

Executive Summary of Current Conditions and Trends Assessment North Central Landscape Region

Introduction

The process for conducting landscape assessments for the north central (NC) region is explained in the background section below. At the time of this writing the following sections of the assessment process are completed:

- Historical Conditions (Range of Natural Variability)
- General Resources Trends and Conditions
- Social and Economic Trends and Conditions
- Preliminary Findings
- Preliminary Issues

This information will serve as the starting point for establishing a regional committee in the NC landscape. As additional ecological and social/economic data becomes available, it will be analyzed and presented to the regional committee for its consideration in determining desired future conditions, goals, and strategies for the landscape.

Background

Subdivision 2 of Minnesota's 1995 Sustainable Forest Resources Act (SFRA) authorizes the establishment of regional landscape committees to foster landscape-based forest resource planning.

SFRA defines landscape-level planning as long-term or broad-based efforts that may require extensive analysis or planning over large areas that may involve or require extensive coordination across all ownerships. Regional committees provide the opportunity to involve private citizens, forestry professionals, and members of various interest groups in implementing landscape-level planning that will promote forest sustainability. It charges the regional committees to:

- include representative interests,
- serve as a forum to discuss issues,

- identify and implement an open and public process whereby landscape-level strategic planning can occur,
- identify sustainable forest resource goals for the landscape and strategies to achieve those goals, and
- provide a regional perspective on forest sustainability to the council.

The following is the general planning process the regional forest resource committees will use to gather, share, and communicate information:

- prepare an assessment of current conditions and trends in the landscape;
- determine vision, goals, and issues that address existing and potential conditions considered desirable for the region;
- develop strategies for implementing the vision, goals, and/or resolve issues in the region;
- encourage voluntary implementation of the strategies by coordination between landowners; and
- conduct an evaluation to determine how well the strategies accomplish the vision and goals and resolve issues.

This "Current Trends and Conditions Assessment" represents the first step in the general planning process. The assessment was accomplished by working with the "Resource Management Partnership," which is a group of landowners and managers previously established in the NC landscape to coordinate forest management activities. Although the assessment report is still a work in progress, it contains enough information to get the regional committee started in the planning process.

Findings

Members of the “Resource Management Partnership,” as well as resource managers from the Minnesota Forest Resources Council (MFRC), Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Forest Service, and the county, completed a preliminary analysis of the information in the “Current Trends and Conditions Assessment” and prepared their findings. The intent is to give the regional committee some suggestions as to what the information means. The regional committee must draw its own conclusions from the assessment information. The findings are listed below:

- The landscape is still largely forested; current nonforest land is primarily agricultural in the southwest part of the landscape and urban/residential development primarily around the three population centers of Brainard, Grand Rapids, and Bemidji.
- Forest cover types, age class structure, and disturbance regimes have been greatly altered from presettlement conditions.
- Upland riparian areas are under pressure from residential development and should be given special consideration in future management.
- Forest mortality is roughly equal to removals by harvest; mortality and harvest together exceed growth for the period in consideration.
- Expected population increases are directly tied to the presence of lakes and the desire of people to relocate in places with trees and water.
- Dramatic increases in the 65+ age group combined with increasing purchasing power will increase the demand for recreational activities and influence the way the land is managed in the landscape.

Preliminary Issues

Based on the assessment information and preliminary findings, the MFRC landscape program staff defined the following issues to give the regional committee a focal point as it begins its work.

Fragmentation of Landscape by Development

Issue Involves:

- Residential and summer home development
- Recreational development (golf courses, etc.)
- Size of development
- Increasing population and wealth
- Cumulative effects of development
- Amount of forestland and nonforestland

Information Needed:

- Quantifiable data on the extent of development over the last five–10 years
- Satellite imagery on size and extent
- Projections of development into the future
- Analysis of cumulative effects—loss of forest land; impacts on forestland, etc.

Development of Riparian Corridors

Issue Involves:

- Residential and summer home development along lakes and streams
- Impacts on water quality
- Erosion and sedimentation
- Increasing population and wealth

Information Needed:

- Quantifiable data on the extent of development over the last five–10 years
- Projections of development into the future
- Wetland Functional Models to give suitability for development predictions

Ecosystem Sustainability

Issue Involves:

- Flora and fauna composition and distribution
- Noninventoried species
- Old growth, Research and Natural Areas (RNA), reserved acres, etc.
- Range of Natural Variability of species in landscape
- Social and economic analysis

Information Needed:

- Complete the “Process for Conducting Landscape Assessments”
- Spatial display of information

Harvest-level Sustainability

Issue Involves:

- Mortality and harvest vs. growth
- Species composition
- Species age class and spacial distribution
- Patch size of harvest units/fragmentation
- Maximum regional harvest level Generic Environmental Impact Statement (GEIS)
- Cumulative effects of harvesting

Information Needed:

- Change analysis using Landstat imagery over last 10 years
- Cumulative effects analysis of changes