpful to me, let me take you on a quick tour of the property.

John Cheynet of MeadWestvaco prepared a forest management plan for my Sinking Creek land (a requirement of the second level of LCP) in 2009. The property had a timber harvest in 1981 and a crop tree release harvest in 2003; I purchased the tract in 2006. Cheynet divided the property into three sections: Stand 1 (29 acres, mixed hardwood, 60 to 70-years old, located at the bottom of the mountain); Stand 2 (75 acres, oak-hickory, 25 to 80 years old, located at mid-mountain); and Stand 3 (36 acres, mixed oaks, mountain laurel, 100-plus years old, located on top of the mountain and bordering the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests).

Because of a severe gypsy moth infestation, I elected to have a 7½-acre clearcut conducted in 2009 on Stand 2 (the clearcut is visible on the mountainside in the photo on the facing page). That clearcut completely changed deer movements on the property, as large numbers of whitetails now bed in the regenerating stand, which is mostly composed of briars and saplings. During Virginia’s 2011-12 firearms season while setting up 60 yards below the cut, I killed a doe that had emerged from it. Earlier during the bow season, I also killed a deer in the same area.

Additionally, the 140-acre tract is under a conservation easement with the Virginia Outdoors Foundation.

Expertise from Duane Means

This past October, Duane and I met to tour my land and go over the three levels of the LCP and to bowhunt afterwards. Like all QDMA members who own land, I am proud of my property and the habitat improvement projects I have implemented from major ones like the aforementioned clearcut to “weekend” ones like small Timber Stand Improvement (TSI) areas with a chainsaw.

But a real positive of LCP is having a certified inspector like Duane tour a property and look at the place from a different perspective than we landowners do. For example, Duane pointed out that Stand 1 had been badly high-graded in the past and that there is a real lack of mast-bearing shagbark hickories. However, scattered about in that 29-acre mixed-hardwood stand were numerous young oaks that would benefit from thinning.

Duane also explained that Stand 1 features incredible numbers of mature red maples and high numbers of shagbark and other hickories. There is also almost a total lack of soft-mast bearing trees, except for a few dogwoods and two hawthorns that Duane identified. The understory is incredibly open as well. The result is that Stand 1 is very uninviting for deer and other wildlife.

As we walked further up the mountain, we came to the beginnings of Stand 2 where I had placed a treestand in a shagbark hickory that had two young trees growing next to it. I had selected the shagbark as a stand site because of the additional concealment. Upon closer examination, Duane noted that one of those young trees was a black oak “just begging to be daylighted,” and next to it was a young maple that needed to be a victim of TSI, as did the mature shagbark. In short, I would lose my stand site but gain a bearing oak.

From Duane’s visit, I took away five relevant points:

1. Stand 1 needs to have a 6- to 8-acre clearcut done with special care made to protect most young oaks growing within, as well as the few bearing oaks.
2. Stand 1 then needs to be allowed to regenerate naturally in order to provide food and cover for wildlife.
3. The logging road created could be planted with a perennial wildlife mix.
4. Stand 2 needs to have TSI conducted in a number of areas in order to daylight young oaks.
5. Stand 2 features several areas that

Continued.
would also benefit from TSI and subsequent planting of, for example, sawtooth oaks and native soft-mast producers like paw paws and persimmons.

Reviewing the Categories of LCP

Next, it was time for Duane and me to review the three levels of LCP and see which fit my Sinking Creek Valley property best. They are: Pledged Lands – this is the apprentice level of the LCP (meet Standards 1-4, 15 of 15 points required), Certified Lands – this is for properties doing a good job with all Four Cornerstones of QDM (meet Standards 1-8, 60 of 75 points required), and Legacy Lands – I see this as the “model” QDM property (meet Standards 1-14, 80 of 100 points required).

Duane and I quickly checked off my accomplishments, such as items for Standard 1 (QDMA membership current and fair chase rules followed), Standard 2 (such as no existing hunting violations for individuals allowed on land), Standard 3 (such as hunter safety class required, safety harnesses required for tree stand hunting, and hunting location procedure in place), and the Standard 4 requirement (commitment to the Four Cornerstones of QDM).

Really, I see no problem with the vast majority of, if not all, QDMA members who own land meeting Standards 1-4 and receiving all 15 of the required points. I look upon the Pledged category as a basic affirmation of what we members do and have done to wisely manage our land. Obviously, Standards 5-8 are more difficult to meet, as they should be, and require more commitment. The Certified category, again basically, shows how landowners can bring their commitment to habitat improvement up another notch, as well as our harvest choices, herd monitoring and hunter education. And the Legacy category is the rarified air of those landowners who have gone above and beyond what is the norm – often striving to do so for many years. The rating system, of course, is part of the inspection process to evaluate the property and its qualification to meet the Standards.

Several areas exist where I have done well and several where I have not in the six years I have owned the land. For instance, Duane and I feel I have clearly performed well with such Standard 5 (Herd Management Activities) requirements as “record herd management data.”

In Standard 6 (Habitat Management Activities), I can check off such requirements as “sound forest management practiced,” and “food and cover requirements provided.” I feel that I have made positive steps to battle the gypsy moth infestation and improve the wildlife habitat, through the clearcut, TSI projects, and the planned

Continued.
future clearcut.

In Standard 7 (Hunter Management Activities), I believe that I have done extremely well with such topics as “evenly distribute hunting pressure,” and “maintain property access guidelines.” For Standard 8 (Herd Monitoring Activities), before I even enrolled in LCP I had decided for the first time to “collect hunter observation data” during the 2011-12 season, and I have also monitored “habitat for overabundance” of whitetails.

But, just as clearly, several areas exist where I have not performed well – and this is yet another plus of LCP. For example, in Standard 6, I have not used prescribed fire and thus can’t receive the full 2 points for having done so. I would welcome the opportunity to have a prescribed burn on the land; perhaps in the future this can be done.

In Standard 7, I have no “hunter liability protection” in place.

While I was fretting about the above two issues, Duane reassured me. He said the standards are not meant by any means to be punitive or to put a land manager’s “shortcomings” on display, that a major benefit of LCP is the process of a landowner talking with an inspector about his options, plus offering guidance and recognition for doing a good job. The overview document for LCP (found at QDMA.com) even states that “applicants are encouraged to adapt their specific objectives, goals and limitations to the framework provided.” The Standards are actually designed to present optional routes when certain criteria may not be feasible or practical.

I felt much better after Duane explained this to me, and I felt great when he showed me an alternative route to meeting the Standard 8 item, “population estimate.” I was at first afraid that because I don’t own any trail-cameras that I couldn’t fulfill this objective. But then he explained how he and I could perform a “pellet count” this spring and meet that objective. I had been wanting to learn how to do that anyway, and so we arranged to do a count one April afternoon – after a spring gobbler hunt in the morning.

Duane said we could also undertake a browse-impact survey to monitor deer density relative to habitat quality. These are examples of activities that would

---

DUANE’S VIEW

As a forester, hunter and deer manager, I’m pleased to be involved with QDMA’s LCP as an inspector, because the LCP gives definition and accountability to QDM practices desired and implemented by landowners/managers. The record-keeping and monitoring aspects required by the program foster a developing knowledge base for the landowner. The body of QDM work on a property develops a history that supports future management efforts. Through LCP this knowledge and effort is measured against a set of standards and can be referenced for continued management planning and education.

I have seen many properties touted as “well managed” under QDM principles when in reality they were mismanaged properties. The existence of one harvest food plot and the intention to only shoot big bucks does not put a property under “quality management.” With LCP the Four Cornerstones of QDM can be measured, and landowners can know where they stand. Good QDM is recognized for all to see, and questionable management is identified for the landowner to improve upon.

–Duane Means

Continued.
allow me, and others in similar situations, to gain credit for monitoring standards. In short, my property qualifies for the Certified Land designation.

For Standard 10 (Conservation of Biodiversity) under Legacy Lands, my conservation easement resulted in a survey of whether any rare species existed on the land (none did). That survey and the conservation easement also enabled me to easily meet the Standard 12 requirement of identifying and managing special sites.

I also have done well with Standards 11 (Aesthetics) by considering wildlife habitat diversity, Standard 13 (Air, Water, and Soil Protection) by following BMPs and minimizing off-road vehicle use in sensitive areas, and Standard 14 (Long-term Habitat Protection and Conservation) by putting the land under a conservation easement.

Another area that I thought would be a problem was Standard 9, Continuing Education (20 hours over 5 years), and it turned out to be an opportunity. I have long wanted to begin taking the Deer Steward classes, but the long hours I work with my two jobs has prohibited me from doing much traveling. Then I learned about the new Level I classes being offered online. I plan to enroll in the class this summer and chalk up two more points!

Finally, an Asian invasive grass species grows in one section of a logging road, which I at first felt would keep me from earning the Standard 10 two points for “invasive species management in place.” But Duane is working to identify the grass and how to eliminate it. Yet another advantage of us landowners working with a certified LCP inspector. In short, I would also qualify for Legacy Lands status.

Keep in mind that not all inspectors will have Duane’s forest management background; but they may well have other areas of expertise, such as experience with food plots, wildlife management, and many other topics. Besides, I found that the actual interview process – the ongoing dialog that Duane and I have experienced since October and will continue to have – is what makes LCP unique. Duane has already given me numerous tips on making my Sinking Creek land better for wildlife – and we have only just begun.

About This Article

This article was published in Quality Whitetails magazine, the journal of the Quality Deer Management Association (QDMA). To become a QDMA member and receive Quality Whitetails six times a year, use the form below.

### Join QDMA and receive Quality Whitetails bi-monthly.

Name

Street

City, State, Zip

Daytime Phone (____) ___________________

Email

☐ Yes, I would like to receive e-mails about QDMA events, information and promotions.

☐ 1-yr NEW Adult Membership - $30

☐ 3-yr NEW Membership - $80

☐ Mastercard ☐ Visa ☐ AmEx

Card # __________________ Exp. Date ______

☐ Check # ___________ ☐ Money Order # ___________

Fax this form to: 706-353-0223

Or Mail to: QDMA, P.O. Box 160, Bogart, GA 30622

Phone Orders: 800-209-3337

Web Orders: www.QDMA.com

---

**About the Author**: Bruce Ingram is a QDMA member and freelance outdoor writer from Fincastle, Virginia. He writes a weekly blog at bruceingramoutdoors.com.