

HOW TO BUY LAND – A CHECKLIST FOR EVERY BUYER

A land purchase is a long-term investment. And, buying land is different from buying a house, so we have compiled this checklist for your reference during your land research.

1. BEFORE YOU START YOUR SEARCH, DO YOU KNOW WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

The main considerations for most buyers are:

Price: What is your budget? Land is sometimes sold with a price tag, but more often you'll see land prices in terms of price per acre. Bear in mind that you may be able to negotiate with the seller to divide a tract to help meet your budget.

Location: Do you need your land to be located in a specific county or state? Or are you open to various locations as long as the land is within a set travel distance from your primary residence? How often will you be traveling to your tract?

Size: Do you need a specific size or are you flexible on acreage to accommodate your budget? Can you manage 2,000 acres or would 75 acres be a better fit?

Intended use: You may be looking for land for hunting. But did you know you can help generate income by selling mature timber on your land? Most people wind up using their land for some combination of timber investment, hunting, conservation or just securing a place for a country retreat.

Necessary amenities/utilities: Depending on your intended use, there are a variety of amenities and utilities that can mean the difference between enjoying your land right away, or spending more time and money making improvements. Find out which factors are important to you so you know what to look for:

- **Direct tract access from existing roads:** Do you access the tract from main public roads? If you have to drive through private property to reach your tract, make sure you secure that right on paper.
- **Existing on-tract roads:** Can you drive through the tract on existing roads? No existing roads can mean having to clear trees to make your own. Even creating a gravel road can take thousands of dollars.
- **Timber:** If you're expecting the tract to yield a return on your investment, what are the timber types, what are the stand locations, are there multiple ages for a continuous harvesting cycle, etc.? Make sure the seller can provide records that give the full history of the land's timber.
- **Wildlife:** What types of wildlife are on the land? Has the land been managed for wildlife? Are there records of existing wildlife habitats?
- **Water features:** How important is river access, or having creeks or stocked ponds on property? Some sellers may be able to create a man-made pond on a property if that's something you require.
- **Drainage:** How does the site drain during wet weather? How does this affect timber, home site or river bank water levels?
- **Home site options:** Are there clear spots that would make good home, cabin or camping sites?
- **Municipal electric power and water:** Are they readily accessible? Will you need to drill your own well?
- **Property Boundary Lines:** Are the property boundaries established and well-marked? If not, the added cost of a survey may be required to determine the location of the boundaries.

2. NOW THAT YOU KNOW WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING FOR, START YOUR SEARCH!

You may find that your “must haves” and “nice to haves” will evolve as you learn about the available land options, but now you have a set of criteria for evaluating each tract.

How to search: Most people look for available tracts in a combination of places:

- **Online:** You can start with a Google search with keywords that broadly define what you are looking for (for example “Virginia land for sale” or “Alabama hunting land”) to see what listings come up that meet your needs. Bookmark the sites that interest you or create a document with links to specific tracts in which you are interested in so you can return to those tracts later.
- **Special interest magazines:** If you’re a hunter, you may find hunting-oriented land for sale ads in a hunting magazine. If you’re interested in tree farming, you may find land in a timber trade publication.
- **Newspapers:** You can also find listings in local newspaper classified sections – most of which will direct you to a website for more information.

Types of sellers: As you search for tracts that meet your needs, you’ll realize there are different types of sellers. There are varying degrees of information each type of seller will be able to provide you so be sure that your seller is able to meet your needs in terms of information, knowledge of the land and understanding and counseling.

- Some individual tracts are listed for sale by owner.
- Some land is listed with a real estate agency that represents land belonging to many different people.
- Some land is listed by companies who are the sole owners of thousands of acres, like MWV Land Sales.

3. YOUR “SHORT LIST”

Once you’ve zeroed in on a particular tract, take a few steps to make sure there are no surprises in the end.

Enlist a specialist: A rural land specialist may be the person selling the land, or an outside source in the area. Make sure you are working with someone who understands land transactions and has a history with the property.

Clean titles: Ask your seller about the land’s title – is it clear of all claims, disputed interests or liens? Title defects have been the downfall of many land transactions so make sure you talk to your seller about this.

How is the land zoned? Consult your land specialist or go to the local planning and zoning department to consult records and authorities for advice. You’re not only looking for what you can or can’t do with your land, but also what might happen to the land around you, over time. Find out if there are any local land ordinances that apply to the tract.

What are the land’s records? What is the history of the place – for example, caretaking, soil quality, timber ages, marked boundaries, etc.

4. READY TO BUY?

You’ve found the tract you want to call your own. The last steps are important.

Rural Land Taxes: Did you know that taxes may be different for rural land? Some states and counties give special tax consideration to rural land through various managed timberland programs.

- **Are you a candidate for an easement?** Conservation easements permanently restrict uses of land – even if you sell it to another owner – so easements aren’t for everyone. But if you want to preserve the land into perpetuity and perhaps secure tax advantages or financial incentives, find out what conservation easements are available to you.
- **Financing:** Your best bet is a local bank or Farm Credit lender. Ask your land specialist for recommendations in your area.

5. WHEN IT'S YOUR LAND

Enjoy it! There are things you can do to keep your land in great shape and get the most out of it for years to come.

Records: Make sure you have the records from your owner so you can reference them now or in the future. These are the basis for a great plan – and valuable if you ever plan to sell your land in the future!

Associations: There are also a number of groups that share your passions and are anxious to help you thrive. For timber management, join the Forest Landowners Association, American Tree Farm System, or your state forestry association. For wildlife management, the Quality Deer Management Association, Wild Turkey Federation, Ruffed Grouse Society and others can advise you on best practices.

Know the local info: Your state agencies can help you navigate government policies and guidelines that are specific to your area.