

2.2 From Project Goals to Landowner Actions

The first step toward effective landowner outreach is to be clear about what change you want to see on the ground. Once you have articulated your program goal and established reasonable parameters (see [Section 2.1: Defining Project Goals](#)), then you can identify what it is you want landowners to do in response to your outreach or intervention.

The connection between your program goals and desired landowner actions is not always easy and direct. Almost always, desired landscape changes can be achieved through different types of landowner actions. For example, if your program goal is to improve water quality in a critical watershed, this can be achieved by asking landowners to do any of the following actions:

- Remove invasive plants that contribute to increased runoff
- Plant riparian buffers or improve existing buffers
- Use best practices related to roads and culverts when conducting a timber harvest
- Reduce inappropriate use of chemicals and fertilizers
- Prevent development on their land

These actions may have different levels of applicability and attractiveness for different landowners, and they may have different levels of impact on your program goal. You may want to choose an action that is easier, or one you think landowners will be more likely to

take, so you can engage a broader set of people. Alternatively, you may choose an action that is the most vital for reaching your landscape goal, although it might be very challenging and less widely adopted.

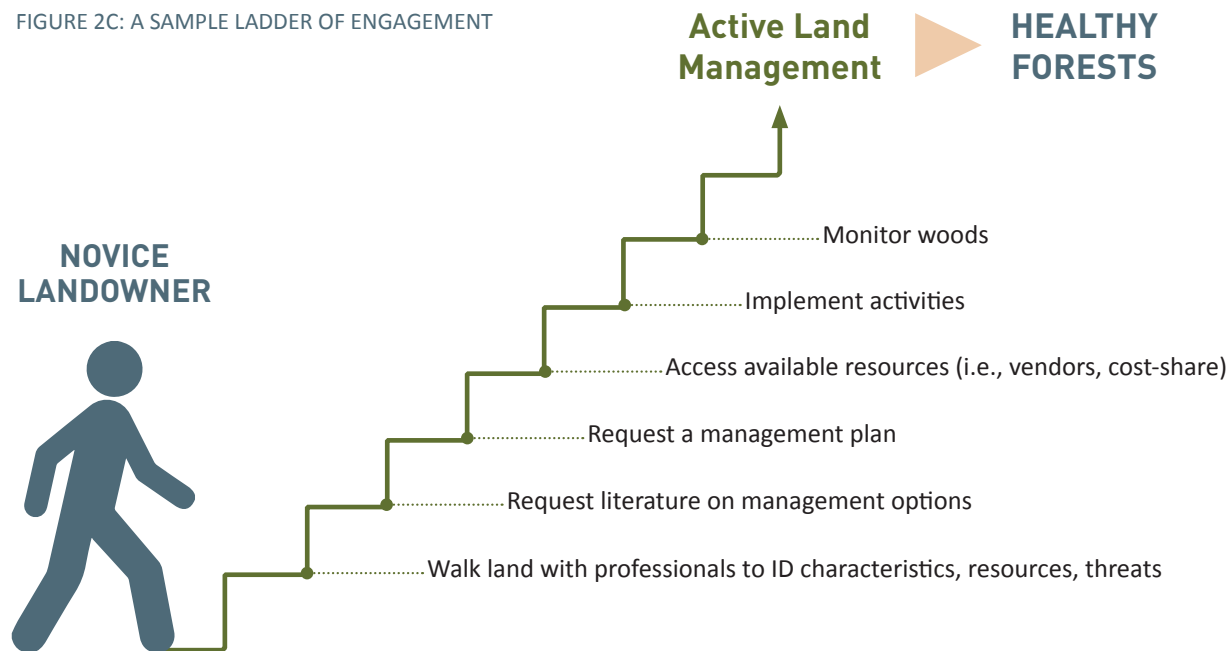
Once you have selected a landowner action that you want to pursue, you will need to break it down further. Any action you ask landowners to take almost always involves a series of steps, and depending on their current level of knowledge and engagement, some landowners may feel overwhelmed by stewardship actions or feel the actions are irrelevant. As communicators, it is our job to meet landowners where they are and help them move toward better stewardship one small step at a time. In many cases, this means starting with “gateway” actions (such as asking landowners to seek more information or contact a professional and then moving on to simple stewardship actions and, perhaps, periodic contact with forestry professionals). Finally, as landowners’ trust, confidence, and commitment grow, they may be open to bigger investments that yield higher conservation values.

All these considerations can make it difficult to articulate a clear and specific ask of landowners. The Tools for Engaging Landowners Effectively (TELE) method uses a tool called the Ladder of Engagement to help you think critically and systematically about what you want landowners to do and to determine how you will engage them to achieve your conservation or management goals.

Any landscape challenge can be addressed by a range of actions, which have different relevance and attractiveness for landowners. Getting landowners on the path to stewardship often involves starting with actions that they are able and willing to take.

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FIGURE 2C: A SAMPLE LADDER OF ENGAGEMENT



THE LADDER OF ENGAGEMENT

The Ladder of Engagement is a pictorial depiction of the steps and actions that you want landowners to take so you can accomplish your conservation or management goals.

The sample ladder above shows the steps a landowner might take to become a “model landowner” who is actively managing their land, thereby contributing to your goal of improving forest health. Clearly, it is unreasonable to expect landowners to jump from knowing nothing about forest management (novice) to being a model owner who implements management practices, monitors their impacts, and adjusts as needed. In the example above, the novice landowner starts by learning something about their land and thinking about how they want to use it. They then may request a management plan and access resources to help them implement recommended management activities. Only then do they actually begin managing their land (which still might involve learning new skills, getting equipment, or figuring out how to hire a contractor).

The purpose of outlining this Ladder of Engagement is to help you think through different engagement pathways and articulate a clear ask of landowners at different steps of the process. Not all landowners

will take the exact same path. Some landowners may learn about management options through a different mechanism or want to learn about cost-share opportunities before they get a management plan. Perhaps some landowners will skip a step here or there, or some of the steps will need to be repeated. Nevertheless, it is useful to think about what path you ideally want them to take and describe all the steps along that path. There are always other options available to people, but knowing the most typical and desired pathway will help you focus your outreach and get more people moving down that path. Outlining the steps helps to ensure that you are setting reasonable expectations for landowners along the way.

Once you have fleshed out a ladder ([see box: Tips for Developing a Ladder of Engagement](#)), you can identify landowners’ current levels of readiness regarding the action you desire and pinpoint the focus of your outreach efforts. For example, if most landowners in your area are already familiar with their own forest resources, then you might start engaging with them by offering a workshop on forest management options. However, if most landowners are further down the ladder, you may need to start with a simple woods walk to help them understand their woods better. Conversely, if many landowners

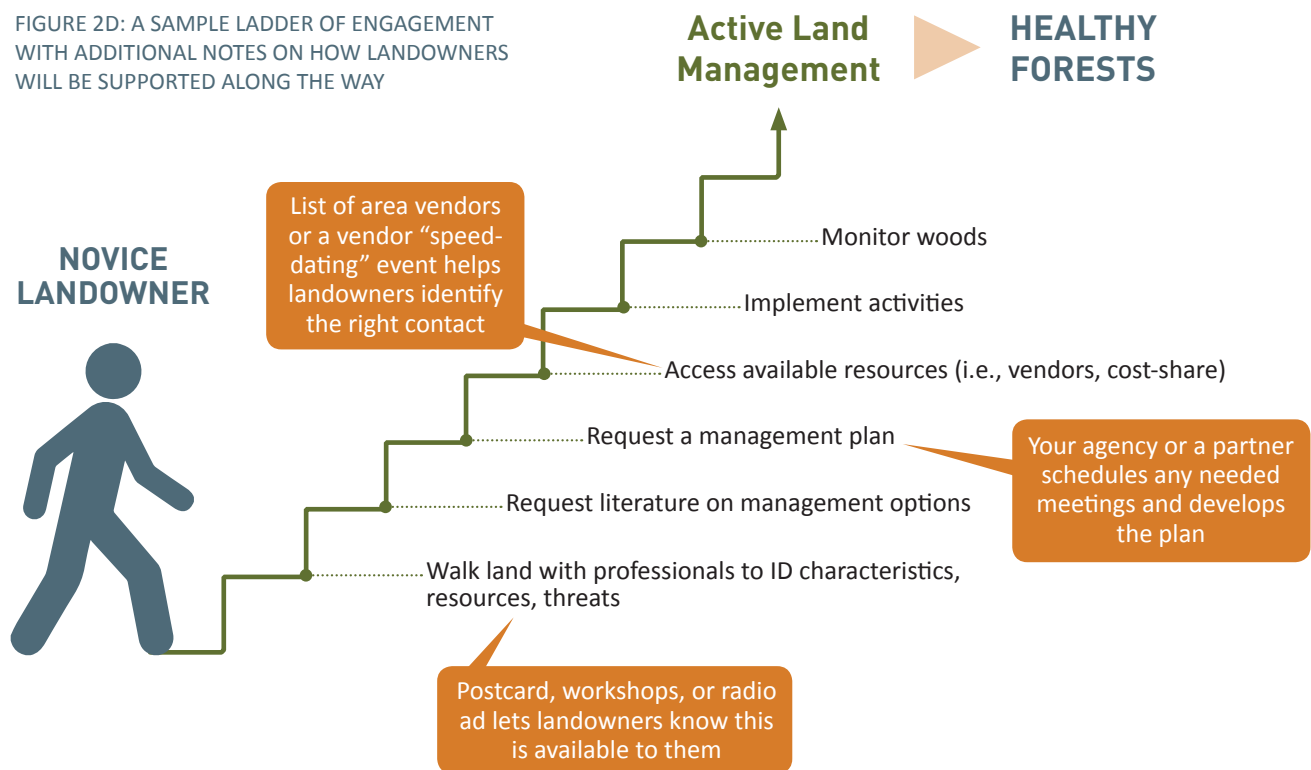
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in your area already have management plans, it may be more efficient to invest your outreach resources in motivating them to implement planned activities.

Outlining the Ladder of Engagement also helps you recognize that landowners need support to get from where they are to where you'd like them to be. The ladder also helps ensure that you are providing needed resources and support at each step along the way. In our sample ladder below, for instance, landowners may not know that there are professionals available to help them learn about and set goals for their land. Landowners will also need to work with a professional to develop a management plan; you might want to provide that service yourself or refer them to other vendors. Finally, landowners may need assistance in identifying vendors to implement treatments on their land.

Outlining your Ladder of Engagement allows you to set milestones and metrics to track landowner interest and engagement at different steps of the ladder (see [Section 8.2: Selecting Metrics and Collecting Data](#)). For example, your outreach efforts may persuade 100 novice landowners to request a walk with a forester. However, only half of them may choose to go the next step to meet with a professional to request a management plan. Another check might reveal that only a third of those who have a management plan actually conducted the recommended activities. Noting where and how attrition occurs can help you understand how many landowners you need to reach to achieve your goals and where and how you need to offer landowners more incentives, motivation, or support to keep them engaged.

FIGURE 2D: A SAMPLE LADDER OF ENGAGEMENT WITH ADDITIONAL NOTES ON HOW LANDOWNERS WILL BE SUPPORTED ALONG THE WAY



Breaking down the desired landowner behavior into specific actions reveals the complexity of what you're asking landowners to do and reminds you to offer needed information, services, or referrals to help translate landowners' good intentions into meaningful actions.

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TIPS FOR DEVELOPING A LADDER OF ENGAGEMENT

The following tips will help you outline a clear path of landowner actions that will ultimately help achieve your landscape goal. You can then use the outline to see where landowners may need assistance, and your programming can support them to take the next step.

- Rather than beginning by writing down the actions of a novice landowner and working your way up toward a model landowner, it's often easier to start by thinking about the actions you believe a model landowner would take to help address your conservation goal. Then, work backward, identifying what a landowner would need to do before undertaking the action you just wrote.
- Break down the actions into smaller specific steps. For example: "Remove invasive species" involves learning to identify them, learning how to remove them, getting access to the right equipment, etc. "Sign up for cost-share" entails checking eligibility, filling out the form, having the form signed by a forester, having the form signed by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, waiting for the application to return, doing the work, asking for reimbursement, etc.
- For each step, focus on what you want the landowner to do (not on what you want them to think or what you will do). Make the steps concrete—i.e., something you can see. Use action words. For example: Instead of "care about water quality," say, "attend a workshop to learn about how the health of the watershed affects them." Instead of "understand forest regeneration," say, "meet with a professional to learn about their forest's regeneration prospects."
- Identify alternative paths (i.e., do-it-yourself versus hiring a contractor).
- Identify steps you can eliminate. For example:
 - Do they need to understand your project or funding? (The answer is almost always "no.")
 - Can you assess their property instead of having them do it?
 - Must they travel to two offices to get the necessary signatures?
- Determine what assistance you'll need to provide landowners at each step of the ladder, and who will provide it.
- Determine the first step you want landowners to take—i.e., what you'll ask them to do in your first communication with them. This should be a relatively simple action that the landowner is able to take and that you can persuade them to take without much education and preparation. In fact, attending your educational session may be the first step you want landowners to take to enter your program.