

Key Stakeholder Focus Groups – Report

2nd Generation Southeast Landscape Plan

MFRC Southeast Regional Landscape Committee

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This report was prepared for the **MFRC Southeast Regional Landscape Committee**.

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
Methods	6
Results	8
Part 1: Most Important Issues.....	8
Part 2: Theme summaries and sample quotes	10
<i>Theme 1: Strategies for private land</i>	10
<i>Theme 2: Forest Health</i>	17
<i>Theme 3: Changing land use and ownership patterns</i>	21
<i>Theme 4: Biodiversity and Forest Succession Planning</i>	22
<i>Theme 5: Capacity and tax program issues</i>	25
Discussion	29
Summary of key topics	29
Future considerations.....	30



Executive Summary

In the wake of an economic recession, public funding for natural resources has become increasingly scarce. In order to prioritize allocation of limited resources for forest management in southeast Minnesota, the Minnesota Forest Resources Council’s Southeast Landscape Committee implemented a non-scientific survey and follow-up focus groups with key forest stakeholders in Minnesota’s southeast region in order to collect feedback pertaining to the most important issues related to management of the area’s unique forest habitat. This report details the feedback received through these focus groups, held in September 2013; the results of these discussions indicate areas where funding is most needed.

One of the most pressing issues to come out of these discussions was the need for greater capacity for private landowner education and technical assistance, an area that has seen drastic cuts in Minnesota in recent years. In conjunction with the goal of the Department of Natural Resources, Minnesota Forest Resources Council, and other agencies to engage the private woodland owner community in land management, a top priority should be ensuring that the natural resources professional base is adequate to meet current – and ideally increased – demand. In the view of the focus group participants, this is not currently the case.

One potential means of both supplementing limited capacity and engaging woodland owners is through encouragement of landowner cooperation via peer-to-peer learning opportunities, such as landowner-led property tours. Other suggested means of engaging landowners and the broader public ranged from encouraging the creation or expansion of trails on private and public lands to encourage woodland activities and demonstrate forest management practices, to public services announcements and creation of a southeast Minnesota arboretum. Regulatory measures were also suggested, such as increasing restrictions on agricultural cost-share funding and tightening private land use regulations. Generally, there seems to be a need for more information in the landowner community – especially the agricultural landowner community – on the value of forest resources, in order to combat the perceived pervasive apathy toward forest management.

Another key area of funding need is management of biodiversity, especially in light of a rapidly growing invasive species problem. Funds for long-term, persistent control methods for established species and rapid responses to eradicate newly introduced species are needed for effective management of this complex threat to native biodiversity. Increasing tree diversity through management practices was also seen as a preventative measure for combating invasive species. While desire was expressed to maintain a component of oak in southeast Minnesota’s forests, several participants discussed the need to manage for a wider diversity of species, including natural forest-successors such as sugar maple, basswood, and black cherry.

While priority levels for certain issues may have shifted somewhat over time, there was much overlap between issues discussed by participants in these focus groups and issues identified by a 2001 survey that preceded formation of the original Forest Resource Management Plan for southeast Minnesota. To ensure forward progress on southeast Minnesota’s forestry goals, increased monitoring and accountability of local conservation efforts and availability of long-term,

consistent, easily accessible funding programs that actively encourage management are needed. The results of these stakeholder focus groups and the survey that preceded them will help inform which key issues are highlighted in the revision of southeast Minnesota’s Forest Resource Management Plan, and consequently where long-term funding efforts should be focused.

Note to Reader: Additional regional data can be found in the reports, “Condition and Trends: 2nd Generation Southeast Landscape Plan,” and “Demographic Data Report: 2nd Generation Southeast Landscape Plan”, MFRC Southeast Planning Committee, 2014.

Section 1

Introduction



During the summer of 2013, the Minnesota Forest Resources Council’s Southeast Landscape Committee implemented a survey of key forest stakeholders in Minnesota’s southeast region. The goal of the survey was to collect opinions from these stakeholders pertaining to the importance of various forest-based topics for the region. In September 2013, follow-up focus groups were performed with a mix of survey respondents and other landowners, foresters, and local business managers in the region to further explore key themes identified by the survey and to pursue desired future conditions and next steps relevant to the most pressing forest issues in southeast Minnesota. The results of both the survey and the follow-up focus groups will be used to guide the first revision of the Forest Resource Management Plan for Minnesota’s Southeast Landscape, first written in 2003; the revision is scheduled to be completed in 2014.

Section 2 Methods



The focus groups were performed as a follow-up to a non-scientific survey of a select audience of key stakeholders in southeast Minnesota to further explore key issues identified by the survey. Focus group participants represented a variety of occupations and interests, including agency staff and service providers, private forestry consultants, landowners, SWCD Board representatives, and local business operators. Most participants had also participated in the survey, though invitations were also extended to and accepted by several landowners, two foresters, and one business manager who were not part of the original survey pool of participants. Participants were chosen by core members of the Southeast Regional Committee. Twenty participants attended the meeting and were divided into three groups (6, 7, and 7 in each group, respectively). The third group consisted of participants that lived and/or worked in the Whitewater Watershed.

The single-day meeting was divided into three parts: an introduction with the large group, individual small-group discussions, and a wrap-up discussion with the large group. During the introduction, the participants were provided with background on the Forest Resource Management Plan, goals of the discussion that day, and a brief overview of the results of the survey. The participants were then assigned to their groups and dismissed to hold separate focus groups that lasted approximately 1 hour 45 minutes. Each group was led by one facilitator and one observer/note-taker from the Southeast Regional Committee.

The small-group discussions generally followed the format suggested by Krueger and Casey (2009)¹. Each focus group began with an opening statement and introductions. Next, participants were shown a list of six topics that had been identified by survey participants as key issues for southeast Minnesota’s forests and were asked to brainstorm important topics that might be missing from the list (Table 1). After the lists were expanded, participants were given three stickers each and asked to “vote” for the issues that they felt were the most important in the region; participants were allowed to vote multiple times for one issue. (Note: the facilitator and observer in Group 3 also voted because they were key stakeholders working in the Whitewater watershed). Votes were tallied and the top four or five issues were listed, in order of rank from highest to lowest, on a flip chart for participants to view. The majority of the remaining time in the discussion was spent moving through some or all of these top issues, discussing positive and negative examples of current practices related to each issue, as well as desired future conditions pertaining to the issues and next steps to achieving these conditions. As a final question, participants were asked to identify the most important issue to them, in light of the day’s discussion. See Appendix A for the focus group guide.

After the focus groups ended, all participants and moderators convened once more and a representative from each group – either the facilitator or volunteer participant – provided a brief summary of the discussion, focusing on desired future conditions and next steps. Feedback from Southeast Regional Committee members was invited, and next steps for the revision of the Forest

¹ Krueger, R.A and M.A. Casey. 2009. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, 4th ed. Sage Publications, Inc: Thousand Oaks, CA. 217 pp.

Resource Management Plan were discussed briefly; participants were invited to continue to provide feedback throughout the process and to attend Committee meetings. After the meeting adjourned, boxed lunches were served and participants were invited to a short social, for which most stayed.

Flip charts were used to capture the additional “most important issues” generated by each group, as well as the number of votes that each topic received; these were summarized into tables (Tables 1 and 2). Each focus group was digitally recorded; recordings were used to transcribe participant responses and dialog that were pertinent to the questions. Transcriptions were coded based on the issues identified by the survey and by focus group participants. Coded dialog was organized and summarized into broad themes and sub-themes across all three focus groups.

Section 3 Results



Part 1: Most Important Issues

In addition to the six topics identified by the survey results, focus group participants identified 17 topics in total, which were added to the “most important” list and voted (Table 1). For Group 1, survey-identified topics received 7/18 votes and new topics identified by participants received 11/18 votes. Group 2 allocated 16/21 votes to survey-identified topics and 5/21 votes to new topics; it should be noted, however, that during the brainstorm session, several survey-identified topics were further discussed and fleshed-out, but ultimately not listed as separate issues (e.g., tax program reform is needed; education for absentee landowners is specifically needed; greater tree diversity should be a goal of managing for biodiversity). Group 3 allocated 14/27 votes to survey identified topics and 13/27 votes to new topics (including moderator votes).

The top five issues identified by each group reflected a mix of survey-identified and new topics. Of the survey-identified topics, managing for biodiversity, and private land management and landowner outreach made the top five issues in all three groups. Invasive species management also ranked highly in Groups 2 and 3; based on discussion that preceded voting in Group 1, participants viewed this issue as important but not something for which progress was feasible, which likely influenced the lack of votes for this issue compared to the other two groups. Various financial issues/lack of natural resource professionals also received several votes in Groups 1 and 2. High ranking new topics identified by focus group participants included: evaluation of conservation performance on private lands and other areas, changing land use and ownership patterns, the need to integrate agricultural management and timber management goals, fragmentation, and changes to tree species composition due to fire suppression and natural succession in woodlands.

Table 1: Votes received, by topic and group. Bolded topics were those that were initially listed for each group, based on survey results. All other topics were brainstormed by participants during the focus groups. Topics are listed in the order that they were presented to groups, or the order that they were written by each group (in order: Group 1, Group 2, Group 3).

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3*
Managing for biodiversity	3	2	3
Invasive species management	1	6	5
Oak management	0	0	1
Soil and water protection during harvest	0	0	0
Various financial issues (capacity/tax programs/markets)	0	3	2
Private land management and landowner outreach	3	5	3
Soil and water protection (broad)	1	n/a	n/a
Changing use/ownership	4	n/a	n/a
Parcelization	0	n/a	n/a
Hwy 52 macrocorridor	0	n/a	n/a

Lack of natural resource professionals	2	n/a	n/a
Natural succession is changing	3	n/a	n/a
Climate change impacts and landscape management	1	n/a	n/a
Manage for maple	n/a	0	n/a
Improve land transfers	n/a	0	n/a
Integrate agricultural and timber management	n/a	4	n/a
Tying timber to wildlife	n/a	1	n/a
Fragmentation	n/a	n/a	3
Restoration for watershed	n/a	n/a	1
Climate change	n/a	n/a	1
Wetland drainage	n/a	n/a	1
Performance for private management (conservation performance evaluation)	n/a	n/a	6
Habitat conversion	n/a	n/a	1

* The facilitator and observer both voted in Group 3, but not in the other two groups.

Table 2: Top five most important topics for each group after votes were tallied. Bolded topics were those that were initially listed for each group, based on survey results. All other topics were brainstormed by participants during the focus groups. Numbers in parenthesis indicate number of votes received.

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3*
Changing use/ownership (4)	Invasive species management (6)	Performance for private management [conservation performance evaluation] (6)
Managing for biodiversity (3)	Private land management and landowner outreach (5)	Invasive species management (5)
Private land management and landowner outreach (3)	Integrate agricultural and timber management (4)	Managing for biodiversity (3)
Natural succession is changing (3)	Various financial issues (capacity/tax programs/markets) (3)	Private land management and landowner outreach (3)
Lack of natural resource professionals (2)	Managing for biodiversity (2)	Fragmentation (3)

* The facilitator and observer both voted in Group 3, but not in the other two groups.

Part 2: Theme summaries and sample quotes

All three focus group discussions were coded and summarized into five broad themes: strategies for private land, forest health, changing land use and ownership patterns, biodiversity and succession planning, and capacity and tax program issues. Most themes contain two or more sub-themes, which are discussed below. Participants were asked to provide examples of positive and negative observations and practices associated with identified top issues, as well as their ideas for desired future conditions and necessary steps toward achieving those conditions.

Theme 1: Strategies for private land

Strategies for achieving more effective private land management – specifically, strategies for educating and engaging private landowners – comprised the most central, overarching theme across all groups. In fact, when asked at the conclusion of the individual focus groups what single change they would make based on the issues discussed, 18 out of 19 responding participants provided an answer that in some way related to private landowner outreach. These answers mostly reflected the need for increased capacity to provide education and assistance to landowners, but also included better coordination among service providers in terms of communication strategies, getting landowners into their woods to increase awareness about the value of their resource, and inspiring a better land ethic.

Three sub-themes are discussed here: the general issue of private land management and landowner outreach, discussed by all groups; the performance of conservation efforts on private land and in other areas, discussed by Group 3; and the need to integrate agricultural and timber management efforts, discussed mainly by Group 2, though the other two groups mentioned this issue occasionally as well.

Sub-theme 1-1: Private land management and landowner outreach

When asked what was “working” around private land management and landowner outreach, participants in Groups 1 and 2 discussed a trail in Chatfield, MN called the Lost Creek Hiking Trail. The trail runs through the property of several private landowners and is open to the public. Thirty-one different forestry practices can be viewed along the trail, which are marked by interpretive signs; more information is available on the trail’s website. One participant noted that he viewed the trail as an “ongoing field trip,” as it was available at any time. Participants noted that the trail provided an opportunity for landowners to educate others and point them to professional resources; one participant noted that people may in fact be more “prone to listen” to their fellow landowners rather than agency or logging professionals. Related to the trail example, one participant said that people are usually impressed when he gets them on to the land to witness the results of management.

Another positive example mentioned was the writing of Stewardship Plans, which provided foresters an opportunity to educate landowners about their land and helped them to prioritize, it was noted. Other positive examples included the availability of a multitude of professional resources for landowners as well as other resources such as the newly available Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) cost-share funds for forestry practices and the recent lifting of

the ban on selling Department of Natural Resources (DNR) nursery seedlings to landowners, and the fact that landowners who are interested in management do tend to come back repeatedly for more assistance over time.

When participants were asked what was “not working” in the private land sector, several issues were expressed. One key issue seemed to be a general lack of interest in timber harvest and forest stewardship in general by many landowners, with participants expressing difficulties such as getting neighbors to attend field days, getting people to prioritize forest stewardship when they have busy lives, and landowners getting Stewardship Plans for tax purposes and not to use for management. One participant mentioned that people overestimate the value of individual trees, and choose to do nothing if they don’t see the prospect of making large profits – which ultimately sets them back in making better profits in the future. While many landowners are apathetic toward their woods, one participant mentioned that some “love them to death,” and don’t want to change anything through management; this neglect can lead to a variety of problems. A local business owner noted that while 25 years ago much of their forestry business came from private land, now much of their work is done on public land, as there is little demand from the private land sector.

Another problem mentioned was the fragmentation of resources among the agencies and the “inconsistent delivery of services” that landowners receive from Federal and State levels, which can become frustrating. One example provided was the instability of EQIP funding regulations over the years. Forest policy was also mentioned as a problem, with statewide policy designed for larger-scale forestry in northern Minnesota, rather than the smaller-scale forestry in the southeast.

Participants from all groups offered a variety of desired future conditions and steps that could be taken to better reach private landowners. As a general sentiment, many participants expressed the idea that with 90% of southeast forest land in private ownership, any major impact aspired to would require action on private lands, thus making landowner education the “overwhelming” issue that would lead to desirable conditions such as improved soil and water quality and invasive species management. A stronger land stewardship “ethic” is needed in the landowner community, as is a heightened awareness of the importance and value of their woodlands in order to encourage information seeking.

It was noted that getting landowners into their own woods is an important step in sparking their interest and awareness in their resource. One suggested means of doing this was to encourage trail-making in private woodlands because “you’re not going to walk into canary grass that’s taller than you, you’re not going to walk into your woods if there isn’t an easy place to walk.” Trails could allow for easier detection of invasive species, as well as encourage use by wildlife. It was also noted that forest management in general could be tied to wildlife management, as a variety of management activities could improve wildlife habitat, and thus might appeal to hunters or other wildlife interests. On a larger scale, it was suggested that trails like the Lost Creek Hiking trail could be implemented in more places, both on private and public land. Previously existing bike, canoe, or snowmobile trails could be converted to educational trails like Lost Creek by adding signage and trail loops that demonstrated forest practices. One participant even suggested adding QR bar codes to signs that could be scanned by smart phones, linking the trail-goer to a website with further information about the practice. These outreach efforts could help engage both the private landowner community and the general public; though with the vast diversity of landowners in southeast Minnesota, these communities seemed to some extent to be viewed as one in the same.

One participant expressed the need to gain the support of urban residents, and another noted that reaching the public was essential to changing legislation. Group 2, especially, found the idea of using private and public land trails as a promising means of reaching a wide audience. Other ideas for engaging landowners included mimicking a “rural landowner packet” that Wisconsin zoning offices distributed to new rural landowners, and using popular workshop topics (such as timber harvest) to draw in crowds, and incorporate more holistic management practices into these.

Another means of engaging landowners that came up several times throughout Group 2’s discussion was through landowner-to-landowner communication. “Word-of-mouth,” landowner-sponsored trails, and even “peer pressure” were seen as ways of spreading information and incentivizing management. One participant noted that providing information to those that were passionate about management might result in the information spreading to a somewhat broader group.

Participants also noted several desired policy changes. Examples included: convincing the legislature to implement policy change around timberland, using the 2010 Forestry Assessment as a guide for statewide strategies and concerns, providing blocked grant money for easier distribution, and the need for some sort of landowner protection program to protect landowners from getting taken advantage of during harvests. Several participants also called for more consistency in the delivery of services to landowners and in landowner tax programs. Capacity and tax program issues are discussed in greater detail further on.

Sample Quotes:

[1-5]: So it’s a farmer educating his neighbors, and that really seems to work well. You know, just passing the word on, you know working with the bluebird folks and the trail people, getting all those folks together and talking about forest management at the same time. ... and it spreads that way. Grassroots.

[1-4]: And there are some forestry walks and those kinds of things going on. So, people like you that connect with others, and bring ‘em on and show ‘em what they’re doing makes these guys’ jobs a lot easier, because then you can say “Well I know of these foresters that could help you.” Plus you could talk to DNR and what they’re doing, and people gather a bunch of information and then choose to do something new.

[2-1]: ...We need to get people actually seeing the results. The few that I have gotten there have been very impressed...

[3-2]: I think the Stewardship Plan Writing has been a positive. More landowners are more aware of what they have on their land.

[3-7]: My experience in PFM is that I work with quite a few people over and over and over again. So there’s people that do stuff, they’re the ones that continue to come back. There’s obviously a lot of people that have no interest in it, but the people that are interested in it, they keep coming back and keep getting assistance. But it’s getting those people that aren’t interested to take an interest in doing stuff.

[2-1]: ... I contact personally a number of people that I know should be- that are in similar stages, they tell me they're going to come...but that's just to appease me, and then they never show up. ... We need to get people actually seeing the results. ... But the first step in the education is the problem. You can't get somebody that has no interest to do anything.

[2-1]: ... a number of them I talk to, the first they say is "Well if it isn't worth anything I'm gonna' do nothing." Well that is actually a negative, they're going backwards, they don't realize it. If they do something they may not be getting anything, but they're going for the future. Doing nothing is going back to nothing. They have nothing in the future.

[2-4]: A bulk of landowners aren't really interested in cutting their timber.

[2-3]:... the general public, "I gotta go to my job, I gotta put my kid through school, I gotta go to my kid's athletic events." And I think Forest Stewardship doesn't compete well with those things.

[3-4]: One of the things I heard from a landowner who was involved with Whitewater years ago, was fragmentation of resources. ... I mean you have DNR, you've got the districts, you've got the FSA, and you know the Federal programs, and I think at some point the alphabet soup doesn't work for them. The landowners are totally confused, even for some who have dealt with it for years, and I think that might be a little bit of the problem. People don't know where to start, they just throw up their hands "The heck with it!"

[3-6]: It's an inconsistent delivery of services, programs come and go, you get something from the Feds, they ramp up the program, it takes them a year to implement it, they hurry and put the money out on the street, then it's pulled.

[1-6]: 90% of the land is owned by private individuals down here, so, of the forest land. And so, you want to do any of these things you're going to have to do it on the private land.

[1-1]: The end of the list on the easel there, none of the other things happen without the significant involvement of private landowners ... They need a suite of resources that gets them up to speed in terms of management if not actually helping them with management.

[2-6]: So maybe it's peer pressure, we need to get the neighbors to say "Boy, you're woods looks tough!" [laughter]

[2-2]: Word of mouth is probably gonna' be your best communication vehicle I would say, ... word of mouth I think, and references. ... you're just talking at the coffee shop, you're standing in line at the grocery store. "Hey you outta see what I did on my timber project."

[2-4]: At some point they need to put some initiative to finding help. ... if they don't have any interest, you're never gonna reach them. You're wasting time. They need to find, however it is, instill that there's an importance in their woods.

[2-7]: I mean, the sisters are probably just like a small group of the public. You don't see a whole lot of interest up there, those that are pretty passionate about it, and they come to the meetings and things like that ... But most of them don't think about it, don't use it, I mean they're doing their own thing. ... You could just play to the ones that are interested in it, and maybe, hopefully it would reach a *little bit* broader group I guess.

[2-1]: It comes down to management. But I gotta' get people one-on-one and out in the woods to impress that to them, and I don't know how to do that.

[2-1]: The one thing I would change, forest management, is to get every individual out to actually look at their woods. Just to see what there is there. Tell them they need to look at it to see what is there. Because most of them don't even want to walk out there.

[2-2]: Every one of these issues to me if very intriguing and very important, but it all starts with education of the public and the private landowner that owns the woods – be it absentee or they live on the property – but it all starts right there with the grass roots. ... And then all of these other issues will hopefully kind of take care of themselves.

[2-4]: Education is a big key to things given private ownership, and it's gonna' take us all – whether public, private, anything in between sector – you know, any chance we get to be able to talk to somebody or show them something ... And it's through the people you know, or those you live by, that's the people you're going to know and impact and probably listen to the most.

[2-5]: ...you gotta get people to view it as a resource. We see it in the CRP spot checks that we do, where you walk out there with a landowner and you start pointing out what they got, and they get interested and excited, and you got that teachable moment. If we could somehow get them in the woods doing the same thing.

[2-6] “you're not going to walk into canary grass that's taller than you, you're not going to walk into your woods if there isn't an easy place to walk. Maintain some trails through your woods. At least you're out there when you're maintaining the trails, and you see that little patch of garlic mustard, you see the buckthorn, you see what's going on.”

[2-6]: You look at the whole list, and as is been mentioned before, it all comes down to, you know, you can have all the information about invasive species, but unless you've educated people and they value doing that, it's not going to make any difference. So I think the education is kind of the overwhelming- or the outreach is the overwhelming thing.

[2-7]: It looks like everything's basically on number 2 up there [private land management and landowner outreach], some version of it.

[2-3]: One of the ways you sell forest management is tying it to wildlife habitat. Because there's an awful lot of land that is now owned by 4 or 5 guys for the sole purpose of hunting. They can see that by doing something ... They can see that that will make better deer habitat, that's the only way you can sell it to them.

[3-6]: Long-term, consistent delivery of services to private property owners; *simplified*.

Sub-theme 1-2: Performance for private management (conservation performance evaluation)

Much of Group 3’s discussion around private land centered on the need to evaluate and improve the performance of conservation efforts on the landscape. This idea pertained to public land as well, but much of the discussion focused on private land as this is where the vast majority of forestland can be found in southeast Minnesota.

Participants identified a few positives pertaining to conservation efforts: land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) now requires more frequent follow-up monitoring than it once did, some recent progress has been made in protecting bluff prairie habitat on private land, and the Whitewater river watershed was recently chosen by the State to participate in a pilot voluntary water quality improvement program aimed at improving practices on agricultural lands. However, many negative results were identified as well, such as removal of the majority of CRP land in Fillmore County, persistence of sub-surface tiling practices, repeated restoration of flood plains for crop land instead of habitat, and continued draining of wetlands despite decades of admonitions against such practices. Generally, the discussion identified a need to strengthen performance and partnerships at the local level.

In terms of desired future conditions, participants expressed a need for more performance monitoring of public expenditures on conservation efforts. Participants suggested the need to assess the various planning efforts in the region, specifically the original Southeast Forest Resource Management Plan, and the need to take a hard look at where these planning efforts have failed in order to chart a better course for the future. It was suggested that more restrictions are needed on public money for agricultural land management, including a push for additional practices beyond what has been done in the past. Further, the monitoring done for CRP land could be expanded to other management efforts on private land with proper scheduling and commitment. On the agency end, greater coordination is needed to determine how best to divide limited time and resources for landowner communication strategies, and thorough testing of future efforts – such as the clean water initiative for the Whitewater watershed – is needed to ensure that projects can be followed through to the end. In a similar vein, one participant noted that the Southeast Regional Committee should itself focus on four or five accomplishable projects.

Sample Quotes:

[3-7]: Well on CRP, if there’s a tree planting, they’re now requiring mid-term contract work done. So, having to go back after 5 years and 10 years and recommend what needs to be done. ... Standards have just been put in place within the last year. So in all our tree plantings, as soon as we do it, we’re scheduling monitoring. Now that could be something that could be done on private land. Is if there is cost-sharing for work to be done

[3-5]: ‘Course, there might be one positive, is that it could be lots worse if it hadn’t done what’s been done in the past.

[3-6]: But when I was a kid growing up, I’d hear continuously that wetlands are of importance to us. You don’t drain them, you don’t do all this stuff. Throughout my lifetime, I watched

wetlands drained right up through the Wetland Conservation Act. I read the BWSR report, it comes out every once in awhile, I look at 90% loss counties[?], and we're still draining wetlands today. We're still doing it. And all the work that we do this, as agencies, as regulators, is enormous. I sat on I don't know how many panels and stuff, and how many planning efforts and activities. And all kinds of restoration work around the wetlands. And we still drain 'em.

[3-6]: I think one of the things that we should think about doing, have some more discussion about it, I think we should put together a white paper on the status of resources in Southeastern Minnesota. Put together the historical context, all the planning that's been done.

[3-5]: Yeah, until you tie restrictions to that money, if you don't follow these plans, if you don't do it this way, Mr. Farmer you don't get Cent 1 from us come hell or high water! That's what it really boiled down to. Instead of babying them along.

Sub-theme 1-3: Integrate agricultural and timber management

Group 2 suggested that the need for better integration of agricultural land management and forest land management was one of the most important issues in the region, and the other groups echoed this theme to some extent as well. Tying the forestry and agricultural industries together was seen as necessary to improving soil and water quality, as interactions between fields and forests sometimes intensified problems for these resources. Participants did note a few improvements in this area, including some amount of increase in recognition among agricultural landowners of woodland value on their properties, the requirement of a "whole farm" plan to receive agricultural cost-sharing, and the recent availability of EQIP funding for private forest management projects. Regarding the EQIP funding, participants pointed out that partnership provided an opportunity for agriculture-oriented agencies to point farmers who seek agricultural management assistance toward forest management as well, and that this partnership was important to maintain. The then upcoming forestry basics workshop sponsored by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which was attended by NRCS and Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) employees was also mentioned as an important step toward cross-agency coordination.

Yet despite some improvements in awareness and availability of resources, participants still felt that agricultural landowners lacked interest in managing their woodland and awareness of its value as a resource, despite otherwise intensive management efforts to maximize value derived from crop land. Further, other factors such as high corn prices and a desire by landowners to invest money rather than pay taxes on it have led to practices such as conversion of highly erodible pasture or natural lands to cropland including transitional ground over bluff slopes, conversion of forest edge to cropland, removal of CRP land in favor of row-cropping, placement of preventative sub-surface tiling even in areas where it may be unnecessary, and the continued draining of wetlands despite decades of education to prevent such behavior. In addition to the need for increased restrictions on agricultural cost-sharing mentioned above, participants also suggested the need to convince good farm managers that woodlands, too, can be managed as an economic resource. One agriculturist and tree farmer noted that he viewed doing forest management as a part-time winter occupation that yielded income on a regular basis; as a counterbalance to long

hardwood stand rotations in southeast Minnesota, proper management sped up harvest times. Another participant noted that income could be obtained through cost-share money by doing one's own forest stand improvement work.

Sample Quotes:

[2-3]: ...even the people you sit in the same building with often don't know anything about forestry. And we're not gonna make them experts, but just to open their eyes to say "Yeah he does have woods, and maybe we should tell him he really needs to get somebody else to look at this, because there's potential there."

[2-6] ... people don't understand what they have. We have farmers, and they've got a little patch of woods on their farm, and they're managing every other acre intensively and getting the best use of it, and the woods is just out there, it's just there and we don't think about it. It's not part of their whole plan of maximizing the utility of that land. ... But it gets ignored and it doesn't get the same attention, and I think that's just lack of education or lack of knowledge of how valuable it is.

[2-5]: We ignore the woods. We do.

[2-2]: ...you have to tie both industries together, because a lot of the issues start up in the field and get magnified inside the woods where you don't have the grasses and the vegetation to slow down the water So I think you need to tie them both together because one scratches the other's back.

Theme 2: Forest Health

Much like in the survey, management of certain invasive species rose to the top in terms of importance for two of the groups. However, prior to voting one group discussed prioritizing issues for which something could be done, rather than just on "importance" alone; invasive species was perceived by some group members as not feasibly fitting the former category, which may have contributed to its lack of votes in that group. Soil and water quality during harvest did not receive votes from any group, though there was some discussion around soil and water quality as it related to agricultural influence. Climate change was mentioned briefly, but usually as an overarching problem.

Sub-theme 2-1: Invasive species management

While generally considered a daunting issue, several successes around invasive species management were cited. There was some mention of places where buckthorn was being eradicated or nearly-eradicated after sustained management; one participant mentioned such success on his own land when converting pasture to forest by managing the pasture several years ahead of time for removal of the invasive species' seed source. It was noted that such management took education and long-term planning to accomplish. Other successes included some headway having been made in biological control of invasive species, such as purple loosestrife; a potential biological control for garlic mustard has been identified as well, though research is still ongoing.

One participant mentioned success with volunteers via the Invasive Blitz program in Winona, MN. It was also noted that EQIP funding for forest management can be used for invasive species control, and that the payment rate is high enough to make significant progress.

However, many challenges surrounding invasive species management were identified as well. Participants talked at length about the trials and terrors associated with specific invasive species – such as buckthorn, garlic mustard, Japanese barberry and Asian bittersweet – the control methods for which can be risky, expensive, or are not yet known. Some of these species affect soil chemistry in ways that could potentially cause difficulties with regeneration in the future, one forester pointed out. The cumulative effect of these and other invasive species is the ongoing reduction of biodiversity, including the diversity of available tree species to plant for management. Despite the enthusiasm for trail establishment in woodlands as an outreach tool, it was also noted that trails and other disturbances such as fencelines contribute to disturbance and concentration of certain invasive species. Several noted that eradication is not even a feasible goal of invasive species management, only ongoing control and management; yet, programs like CRP, by their design, lead landowners to believe that invasive species can be tackled quickly. As one participant noted, “I think we shouldn’t lead people to believe that a one-time hit is gonna’ do it.” Management efforts that lack follow-up can waste money and effort, and even intensify problems.

Several prescriptive measures were suggested. First, landowner education is needed to increase their perception of the importance of managing invasive species so that they will be willing to invest the time and money to do so. Next, resources need to be allocated for fast response to new invasive species before they are beyond control; an example would be Asian bittersweet, which is relatively recent to the state and beginning to spread to forests, but hasn’t been addressed well yet according to one forester participant. Further, resources such as those from the EQIP funds could be used to hire contract work for invasive species control to be done during other routine timber management activities; however, the approval process is currently too slow to make this feasible for landowners seeking timely management. An ongoing approval process that utilized block grants could expedite funding distribution, making cost-share a more feasible option for invasive species control. Resources were also needed for further research into biological controls, as control was seen as a more feasible approach than eradication. Finally, targeted, long-term control was seen as crucial to effective invasive species management. Neither “random acts of conservation,” as one participant noted, nor one-off management projects have been effective, and conversation efforts may be better off focusing on “hot spots” of infestation and targeting landowners in those areas.

Sample Quotes:

[2-1]: I personally have seen positive results. You have to plan ahead; I have taken areas out of pasture land, which are good timber land growing areas, but about 3 years in advance I’ve made sure that the buckthorn seed sources are all eliminated ... But if you do that, and then let it go into the timber, you have almost no trouble with buckthorn in there.

[3-1]: It’d be nice to see more biological control. We’re not eradicating loosestrife, but we’ve seen improvements at least periodically along Winona, Lake Winona on loosestrife, it’s not quite as thick.

[2-3]: One time isn't gonna' do it, and like you said, it's a long term commitment to do these, and you're never gonna' eradicate them. You get them to a manageable level, but I don't think anybody that's in conservation is fooled into thinking that you can eradicate these things. You can manage them.

[2-2]: But in my 35 years of tramping these woods, buckthorn is the thing that scares me the worst. 'Cause where you have that, you can spend a million dollars on your farm, if the neighbor doesn't do anything, you're starting all over again.

[3-1]: I think we're pouring money down a rat hole. ... I think you better encourage a lot of biological control and put our money there...

[3-7]: Unfortunately buckthorn isn't the worst thing. We've got Asian bittersweet, which I think is gonna be a lot worse than buckthorn. ... the places I've seen, just starting in Winona county, it just wraps itself around the tree.

[2-3]: But I wonder if you couldn't somehow have an approval process that's all the time.

[2-3]: I took that as to what would be our next step to make this expedited process. If NRCS just gave us the pot of money and let the State run it. Remember that carbon copied State cost-share program? That took what, a week or two to get approval? It wasn't the 3 months or 6 months, or only 2 times a year, only 4 times a year. ... That old program did work like that. That you did the state form, and it was pretty much immediately, you turned it into St. Paul, it got approval, you got a note back that said it's been approved.

[2-5]: Yeah, in the soil and water field, we get beat up at the Legislature for what they're calling "Random Acts of Conservation." Rather than targeting, fixing an area, we work with who walks in the door and is willing. So you get one here, and you get one here, and you get one here. Now if we're going to do invasive species control, are we accomplishing anything by doing that? Or would we be better off to say "Let's target – we've got this really pristine area – let's target everything around it so that that stays pristine." ... But first you'd have to identify "Where's the hotspots, what do we want to protect?" And then let's find a way to convince the people that own the property where we want it to be done to actually do it there.

[3-7]: When something is identified, you need to have money set aside for quick response.

[3-4]: ... if you could have some way of checking these things out instead of these people bringing all these things in ... That's the sort of thing where you would start going and just say "Any new species, coming outside of the United States has to meet these criteria."

[3-2]: I think using control instead of eradication to focus on how you're gonna' manage it or try to manage it? Because eradication seems illogical. And our goal in Minnesota always seems to eradicate things, and it's impossible. Fight the fights you can win.

Sub-theme 2-2: Soil and water protection

While the effect of logging practices on soil and water did not seem to be a noteworthy issue to participants, other issues such as the impacts of agriculture and silica sand mining, and the ecosystem services provided by forests, were mentioned. Participants noted the need for erosion control on slopes against pressures from mono-crop agricultural and sand mining. Other agricultural practices such as sub-surface tiling and wetland draining were also seen as contributing to long-term water quality issues. Needed actions included a cultural shift that recognized the economic value of ecosystem services in maintaining water quality as well as the “expansion of wooded areas as a way to deal with water quality issues in some sub-watersheds.” Further, the occasional presence of DNR foresters in Soil and Water Conservation District buildings would be useful in answering farmer questions.

Sample Quotes:

[3-5]: Well one thing I’ve seen quite a bit around Rolling Stone in recent years is this tiling of Type 1 wetlands, or low areas, temporary wetland areas. And that obviously would affect biodiversity and soil and water quality. And yet apparently these guys can still do this kind of stuff and get agricultural subsidies and the whole bit. I mean I’m not real familiar with the laws, what they can get by with nowadays.

[1-1]: we don’t have a solid grasp of what the ecosystem services of those same lands are. ... If everything’s growing corn under intensive fertilization, and who knows what else goes on in that acreage, that’s not good for water quality. And what’s not good for water quality is a long term proposition. The damage that we do is very long lasting. So our forests, grasslands, probably a good fraction of our pasture and hay lands are important for watershed protection, and we pay precious little attention to them as a culture.

Sub-theme 2-3: Climate change impacts

The issue of climate change came up briefly in a couple of the groups, with one participant calling it the “elephant in the room.” Some participants in Group 1 pointed out that climate change will make future growing conditions unpredictable, and that landscape planning efforts need to take climate change into account when considering which species to manage. A forester in the group suggested that adherence to strict genetic purity of seed sources may not be an effective management tool for the future forest; diversity is needed to prepare for a variety of potential future climate conditions. Related to the soil and water quality issues mentioned above, a participant in Group 3 expressed that one small way to make an impact on climate change itself would be to take flood plains out of row cropping and restore them to forests that can sequester carbon.

Sample Quotes:

[3-6]: I’ll just offer this as a quick example. The flood plains, we pay for that time and time again. You put it in trees, you sequester carbon, you take out the row crop ag’ and all the inputs, you can do something there. A small amount, but you can do something.

Theme 3: Changing land use and ownership patterns

Participants from all groups expressed a variety of ways by which land is shifting from natural/productive to recreational or residential uses, via contributing factors such as the Highway 52 macrocorridor, growth of the Mayo Clinic’s Destination Medical Center, continued drainage of wetlands, and conversion of habitat for development (as well as agriculture). Coinciding with these issues are changing patterns of land ownership, as lands transfer from productive farm owner/operators to increasing ownership by non-rural people for recreational purposes, and from one generation to the next. These factors are contributing to fragmentation/parcelization of private lands, increasing the difficulty of landscape-wide management.

Participants did note a few successes around ownership patterns. The availability of Legacy Amendment funds is allowing non-profit organizations, land trusts, and other groups such as the Root River Watershed to identify and acquire ecologically valuable parcels or conservation easements on these lands. In terms of private owners, wealthier people who may have the funds to put toward long-term management are beginning to acquire land. One participant mentioned the Wisconsin organization, Wisconsin Family Forests, which assists landowners with generational land transfer. Another mentioned a county regulation that prevented development adjacent to a county park on the Root River before the county had an opportunity to negotiate for purchase of the land.

Yet, expanding residential development in the region, especially in woodlands themselves, were seen by participants as a detriment to natural areas, due to increased parcelization, disturbance, pet/wildlife conflict, and so on. Fragmentation of properties severely complicates landscape-level management, making much-needed management activities such as fire disturbance unfeasible. Furthermore, one participant noted that current zoning laws are not tied to the natural boundaries created by the landscape, furthering the disruptive power of parcelization. Some programs such as the Green Acres program discourage rural development, but are flawed in that they do not also encourage management on these lands. Land transfer can be risky as well, as high taxes may discourage or prevent new owners from keeping the land in forest. Yet despite this variety of concerns over development, County Commissioners are reluctant to build development limitations into county plans, due to an unwillingness to restrict property rights.

Participants saw a need to push back against these pressures to maintain forests as forests. Public service announcements were mentioned as one means of spreading the message about the benefits of preserving natural ecosystems from development. Policy change was also seen as necessary to address parcelization, with such policy being supported by a government-appointed group, such as the Minnesota Forest Resources Council (MFRC). Greater restrictions on where people can build were also seen as necessary; a possible solution was “overlay zoning” for blufflands, such as that seen with shoreland or floodplain zoning. Other ideas included a Minnesota version of the Wisconsin Family Forest organization, and an arboretum in the Dorer Memorial Hardwood State Forest to act as a learning center for the public about the importance of maintaining forests. Finally, one participant noted that it might be useful for the revised Southeast Forest Resource Management Plan to demonstrate the economic impact of the southeast’s productive timber lands and their associated ecosystem services compared to the same land going into residential development. This assessment would demonstrate the money saved through ecosystem services, compared to the money lost through the need to bring services out to remote residences.

Sample Quotes:

[1-5]: In Wisconsin they have an organization called Wisconsin Family Forests. It's really an interesting group that I study quite a bit. But having, again, those family forests be a generation upon generation...you know they hand them down and manage their forests properly.

[3-6]: I think fragmentation remains a huge, huge issue. Not just homes, but ownership for a variety of reasons. You start getting these parcel sizes smaller, 20, 30, 40 acre recreational parcels, and it makes management across a long landscape setting damn near impossible.

[1-6]: I think we want to preserve or enhance as much natural areas on private land or government land in the future. Whether you're talkin' price of corn or frack sand mining, there's a lot of pressures pushing for development and not so much pushing back to maintain natural areas.

[1-3]: Go back to the government, and do policy changes, legislative work of those changes that are needed so that the parcelization is- so we have uses accommodating the vision for the future landscape.

[1-4]: I think it'd be very valuable if there's the opportunity within this plan to actually show the economics of the ecosystem services, the use of these lands as productive timber lands long term, versus the parcelization and the loss of those lands as productive lands. ... I mean there's kind of two elements of it. What are the cost of services if this was all built out instead of protected as resources lands, so that's one side of it. And then the other side of it is what these lands are providing in terms of carbon sequestration for climate change, water quality protection, those kinds of things.

[3-6]: We gotta start having a discussion that says, maybe you just don't build in the woods anymore, you don't build on the bluffs, keep this landscape intact. Landowners' property rights are gonna have to be revisited.

[3-2]: And I think it's the demographic of the farm, and the people owning land has changed, and I think we need to capitalize on the younger owners somehow. Farms are getting older, they have been passing down forever, but we're seeing more of that now to somehow reach the next group of landowners.

Theme 4: Biodiversity and Forest Succession Planning

Southeast Minnesota contains some of the highest concentrations of biodiversity in the state. Yet, as mentioned, a variety of issues are impacting biodiversity in the region, such as the proliferation of invasive species and habitat loss to development and agriculture. Further, the natural succession that is taking place in Southeast Minnesota, post-fire suppression, is eliminating oaks in favor of maple-basswood forests. These factors necessitate science-based approaches and realistic goals on the part of foresters when choosing landscape management strategies.

Sub-theme 4-1: Managing for biodiversity

As one landowner pointed out, even small plots can be richly diverse. The combination of the Minnesota County Biological Survey (MCBS) and the creation of the Ecological Classification System (ECS) have helped to at least identify some of these unique areas and high biodiversity sites in the state. However, as the MCBS work has largely been done on public lands, high biodiversity sites on private land have yet to be fully explored. In some cases action has been taken, such as the targeted prairie bluffland protection work on private lands previously mentioned, but such instances seemed uncommon. Participants noted that biodiversity is not necessarily a focus of Stewardship Plans, which would require increased native plant knowledge among foresters. Thus, private land near high biodiversity sites provided an opportunity to target management; it was suggested that district staff could familiarize themselves more with these MCBS-identified areas so that they could pass this information along to landowners.

Further, some foresters in Group 1 suggested that non-traditional means may be necessary to maintain high levels of biodiversity in the face of threats such as invasive species and climate change. For example, a wider variety of trees might be considered, even if they don't traditionally grow in the area but are proven to do well, as ranges shift with the changing climate. Genetically modified cultivars that resist pests or sourcing seeds from other areas were also mentioned as options, as increasing diversity may mean not being a "purist," some expressed.

Sample Quotes:

[1-3]: It's amazing to me, I just am in awe all the time at this parcel that's just, it's amazing, it has everything just about. ... We've got the ravines, and it's just an amazing parcel to watch how it can work in just a little spot.

[3-7]: And there still is quite a bit of biodiversity out there in the woods. Invasive species haven't taken over everything yet. And on state land we're doing inventories kind of as an extension of the Minnesota County Biological- But we're doing ECS, doing that on all our state forest land, on all our wildlife land. So we are getting a good handle on what is out there on state land at least. And that'll lead to deciding what are really unique and diverse areas on state land.

[1-1]: Because biodiversity comes from some level of ... ebb and flow on the landscape that as foresters and planners we're not necessarily thinking about enough in terms of contributing to biodiversity. Because we're talking about an end state, a desired this or that. But in fact that ebb and flow over the landscape is critically important for all sorts of wildlife habitat, for all sorts of plants, and that's a tough thing to capture in a document.

[1-6]: But there are a lot of invasives that are reducing our biodiversity. And I'm not a purist, so I say maybe we need to expand some of our species types, you know. I don't even care if you genetically have to modify the ash to make it so it's resistant to the ash borer, so we maintain it. As we keep clicking off these species just in the tree types, nevermind what's in the forest floor and all that, yeah, preserving biodiversity is a goal, and maybe increasing it by ... In view of climate change or some invasive, maybe we need to import some new ... some other things that we can live with, have a little more diversity, because maybe it'll handle the invasives better, maybe it'll handle global warming better.

[1-1]: It has been pointed out by the forest ecologists that in the future we will be managing, if managing is the right word, managing unknown assemblies of species under unknown conditions, unprecedented conditions. So that we truly don't know (moderator: what's coming.) what's coming. And that should make us all rather humble. ... it should make us less concerned about genetic purity of stocks for planting, and looking for broader genetic sources for anything we do, rather than narrower.

[3-4]: I think district staff could benefit by being reminded those County Biological Surveys exist. [...]. But I think part of it might be knowing, when you walk into a wooded area, or an area that hasn't been disturbed, what to tell the landowner. And if they have access to that map and know what to look for before they get out there, just reminding them of that I think would be helpful.

[3-6]: You've got these high biodiversity sites down here ... And if you want to do first level of alert for exotic plant species, and work with proximal property owners, people adjacent to those sites, and do some better land management, they are really the jewels on the landscape to go back to. ... they're scattered around enough so that if you do that well in those little [missed word(s)], you're going to grow some understanding about how to do it better elsewhere.

Sub-theme 4-2: Oak management vs. natural succession

Pre-settlement, southeast Minnesota was dominated by oak savannahs. However, with the post-settlement suppression of fire, these oak savannahs became mature oak forests, which are now giving way to maple-basswood forest in a natural succession that is to be expected in a fire-excluded environment. There was some discussion in Groups 1 and 2 about the pros and cons to this shift, and some debate as to how much it should be prevented. From a forestry perspective, both oak and sugar maple provide high-quality timber for good prices. Sugar maple, in fact, is faster and easier to grow than oak, and does well in southeast Minnesota. However, it lacks the wildlife benefits of oak. Further, oak regeneration can be difficult because it usually requires clear-cutting, which landowners are hesitant to do. In some places, maple/basswood forest succession is so far along, that it doesn't make sense to try to reverse the trend.

Still, it was clear that there was desire to try and maintain some element of oak on the landscape. Participants in Group 1 discussed the importance of setting concrete goals for how much oak habitat they wished to maintain, and that oak sites selection should be strategic. Areas that could grow maple/basswood well and would be cost-prohibitive to grow oak should be maintained as maple/basswood. In areas where oak was desired, management would be absolutely necessary or maple/basswood forest would eventually succeed. Strategies for maintaining oak could include maintaining remaining oak stands on public land, using GIS to identify private lands that could be targeted for oak maintenance, and specifically targeting the hunting population, who would be interested in the wildlife advantage of oaks. Generally speaking, a good species mix seemed desired, especially in light of the proliferation of so many species-specific pests; encouraging diversity would help to prevent future epidemics. As one participant stated, "Manage with what you have, and then the next rotation you'll get other species, as long as you have a good variety."

Sample Quotes:

[1-6]: Foresters, we can say, “Sugar maple’s sometimes a very valuable tree. That’s comin’ in.” Wildlifers, “Eh, I’m not very excited about sugar maple.” And that’s where the forests are headed, they’re headed towards northern hardwoods. Basswood. Foresters say “hey, we like red oak, it’s good or better than some of our other species that are tending to go away. So we’re on board too, we want to do it this way.”

[1-1]: You can harvest sugar maple on shorter intervals, you can grow very good quality, it’s supremely forgiving about the circumstances under which it will regenerate. And oaks are just the opposite.

[1-6]: One other thing, we talked about this unique oak forest we had from pre-settlement...it’s going away whether we cut it or not. And again, our wildlife guys recognize that. ‘Cause it’s moving well over a hundred years old, and as you start to put red oak – not so much white oak – but red oak over a hundred years, it starts melting out of your woods. I couldn’t just look at a beautiful red oak stand and say, it’s a 110 years old, and I’d say “this is wonderful, let’s leave it forever.” Because what’s underneath it will be basswood, sugar maple, black cherry...good species from the lumber standpoint. But that oak story there, there’s not oak coming underneath it, particularly on the mesic more productive sites. So, if I want to get oak back I have to – I can’t just draw a line around and say “ok in 50 years I’ll come back, it’ll be a nice oak forest.” No, it won’t be, it’ll be going away.

[1-1] the difficulty of growing oak, the expense of growing oak, compared to the really good prices for sugar maple in recent decades, I’m willing to entertain the maple-basswood any place I think that I can get away with it really. ... It’s easier for them to maintain a little bit of oak, to refrain from selling it, then it is to try and reestablish it. So I see more retention and preservation than regeneration I think.

[1-5]: This is my urban forestry perspective, but bleeding into the biodiversity topic, it seems a little bit strange to me just because I’ve done urban forestry for so long, but to put all your eggs in one species basket. It seems like your need to diversify as much as possible, so that if you have an insect or disease come through and wipe everything out, you still have something left.

[2-2]: but I’ve see too many timbers where people will have beautiful stands of young maple, ash – which is in peril now – basswood, and they want to completely eradicate those species to get oak. And I figure if we manage for oak, the rest of the species will take care of themselves because they’re shade tolerant. But if you have a heck of a stand of maple there, there’s nothing wrong with that. Manage with what you have, and then the next rotation you’ll get other species, as long as you have a good variety.

Theme 5: Capacity and tax program issues

The two main financial issues that participants identified were a general lack of capacity for private landowner assistance and the need for tax/incentives program reform for private lands. These issues were discussed in all three focus groups.

Sub-theme 5-1: Lack of natural resource professionals

A key ingredient in the concerns expressed over private landowner education and outreach discussed earlier was the shortage of agency professionals available for assisting private landowners. Very limited state funding for the Private Forest Management program now remains – a total of eight full-time equivalents – leaving DNR foresters overwhelmed and unable to meet the needs of landowners in their areas. A participant who worked for Olmstead County said that they were also understaffed to meet the needs of the larger population to whom they must cater, and that staff time was often spent pursuing competitive grant money, which seemed counterproductive.

In terms of desired future conditions, participants felt that more foresters were needed. One forester pointed out that if forestry industry folks are the only ones talking to landowners, that limits the perspectives available to those landowners. DNR foresters were needed to advertise available management practices that might not otherwise be well-marketed. One participant pointed out that it was counterintuitive to work towards generating more interest in management in the landowner community if there were insufficient resources to deal with such interest in a timely manner, and that the MFRC could work with the Legislature and the DNR to increase capacity for DNR or SWCD capacity for private forest management. Government support for management practices, such as invasive species control, was also needed, or most landowners would be unable or unwilling to afford it. Generally, landowners needed “a suite of resources” to educate and assist them with management, and participants found these to be currently insufficient.

Sample Quotes:

[2-3]: In the EQIP program, there’s a million dollars a year, beginning year 3 of that. It’d be nice to keep that forestry initiative pot in the EQIP program. ... And the payment rates are pretty good, if it’s not so totally infested. Some of those payment rates will take care of the big hit. So it’d be nice to get it out in the discussion of some these... Forest Resources Council, to continue that forestry initiative pot of money.

[2-4]: ...it’s the minority of landowners that are able and willing to do anything on their land. There’s those that want to do it, but financially they can’t do it, ... and that’s where in the long run, especially on private lands, our land base isn’t really gonna’ change. ... I think most would do it, would carry out more control if they could, but given the cost, not many people can foot that bill on their own.

[3-4]: Well I can understand the idea of competitive grants, but that seems to be almost self-defeating, because we’re wasting so much staff time chasing the money.

[2-3]: I see it as a capacity issue because as a DNR forester, I’m overwhelmed with landowner requests. I’m booked out a month or two ahead of time. And these are people that want to do

something. So I'd love to...I like that trail because it gets the people that won't be knocking on my door. But the reality is the Division of Forestry knocked the heck out of its private land assistance programs 2 or 3 years ago. There's only 8 people in the whole state to deal with any private land stuff. I mean 8 FTEs. It's a capacity issue. I mean I'd like to get to a lot more people. I'm at least getting to the ones that knock on my door, I'm at least getting to them in 2 months.

Sub-theme 5-2: Tax and incentives programs

One benefit noted about the 2c “Managed Forest Land” tax classification is that it requires a management plan, which generates an opportunity for foresters to provide landowners with some information. Participants also noted that the EQIP program and Legacy Amendment funds provided funds for hiring contract workers to implement additional management practices during harvests, such as invasive species control. However, one participant noted that a million dollars per year (from EQIP) for the whole state is “very little.” Further, acquiring such cost-share could be a lengthy process, and landowners may not be willing to wait. Other issues included the opinion that programs like Green Acres and 2c “were done to mollify tax payers” rather than as true policy initiatives, and as such lacked “teeth” for encouraging management. The Rural Preserve tax program excluded tree farming as an agricultural product, and thus excluded forest landowners from enrolling. Inconsistency in program regulations was frustrating, such as the frequent changes to the EQIP program expressed by several participants.

One participant pointed out that in a region with such long rotations for timber species, it isn't realistic to expect people to think long-term without some sort of short-term rewards for their actions. It was suggested that Minnesota could model tax programs after neighboring states such as Wisconsin and Iowa. Wisconsin's Managed Forest Law program offers a greater benefit to forest landowners, but also has stricter requirements and enforcement; Iowa does not tax enrolled forest land that meets certain criteria. A fairly different incentives program mentioned was the Forest Bank project. This program would enroll landowners in a cooperative-like system that provided payments for standing timber in discrete intervals over time. The program is currently in the economic feasibility assessment phase for a pilot region of southeast Minnesota.

Sample Quotes:

[1-6] I think [Green Acres] had an idea of preserving ag land in the face of development, but it was grabbed on to and became a reduced property tax thing, and without much teeth in it.

[2-3] your tree farming doesn't count as an ag product, 'cause I have 110 acres that I live on, it's all wooded, I cannot get into Rural Preserve.

[3-7]: And it's tough for me because EQIP is very convoluted, the way that the rules keep changing. Every year I feel like I have to go back, “Ok what are the requirements *this* year, and what do I need to know?”

[2-2] So maybe we can take some ideas from the neighboring two states on the tax problems. ... I think our timber land is taxed quite high compared to some of the other states surrounding us.

[2-6] ...it's really hard to get people to think longterm. The easiest way to restore oak is in a bare field, where there's full sunshine. You're not trying to regenerate underneath other trees. And it's really hard to get people to take that field and plant it to oak and wait 80 years for the harvest. And if you're penalizing them for doing it, there just has to be some short-term rewards for doing that to convince people to make that long term decision.

Section 4 Discussion



Summary of key topics

In the wake of an economic recession, public funding for natural resources has become increasingly scarce. In light of limited funds, the results of these focus groups with key forestry stakeholders in southeast Minnesota indicate priority areas where funding is most needed. One of the most pressing issues to come out of the discussions was the need for greater capacity for private landowner education and technical assistance, an area that has seen drastic cuts in Minnesota in recent years. While the groups also discussed various ways to engage landowners in forest management, one participant aptly pointed out that it was unrealistic to direct landowners toward a resource that does not have the capacity to assist them:

[2-6]: “If we get a lot of people interested, but we don’t have the resources to deal with that interest timely... So maybe that’s where this group could work with the Legislature, the DNR, something, to get some of that private forest management ability.”

In other words, if the goal of the Department of Natural Resources, Minnesota Forest Resources Council, and other agencies is to engage the private woodland owner community in land management, a top priority should be ensuring that the natural resource professional base is adequate to meet current – and ideally increased – demand. These discussions indicated that in the view of participants, this was not currently the case.

One potential means of supplementing current natural resource professional capacity is through encouraging an increase in peer-to-peer learning opportunities among landowners. Several landowners discussed this notion, from the power of “peer pressure,” to landowner-led property tours and public trails on private land. Public investment in programs, organizations, or other mediums that facilitate peer learning among landowners and encourage volunteerism among landowner leaders may help stretch limited dollars by expanding the reach of agency messages further into the community.

Another area of funding need expressed was for invasive species management. Several participants discussed a need to focus on control, rather than eradication methods; consequently, it was noted that funding was needed for rapid responses to new invasive species to Minnesota, as well as for further research into biological control methods for specific invasive species. Participants also emphasized the need for ongoing management, and funding programs that encouraged this approach rather than portraying invasive species management as something that could be accomplished with a “one time hit.” Further, there was some discussion around making invasive species management – and conservation efforts in general – more targeted toward high biodiversity and other at-risk areas, rather than the somewhat random current design of working mainly with landowners who self-select to pursue assistance.

In addition to the need for targeted funding, the main topic of conversation for the Whitewater watershed group centered on a need for improved follow-up for publically-funded conservation

initiatives. Many of the issues discussed in the focus groups were not novel; while certain issues have changed in priority level over time, there was much overlap between the 2013 topics and the topics from a 2001 survey that preceded formation of the original Forest Resource Management Plan for southeast Minnesota. Increased monitoring and accountability is needed to ensure that conservation efforts are focused on moving progress forward on southeast Minnesota's long-term forestry goals, rather than funding short-term approaches with overall static results. However, on the funders' side, stability of resources is necessary to enabling effective planning efforts for both agencies and landowners themselves. Inconsistency in resource allotment was blamed for wasted funds and lack of meaningful progress in certain areas. Assurance of long-term, consistent funding programs may increase overall efficacy of public dollars spent. Furthermore, the need for simplification of resource distribution was mentioned by more than one group; providing block grants through programs such as EQIP may expedite the approval process for landowners and ensure more management practices, such as invasive species control, are happening on the landscape.

Increasing capacity for private landowner outreach would address many participant concerns surrounding private land management; however, there was also obvious concern over general apathy in the landowner community – especially the agricultural landowner community – toward woodland management. A variety of methods were suggested for addressing this lack of engagement, from interpretive woodland trails, public service announcements, and an arboretum, to increasing restrictions on agricultural cost-share funding and tightening private land use regulations. While the potential mediums may vary – public agencies, private consultants, non-profit organization, or other landowners – the general need for more information seemed to be great. Several participants discussed the need to convey to landowners the value of their woodland resource and the potential for economic gain it provided. Reaching such a broad community continues to prove challenging; but as one participant noted:

[2-7]: “I guess all you could do is some type of meeting, some type of information up there ... You could just play to the ones that are interested in it, and maybe, hopefully it would reach a little bit broader group I guess.”

In terms of biodiversity, many participant concerns were correlated with the rise in invasive species and the threats that they posed. However, it also appeared that forest managers have some tough choices to make surrounding the management of southeast Minnesota's disappearing oak woodlands. While there was still obvious desire to maintain some component of oak on the landscape, several advocated for a focus on greater tree species diversity and management of incoming maple/basswood forests where sensible. If southeast Minnesota's oak woodlands are to be preserved, diligent management will be required. Forest managers need to agree on goals for oak management, in terms of what percentage of the landscape and where such efforts will be focused, and also where other species such as sugar maple, basswood, and black cherry would be better suited.

Future considerations

The results of these focus groups, as well as the stakeholder survey that preceded them, will help inform which key issues are highlighted in the revision of southeast Minnesota's Forest Resource

Management Plan. Other pieces of the Plan are still in development. Several participants suggested the need for various reports; for example, something that looked at current and historical planning efforts in southeast Minnesota and the current status of resources. Reports of this nature are already underway for inclusion in the revision of the Forest Resource Management Plan. Another participant suggested the need for an economic assessment of ecosystem services in the southeast, compared to costs of residential services if housing was developed in the natural areas that provide those ecosystem services. While not planned for inclusion in this revision of the Plan, this may be a useful future project for the Minnesota Forest Resources Council or other southeast Minnesota stakeholder group to consider, if current research in this area does not already exist.