

Vital Forests | Vital Communities

Growing Minnesota's Advantage in a Global Economy

A Blandin Foundation Initiative

Blandin Foundation Credibility: Phase 2

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Executive Summary

Introduction

As part of its Vital Forests / Vital Communities Initiative, the Blandin Foundation seeks an understanding of its credibility in undertaking the effort and an assessment of progress made to date. The first review was done late in 2003; this paper summarizes the second review done for 2004.¹

The assessment was based on structured telephone interviews with 39 people on the Initiative's mail list (see Appendix for questions. People interviewed included: Public land managers [5]; University / researchers [6]; Industry (manufacturing and land managers) [14]; Environmental / conservation groups [4]; Loggers [2]; Business development [4]; Other private [4].

Blandin Foundation's Overall Credibility

The Blandin Foundation's perceived credibility to undertake this initiative with objectivity and effectiveness remains universally and exceptionally high. Of the 30 people responding to this question in the second survey 18 said the Foundation is "very credible" and 7 said "credible". In neither the 2003 nor 2004 assessments did any respondent find the Foundation to not be credible.

Initiative Credibility

Regarding the Foundation's credibility and capacity for carrying out the Vital Forests / Vital Communities Initiative, the following conclusions can be drawn [the first three are same as last year]:

- The Initiative is seen as crucial to Minnesota, its forested landscape, and to the economic vitality of the industries and communities that rely on the forests.
- The Blandin Foundation is widely perceived as being a credible, if not *the* credible, entity for undertaking such an effort given the rancor and political dynamics that have accompanied debate around this subject within the state.
- The keys to the Foundation's credibility lie with its neutrality, effectiveness in process, location in rural Minnesota, and willingness to support results.
- Everyone feels the initiative is worth undertaking and it is generally progressing on the right track.
- People remain committed to participating in the initiative.
- The process of making hard decisions, especially to fund projects, creates "winners and losers" and provides fodder for discussions as to the true direction of the initiative. There is little in-depth awareness of the projects supported by the initiative although most of the general topics funded were seen as high priorities.

¹ Applied Insights^{north}, "Vital Forests/Vital Communities: A Blandin Foundation Initiative, Blandin Foundation Credibility: Phase 2", December 7, 2004.

Blandin Foundation Credibility: Phase 2

Introduction

As part of its Vital Forests / Vital Communities Initiative, the Blandin Foundation seeks an understanding of its credibility in undertaking the effort and an assessment of progress made to date. This review is the second of this type, the first being done in December of last year.²

The assessment was based on structured telephone interviews with people on the Initiative's mail list (see Appendix for questions). Applied Insights^{north} established a pool of 50 people to interview; 25 had been interviewed for the first assessment and 25 others were selected at random from the Initiative's mail list. Several names were replaced due to missing or disconnected telephone numbers, job relocation, and similar factors. Repeated attempts were made to contact every person on the list; a total of 39 people were eventually contacted and surveyed. People interviewed included:

- Public land managers [5];
- University / researchers [6];
- Industry (manufacturing and land managers) [14];
- Environmental / conservation groups [4];
- Loggers [2];
- Business development [4];
- Other private [4].

Of the group, 19 had been interviewed as part of last year's assessment.

Blandin Foundation Credibility

The Blandin Foundation's perceived credibility to undertake this initiative with objectivity and effectiveness remains universally and exceptionally high. Of the 30 people responding to this question in the second survey 18 said the Foundation is "very credible" and 7 said "credible". In neither assessment did any respondent find the Foundation to not be credible.

Table 1. Perceived Credibility of Blandin Foundation to Carry Out Vital Forests / Vital Communities Initiative with Objectivity and Effectiveness	
Perception	Number of Respondents
Very Credible	18
Credible	7
Needs Improvement	3
Not at all Credible	0
Don't Know / Unsure	2

Last year's basic findings remain fully valid today: "The Foundation's credibility lies in its perceived neutrality in a contentious subject, its renown for having a positive track record in other endeavors, the level and quality of effort being applied to the Initiative, the openness of the staff and process, and the Foundation's willingness to back this effort with

² Applied Insights^{north}, "Vital Forests/Vital Communities: A Blandin Foundation Initiative, Blandin Foundation Credibility: Phase 1", December 4, 2003.

financial support. It was a commonly stated opinion that an effort of this type could only be undertaken by an entity such as the Blandin Foundation.”

Further, as was the case last year, many respondents said the Foundation’s credibility arose from its history, the fact its very name is linked to the forest products industry, and its physical location in a rural, forested area community. Everyone said the Blandin Foundation is broadly credible and respected. One person observed that the Blandin name is directly associated with “integrity”.

As noted earlier, many respondents in the first assessment had taken a “proof is in the pudding” approach to the Foundation’s credibility. The second survey found most people saw that the pudding proved true – the Foundation’s credibility was solid.

However, three respondents in the second survey said the Blandin Foundation’s credibility “needs improvement.” One said more time is needed to evaluate decisions made under the initiative. Several others focused on the Advisory Board suggesting that its decision making and communication processes are not “transparent” and may be influenced more by personal agendas than the expressed will of the initiative’s participants.

One respondent, obviously referring to recent changes in personnel and overall direction at the Foundation itself, said that the “Blandin Foundation has finally reconnected to its northern Minnesota roots – this project is a good example of that effort.”

Level of Participation

The largest number of respondents (16) claimed to have no involvement in the Initiative up to that point. This is somewhat misleading since the investigator personally knew many of these people and knew that they *had* been involved through attendance at a conference or limited work with an action team. Many of those who claimed to have no involvement were nonetheless very informed about the Initiative and forest related issues (e.g., several noted they read all the Initiative’s email newsletters).

Thirteen people said they had limited involvement in the form of attending one or two conferences.

Four said they had more substantial involvement and five said they had extensive involvement (several of these are on the Initiative’s Advisory Board).

Understanding of the Initiative’s Purpose

The Phase 1 survey found that respondents felt the Initiative’s title succinctly stated its purpose. Nearly all respondents stated that the purpose linked forestry to economic development with a focus on rural, especially, northern Minnesota. If there was an emphasis underlying most comments in Phase 1 it was that the Initiative’s primary attention was on economic development. With rare exception this observation was offered with a positive connotation.

Findings from the Phase 2 survey were generally consistent with those of the first one. Most respondents said that the purpose was to support, enhance, or strengthen the forest products industry as an end in and of itself, and, as the means to support forest management and sustain viable rural communities

Most people felt that the initiative’s purpose has remained consistent over the past year although several noted that it is evolving or refining its focus over time. Some felt that the initiative has shifted more of its attention to secondary rather than primary industry; in the eyes of some this was a positive move while several felt it ignored the reality of the primary industry’s dominance.

Assessing First Round of Investments

Respondents were asked several questions regarding a number of Initiative projects funded by the Blandin Foundation in the past year. The first sought their level of awareness of the projects.

Project	Level of Awareness of the Project (1-5 ranking)				
	1 - None	2	3	4	5 – Very High
Third-party forest certification	4	3	3	3	18
Pigmented clay facility analysis	14	5	4	4	4
NIPF management plan preparation	9	5	3	7	6
Logger capacity	15	4	5	1	6
Management plan preparer capacity	16	2	3	5	5

Table 2 indicates that roughly half of the respondents were unaware of the listed projects. The “very high” awareness for third-party forest certification is deceptive; most of these respondents are aware of the general topic but judged by their general lack of knowledge of the other projects are equally likely to be unaware of the specific project funded by the foundation.

Respondents were then asked to rate the funded projects as to their level of priority relative to advancing the objectives of the Initiative.

Project	Perceived Priority of Project (1-5 ranking)					
	1 - Low	2	3	4	5 – High	Don't Know
Third-party forest certification	1	0	3	8	16	3
Pigmented clay facility analysis	3	4	5	2	5	12
NIPF management plan preparation	0	0	6	10	7	8
Logger capacity	1	0	1	11	8	10
Management plan preparer capacity	0	1	6	6	6	13

Action on third-party certification of forests is clearly a high priority with the respondents. The same can be said for enhancing logger capacity and encouraging more management plans on non-industrial privately owned forestland. Support for increasing the capacity of management plan preparers was a little less strong and this may be in good part due to a lack of understanding about the project.

The notably lower level of support for the pigmented clay facility analysis project is underscored by several comments. One person stated that this project was taking the initiative in the wrong direction. Another indicated that this type of project should be funded solely by industry. Yet another respondent, commenting on the project and the decision making process, said that this project did not emerge from the conference / action team portion of the process and smacked of an “insider” decision.

Future Initiative Investments

After evaluating current projects, respondents were asked to identify possible future investments that would advance the purpose of the initiative. The list was lengthy and diverse, but concepts that were mentioned most included:

- Industry support: product development, marketing (specific projects mentioned were the Minnesota Wood Campaign and Goods from the Woods).

- Education: of the general public about proper management, of the link between successful industries and land management.
- Forest management: third party certification and auditing, counteract parcelization, employ new harvesting techniques, consulting forester training, logger training and support, landscape level management perspective.
- Worker training: enhance value of workforce (within manufacturing and logging).
- Wood availability: work with USFS to secure more wood, work on cooperative ventures with NIPF, inform public and decision makers about state's reliance on imported resource.
- General guiding principles: think out-of-the-box; be flexible in approaches; continue with current projects; success will require persistence to generate momentum.

Is the Initiative Worth Undertaking? Is it on the Right Track?

In the first assessment the vast majority of respondents felt the Initiative was worth undertaking with no one saying it was not worth doing. Most were of the opinion that the Initiative was needed and were grateful that the Blandin Foundation had undertaken it. Finally, since that assessment occurred before the second major conference, many respondents adopted a "wait and see" attitude.

Now after more than a year into the Initiative it is clear that everyone feels the initiative is worth undertaking and that is generally progressing on the right track. As much as anything, people genuinely appreciate the fact that the Foundation is tackling a subject that is critical to the state and rural communities regardless of outcome – it's the attention to the subject and the dedication of personnel and money to it that is most important. Some typical comments include:

- Has initiated dialogue and gotten people thinking about new topics.
- Appears to have pulled all the appropriate players together.
- The Foundation is bringing people together and obviously trying to accomplish something of value.
- Foundation is in unique position to do this effort. It sees and understands the big picture and has the dollar resources to deal with the issue.
- Initiative is serving an important role. Glad to see the Foundation pushing it.

Strengths

As noted above, most respondents feel the initiative is important, positive, and is progressing in the right direction. People are pleased that the Foundation is undertaking it. Among the process's specific strengths identified by the respondents are:

- Facilitating an important process.
- Brought some good outside resource people into the process.
- It is well publicized. Very impressed with its visibility.
- Programs are trying to capture some of the needs and challenges of the overall issue.
- High level of commitment and passion by participants. Has brought a lot of good people together. A strong effort is being made to keep lots of people involved.
- Wisdom and experience of the Advisory Board.
- No one else could have done this.
- Feels he has the maximum opportunity to be involved in the initiative.
- It's helping people understand the issues.
- Support for the Minnesota Wood Campaign is a good thing.
- Public land management agency staff are being sensitized regarding the urgency of the tough economic situation facing regional manufacturers.

Weaknesses

Last year the initiative was new, people were withholding judgment, and, as a consequence, only identified a few weaknesses. These included: demanding too much of people's time to participate in the conferences and action teams; the voluntary nature of the process meant that several constituencies were not represented or were under represented; and, would the extensive process to date result in real action in the next phase?

Now, after the passing of a year with additional conferences, newsletters, and decisions to fund projects the range of possible topics and actions to criticize has greatly expanded. As a consequence, the list of specific concerns or perceived weaknesses in the initiative has lengthened. These include:

- "Capacity" conference was too expensive for the average person to attend. He didn't attend because of the cost and felt that the high cost effectively excluded the very people who should have attended.
- The process, particularly the decision making process, lacks transparency in communication. Some people have the perception that is a "closed door" process. Others are not sure what level of stakeholder involvement is desired or who has what role in the overall process.
- A potential issue is the likely need for checks and balances to make sure the Advisory Board is on the right track.
- The initiative has not yet wrapped its arms around the NIPF management plan action. Each failure to address this topic causes some loss in Foundation credibility.
- Feels there is a "bit of an agenda" to promote secondary industry and longer-lived forest management over primary industry and production.
- There is some disconnect between the Goods from the Woods event and the rest of the Vital Forests / Vital Communities initiative. The connection should be made to strengthen both efforts.

General Advice and Observations

A number of observations and statements of general advice were offered by the respondents. Among the more notable and/or often stated were:

- Hard to deal with conflicting vested interests. Foundation is doing a good job in this regard.
- There is great territorialism with the interests involved in this general topic. It is a tougher issue than first thought to overcome this.
- This is an appropriate commitment by the Blandin Foundation.
- There is a real sense of urgency – hardwood manufacturers are closing across the nation.
- The initiative is an evolving process. It has gotten the ears of policy makers. Need to keep the pressure on them.
- The Blandin Foundation staff was seen as being exceptionally competent, exercising good diplomatic skills, having gained a proper understanding of the issues, and running an overall good process.
- We should perceive that the primary "product" of the forest industry to be well-paying jobs.
- There is a need to continue with the initiative and to persist with funded projects so they have time to succeed.

Conclusions

Regarding the Blandin Foundation's credibility and capacity for carrying out the Vital Forests / Vital Communities Initiative, the following conclusions can be drawn [note: the first three are identical from last year's assessment]:

- The Initiative is seen as crucial to Minnesota, its forested landscape, and to the economic vitality of the industries and communities that rely on the forests.
- The Blandin Foundation is widely perceived as being a credible, if not *the* credible, entity for undertaking such an effort given the rancor and political dynamics that have accompanied debate around this subject within the state.
- The keys to the Foundation's credibility lie with its neutrality, effectiveness in process, location in rural Minnesota, and willingness to support results.

- After more than a year into the Initiative it is clear that everyone feels the initiative is worth undertaking and that is generally progressing on the right track. As much as anything, people genuinely appreciate the fact that the Foundation is tackling a subject that is critical to the state and rural communities regardless of outcome – it's the attention to the subject and the dedication of personnel and money to it that is most important.
- People remain committed to participating in the initiative. They see the process as being critical to the future of Minnesota's forests and forest products industry – furthering education of the general public, informing policy makers about the issues involved, introducing and fostering the application of new concepts in management and manufacturing, bringing people together on a regular basis, and exploring ways to unify the various interests behind a common cause.
- The process of making hard decisions, especially to fund projects, creates “winners and losers” and provides fodder for discussions as to the true direction of the initiative. There is little in-depth awareness of the projects supported by the initiative although most of the general topics funded (e.g., certification, NIPF stewardship plans, increasing capacity of loggers and plan preparers) were seen as high priorities.
- The decision to fund the pigmented clay facility analysis serves as a flashpoint for people concerned about the decision making process. Respondents who are “in the loop” and several that were not raised this concern. It was unambiguously asserted that certain members of the Advisory Board had their own agendas that came from outside of the conference/action team process, and, that the Board as a whole was not adequately balanced or representative of the interests involved. While some of this might be attributed to “sour grapes” over not getting desired projects considered for funding, the mere existence of such negative thinking should be a concern for the initiative.
- There is a subtle undercurrent intimating that the initiative is maybe not quite focused on the topics or projects having the most impact on the resource and the industry. Some of this can be attributed to the core difference of opinion between champions of primary versus secondary wood products industry (note: the Foundation is broadly is recognized as having done much to bridge this chasm, which, although bridged still remains). One example is Goods from the Woods. No one directly criticized the event and many found it laudable and successful. However, several respondents suggested that the event, even if fully successful, will not have measurable impact on either the regional economy or the forest resource. A more fundamental example begins with the assertion that appropriate forest management is financially underwritten by industries willing to buy the resource. By this line of thinking, the initiative should focus on strengthening these industries and their use of Minnesota's resources. Of course, the debate then shifts to which is more important, primary industry which by far and away uses the most local resource, or, secondary which currently doesn't use much of the resource but could/should/might. The debate over which is more vital – primary or secondary industry – is deep, profound, and at the heart of the entire initiative's success. The key is to persist, as the initiative has attempted to this point, to establish common ground between them and not pit one against the other.

Survey

On the following page is a copy of the structured interview instrument. After a brief introduction, respondents were asked the questions in the sequence indicated. Ad hoc follow-up questions were asked to seek clarification or expansion of comments. Many questions were open-ended and respondents were encouraged to offer as much commentary as possible whether directly relevant to the specific question or not.

A document with all the “raw” non-attributed comments has been sent to Blandin Foundation staff separately.

Blandin Foundation VF/VC Initiative Credibility Interview: 2004

Name: _____

Date: _____

Organization / position: _____ / _____

1. On a scale of 1-5 how would you rate your level of involvement in the Initiative up to this point?

1: none 2: attended one conference 3: attended both conferences 4: attended both conferences and served on action team 5: all that and more

Describe:

2. What is your current understanding of the Initiative's purpose and goals? Has your understanding changed over the past year? If so, in what way?

3. This year the Blandin Foundation funded several VF/VC projects. Please rate your awareness of the projects on a scale of 1-5 (1=not aware at all; 5 = very aware).

Third-party forest certification system:

Pigmented clay facility analysis for the paper industry:

Non-industrial private forest land management plan preparation:

Logger capacity:

Management plan preparer capacity:

On a scale of 1-5 please rate these projects regarding their appropriateness as priority projects (1 = Low priority; 5 = High priority); if unaware of project, indicate with "don't know" response.

Third-party forest certification system: / Don't know

Pigmented clay facility analysis for the paper industry: / Don't know

Non-industrial private forest land management plan preparation: / Don't know

Logger capacity: / Don't know

Management plan preparer capacity: / Don't know

What projects/topics supporting the goals of the Vital Forests initiative should be the focus of future investment by the Foundation?

4. What is your current assessment of the Initiative? What are its strengths and weaknesses? Is it progressing on the right track? If not, what would make it better?

5. In your opinion what is the credibility of the Blandin Foundation to carry out this Initiative with objectivity and effectiveness?

Very Credible Credible Needs improvement Not at all credible Don't know/unsure

6. Please explain the reason for your previous answer.

7. Do you have any other comments regarding this initiative you would like to express to the Blandin Foundation?