

## Field Notes – Summer 2019

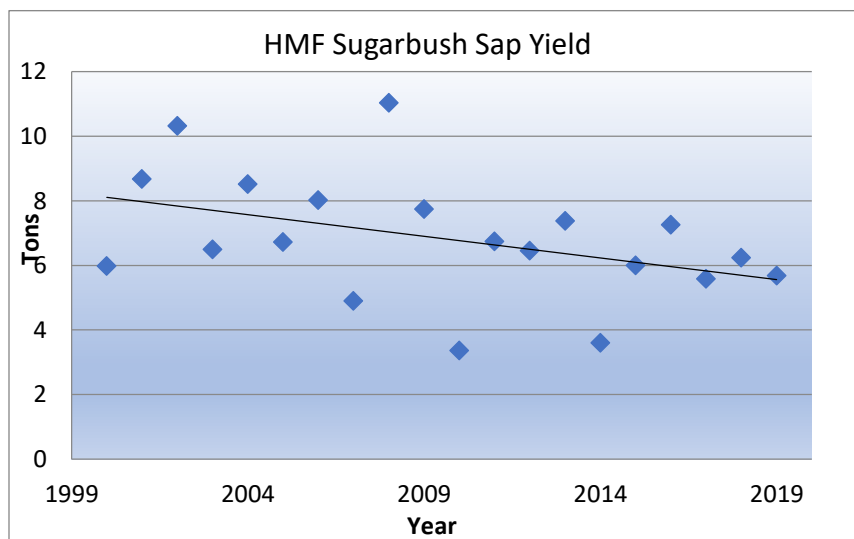
### ***Sugar Blues: News from the Hopkins Forest Sugarbush***

We recently cleaned out the sugar house, completing the 20<sup>th</sup> season of maple sugaring in my tenure at Hopkins Forest. As the gritty crew of spring caretakers scrubbed and put away the last bucket, hose and tank, we got down to the business of bottling this year's yield. Thanks to Jay Racela, Tom Merrill, Kristen Bayrakdarian '20 and her troop of hardy cohorts (who volunteered over spring break) they were able to keep the season going even as I disappeared into the Arizona desert to join the Outing Club's annual service trip. Based on past experience, I could have expected the season to be winding down by the latter half of March, but with this spring's sluggish arrival, the maples were just starting to run in earnest.

Due in large part to our devoted volunteers we managed to bottle 28.5 gallons of syrup from 1420 gallons of sap harvested from the trees along Northwest Hill Road and the grove that surrounds the sugar house. These totals are in line with those of the last few years but notably short of our production levels of the early 2000s, and the numbers are clear on that.

Since 2000 -- our first year of keeping records -- the HMF operation has experienced a 25 percent decrease in the amount of sap and syrup produced in spite of using essentially the same trees, equipment and techniques. Although we do still have an occasional "big run" which fills the entire 350-gallon holding tank (as happened on March 21st of this year) and keeps us up boiling into the morning hours, the tendency has been toward smaller runs and shorter boil-times (though perhaps a little more sleep).

People often ask me about the season: the production, the trend etc., and what factors might be influencing them. These questions certainly are subject to a variety of interpretations as you talk to producers around the region. While the number of trees tapped in HMF has remained essentially constant for twenty years, if you take a closer look at them, signs of stress appear. Walking up Northwest Hill Road you will notice that many of our maples -- planted 110 years ago under the direction of Amos L. Hopkins -- are clearly in a state of decline, and a good number have already given out. Indeed, life for a hardwood tree best adapted to deep, fertile soils can be tough when it has to grow in less hospitable places, such as bordering drainage ditches and road-side troughs. Many of these trees, which have grown quite massive over the



last century, have had their roots repeatedly cropped and exposed by road crews with excavators, an activity that could hardly have been imagined in the era of their planting. As these trees battle the burdens of time and tampering, it's easy to understand why their vigor to produce and pump a steady supply of sugars have been impaired.

There is some good news in this however, and we have reason to suspect that our maple woes may be eased if not completely reversed soon.

As you wander past the Rosenberg Center and into the sugarbush you may notice that for every large, senescent tree, there are 2-3 young and vigorous ones that are joining the ranks of the sap producers. This is not completely by chance; for more than a decade, student caretakers have assisted with thinning and culling in order to stimulate growth in the younger cohort of maples, which happens to have self-seeded into an aging poplar plantation. And their work has begun to pay: recently we've begun to tap several of the newer trees each year. Young and straight, and growing on the richer, protected soils of the forest itself, these 12-inch diameter specimens will be well positioned to contribute their sugars for decades to come and, with another thirty to forty in the fold, eventually replace their expiring predecessors. Thus, there is hope for the next generation or two of Hopkins Forest caretakers and maple connoisseurs; what lies beyond that, however, will require more than just sound, proactive forest management to forestall.

-Drew Jones

June 2019



First grade maple helpers