



Family Forest Stewardship: Getting to the Next Million Acres

A Conference of the Vital Forests/Vital Communities Initiative

**May 25, 2006
Saint John's University, Collegeville Minnesota**

Official Conference Proceedings

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On May 25, 2006, over 70 family forest land owners, forestry professionals, policy makers and forest lovers met at Saint John's University to discuss efforts to foster and encourage sustainable forestry practices among family forest owners. ***Conference participants achieved consensus on a strategic vision and action plan to increase the number of acres of family forest land with Forest Stewardship Management Plans from 1.3 million today to 2.3 million by 2015.***

The conference was sponsored by the Foundation's Vital Forest/Vital Communities Initiative, part of Blandin Foundation's commitment to fostering economically vital communities. Vital Forests/Vital Communities aims to increase the competitiveness of Minnesota's forest-based industry, improve the quality and sustainability of our forest resource and improve the economic vitality of Minnesota's forest-dependent communities. The Initiative is aligned with the Foundation's broader mission – to strengthen rural Minnesota communities, especially the Grand Rapids area - because the health of the forests and forest-based businesses directly affects rural communities. The conference's focus on family forest stewardship is in service to the **Vital Forests/Vital Communities Initiative's** objective to increase the number of acres of family forestland being actively and sustainably managed. [Click here to view a complete list of Initiative objectives.](#)

Rationale for the conference

The context in which the conference sought to increase the number of acres of family forest land under sustainable management includes:

- Complex ownership patterns
- Reduced harvest levels on the federal forests, resulting in increased pressure to manage forests for wood and fiber production on fewer acres
- Demographic trends accelerating changing patterns of forest ownership
- Forest fragmentation and increasing demands on the state's forest resources and public forest management infrastructure.

Privately owned forests are the state's largest source of timber, supplying over 50 percent of the state's annual harvest. Over 200,000 individuals, families and other non-industrial owners hold slightly more than three-fourths of the state's privately owned land, amounting to nearly six million acres. This highlights a need to focus limited resources for forestry education and technical assistance to these private landowners more effectively. Effective communication of sound forest management practices is a major challenge for ensuring productive and sustainable forestlands now and into the future. And while ***a major premise of the conference was that stewardship plans are best proxy for sustainable forestry practices***, less than 20 percent of these family forest land owners currently have forest management plans.

Doug McKenzie-Mohr challenged participants – “Fostering Sustainable Behavior: An Introduction to Community-Based Social Marketing”

Dr. McKenzie-Mohr, author, professor, and international consultant from Canada, helped develop the concept of **community-based social marketing**. During his lunch time keynote address, McKrenzie-Mohr challenged participants to apply these concepts and strategies to the conference goal of reaching consensus on a strategic vision and action plan to increase the number of acres of family forest land under stewardship. According to McKenzie-Mohr, advocates of increasing the adoption of forest management plans need to clearly identify the behaviors they want to see, as well as the barriers and benefits of achieving these changed behaviors, develop strategies that address the benefits and barriers to change and pilot strategies before bringing them to scale. McKenzie-Mohr expanded on themes he raised in a full-day training the previous day attended by 47 professionals representing state and county agencies, academia and nonprofit sectors.

In response to McKenzie-Mohr's challenge that specific behaviors associated with the forest stewardship goal had not yet been identified, a group of conference participants called an impromptu meeting after lunch to begin that task. The list of behaviors they identified included such examples as routinely walking their lands, piling brush to create habitat and contacting a forester before they cut.

Blandin Foundation is exploring opportunities to apply McKenzie-Mohr's approach to the conference goal and action plan.

Saint John's University hosts a guided tour

Tom Kroll, Land Manager and Arboretum Director at Saint John's Abbey and University, led a guided tour of the 2,500 acre Arboretum where its oak management is an excellent example of its sustainable forestry practices. The Arboretum also provides environmental educational opportunities to 4,500 students per year.

Conference Outcomes

In addition to endorsing a strategic vision of dramatically increasing the number of acres of family forest land under sustainable management, participants were asked to consider a set of specific recommendations designed to achieve that vision over the next decade. The [draft recommendations](#), sent out to participants as pre-conference reading and developed over the last year by a wide range of people interested in the future of Minnesota's forests, was presented for discussion. To help inform the conference discussion, participants heard from a [panel of forest professionals](#) who shared their perspectives on the proposed recommendations.

*Participants solidly affirmed **Recommendation 1: Increase family forest land under sustainable management.** Specific 2015 goals agreed to include:*

- Prepare Forest Stewardship plans for 1 million acres of Minnesota family forest land that do not currently have plans
- Update, as needed, the Forest Stewardship plans on the 1.3 million acres of family forest land that already have plans
- Enroll 20 percent of family forest land – about 1.2 million acres – in sustainable certification programs
- Assure 80-100 full-time equivalent foresters and other natural resource professionals from both the private and public sector are available to provide stewardship plan preparation and implementation services for family forest owners.

The existing capacity to deliver stewardship plans in the state has resulted in an average of about 65,000 acres of new stewardship plans prepared per year. To meet the new goal, capacity (and demand for plans) would need to be increased by about 45,000 acres per year.

Doug Anderson, Community and Private Lands Program Supervisor for the DNR's Division of Forestry, announced that to advance the goal of enrolling 20 percent of family forest lands in third party certification systems, the DNR, with financial support from Blandin Foundation, had retained Scientific Certification Systems (SCS) to develop a scoping paper that outlines what would be required to bring the DNR's Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) under some sort of Group Certification System.

SCS looked specifically at two options for group certification: Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) group certification and Tree Farm System (ATFS) Group Certification. Anderson announced the study findings to participants. Read the [summary](#) or [full report](#).

In sum, the evaluators concluded that the DNR's Forest Stewardship Program is "generally compatible" with both group certification systems. However, a number of gaps were identified. Anderson reported that the Forest Stewardship Committee, the DNR, and other partners will use the report findings to assess costs and benefits of group certification. If a decision is made to move forward, and if required funding is made available, the participants in the FSP would be offered the option of joining a group designed to achieve either or both FSC and ATFS certification.

Recognizing that achieving the goal of preparing, by 2015, one million additional acres of forest stewardship plans for private landowners will require additional resources, participants strongly endorsed **Recommendation 2: Establish a Family Forest Initiative Fund of approximately \$2,000,000.00 (annual) that is self-sustaining and managed through the Forest Resource Management section of DNR.** Funds would be used to pay for preparing new Stewardship plans on family forests, updating existing Stewardship plans as cost share to land owners for plan implementation, and to support educational and technical assistance delivery to family forest land owners. [\(See the pre-conference reading for details on the proposal for how these funds would be allocated among these purposes\)](#). Participants noted that these funds are unlikely to come from a single source, and recommended that the Vital Forests/Vital Communities Initiative continue to work with all interested parties to identify possible strategies for securing sustained and dedicated funding sources.

Participants discussed a number of specific strategies for creating this funding stream, including:

- Seek funds through the newly reconstituted Legislative and Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR)
- Explore opportunities through the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) and the Department of Energy (DOE) to use existing programs to provide financial and/or technical support for forest-based businesses
- Collect a \$.125 per cord surcharge on wood harvested from family forest land.

Participants also believe opportunities exist to enter into a coalition with others seeking dedicated sales tax revenues for natural resource management.

With the conference goal of improving the effectiveness of SFIA as a policy tool, participants endorsed **Recommendation 3: Revise the Sustainable Forestry Incentive Act.** This recommendation was based on a [report developed by the SFIA Work Group](#), convened by Minnesota Forestry Association (MFA) in Fall 2005.

Blandin Foundation announced it is prepared to move immediately to fund one of the Working Group's key recommendations: a research study to investigate optimal SFIA incentive payment structures. In response to the presentation by Doug McKenzie-Mohr, conference participants urged that the research be used to identify other, non-monetary, incentives for participation in SFIA, such as a visit by a forest professional.

Participants discussed a number of ideas developed under the leadership of Saint John's Arboretum Director Tom Kroll in support of **Recommendation 4: Revamp the *ad valorem* property tax system's inherent bias to overtax undeveloped land in comparison to developed land with respect to the public services provided to their owners.** Currently the tax rates for undeveloped forests and other wild land are the same as for an urban home site or a rural home site, despite the fact that developed sites need many more services than undeveloped land (e.g. schools, police and roads). Such a disparity helps drive parcelization and development of forest lands. Further, undeveloped agricultural land is currently taxed at about half the rate of undeveloped forest land.

Kroll suggested a number of specific steps to address these disparities, including:

- Lead a reassessment of Minnesota's property tax system to reduce the tax rate for the classification "timberland" (old 2b) from 1.00 to 0.55 to match undeveloped agriculture land
- Establish clear minimum criteria for participation in this class that will promote forest sustainability
- Assure that the revised system is available to all forest landowners who meet minimum criteria
- Assure that undeveloped land now in the "seasonal recreational" class is also eligible for this benefit.

Kroll noted that a recent [Department of Revenue \(DOR\) report, drafted at the request of the Minnesota State Legislature](#), addresses some of these points. The Vital Forests/Vital Communities Advisory Board, in collaboration with the Minnesota Forest Resources Council and other key partners, is committed to exploring opportunities to leverage and build on the DOR's recommendations as a key strategy for protecting Minnesota's forest land base and increasing the number of acres under stewardship.

Participant Feedback about the Conference

Fifty-six (or 77 percent) of 73 conference participants completed the conference evaluation. Public land managers, representatives from environmental/conservation organizations and forest land owners comprised nearly 60 percent of the participants with state officials, private citizens, consultants, academics and others from industry present as well.

100 percent of the respondents reported that the conference helped them establish or reinforce professional relationships with people who are working toward the same family forest land management goals. While nearly all (98 percent) thought that family owned land stewardship was important to the state's forest and forest industry, nearly half said their views were changed by the conference. Comments ranged from appreciation for information about the complexities of increasing stewardship plans among private forest owners to a sense that the conference was a constructive force to making progress. Seventy-two percent indicated their own forestlands are certified or under an active management plan. Nearly 40 percent said the conference would specifically impact their actions on land they own or manage.

Participants cited the quality of the presentations and thought the focused interactive discussions were productive. Several appreciated the conference planners' willingness to shift gears to include discussions on behavior change prompted by MacKenzie-Mohr's presentation without losing the central focus of the conference and reaching consensus on a strategic vision and action plan to increase the number of acres of family forest land with Forest Stewardship Management Plans from 1.3 million today to 2.3 million by 2015.