

# **Blandin Foundation Credibility: Phase 1**

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## **Introduction**

As part of the Blandin Foundation's Vital Forests / Vital Communities Initiative, the Foundation sought an understanding of its credibility in undertaking the effort and an assessment of progress made to date. This review provides a baseline from which the Initiative's progress can be examined and offers insights useful to Blandin for making any mid-course adjustments to its process.

Applied Insights<sup>north</sup> conducted telephone interviews of 25 participants in the Initiative. The people interviewed included loggers, public and private landowners, public agencies, industrial landowners, wood products industry, researchers, and special interests.

Most of the respondents had no experience with the Blandin Foundation prior to the Initiative. One-fifth had some experience with only one or two of them having any in-depth involvement with Foundation programs or grants.

## **Is the Initiative Worth Undertaking?**

The vast majority of respondents felt the Initiative is worth undertaking; no one said that it was not worth doing. Several were unsure, reserving their opinion until the project unfolds further.

This "wait and see" attitude was shared by many respondents. The phrase the "proof is in the pudding" was a typical observation; most people were looking forward to the December 10 conference as the test of the Initiative's worthiness.

Equally shared by the respondents was the opinion that this initiative was needed, a deep appreciation of the Foundation's undertaking of it, and the holding of high hopes and expectations that it will result in good things happening in Minnesota.

## **Blandin Foundation Credibility**

The Blandin Foundation is universally seen as an exceptionally credible entity for this effort. No one replied that the Foundation was not credible. Several indicated they were unsure or that it is too early to determine if the Foundation is credible relative to this effort.

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 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.

Several respondents said that the Foundation's credibility arose from its history, the fact its very name is linked to the paper industry, and its physical location in a rural, forested area community.

Because most of the people did not have prior experience with the Foundation, their perception was based upon what they have seen to date with this initiative and what they anticipate emerging from the December 10 conference. The ultimate test of credibility with these people, most of who would describe themselves as being practical and results oriented, is what follows December 10<sup>th</sup> – people are expecting concrete, visible, and effective action.

One side note is worth mentioning. Several people seemed to think the Blandin Foundation was still directly linked to UPM-Blandin Paper Company. For some this was a positive, suggesting that the Foundation knew and cared about forestry and the forest products industry. At least one person felt this was a negative association believing that some people (but not him) might think the Foundation was putting forth an industry agenda. Before the interview was over, anyone confusing the relationship between the two entities was informed about the separate status of the Foundation.

## **Understanding of the Initiative's Purpose**

Several respondents said the Initiative's title succinctly stated its purpose. Nearly all voiced similar sentiments stating that the purpose linked forestry to economic development with a focus in rural and northern Minnesota.

If there was an emphasis underlying most people's comments it was that the Initiative's primary attention was on economic development. With rare exception this observation was offered with a positive connotation.

Having said that, it must be noted that several industry representatives, who agreed with the general understanding of the Initiative's purpose, felt that industry was under represented in the process and that too much attention was being placed on forestry and not on the need to "add value".

## **Strength's and Weaknesses**

Respondents were asked to identify any strengths and weaknesses they have observed in the Initiative process to date.

### **Strengths**

Most respondents offered one or more strengths and the sentiment of most statements were commonly shared by the respondents. Strengths identified included:

- Effort is broad based; the right people are being involved; high level of energy and commitment by a wide range of participants.
- Blandin Foundation is broadly perceived as an effective, neutral entity.
- Initiative has convened a group that no one else could have brought together and has done so without political undertones.
- Time and care is being taken; facilities and facilitation are excellent; taking time to do it right.
- The full range of issues is being considered.
- Foundation has developed good understanding of the issues.

### **Weaknesses**

A number of weaknesses were offered but, unlike the strengths, few were broadly shared. Perhaps the most common complaint involved the process itself. Several people said that it was too bureaucratic, too demanding of time, and involved too much communication. A couple others felt that not enough time was being allowed, either at the initial conference itself or for the action teams.

Several people observed that the voluntary nature of the process was a weakness. They noted that several constituencies were not represented or were under represented; these included recreational interests, woods products industry, loggers, and non-timber products interests.

Then there was the variant of what could be termed the theme of the interviews – there has been a lot of process to date but not many results, will real action emerge from the next phase?

### **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:

- Will the Foundation accept directives from the groups, especially when they might conflict with Foundation's expectations? Associated with this was a concern that not all the ideas that *should* be considered will emerge from the volunteer action teams.
- People who were involved in the action teams had a greater sense of the Initiative's purpose and possessed a deeper feeling that something was happening.
- 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.
- Most participants are self-identified practical people who are seeking on the ground results from this effort.

- Having embarked on this urgently needed, creative, and balanced initiative the Foundation must stay the course. The Foundation cannot allow itself to be pulled off this track by people who naturally resist change. If this Initiative doesn't get it done, then nothing will make it.

## **Conclusions**

Regarding the Blandin Foundation's credibility and capacity for carrying out the Vital Forests / Vital Communities Initiative, the following conclusions can be drawn at this time:

- 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.
- The December 10<sup>th</sup> conference and its immediate aftermath will be critical tests for sustaining the Foundation's credibility – people are expecting visible and substantive action balanced across the spectrum of opportunities associated with this topic.