MN FOREST RESOURCES COUNCIL
LANDSCAPE PROGRAM

EVALUATION REPORT

PILOT PROJECT

ESTABLISHING THE
NE REGIONAL FOREST RESOURCE
COMMITTEE

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INTRODUCTION

Subdivision 2, Sustainable Forest Resources Act (SFRA): ***Regional forest resource committees.*** ***"****To foster landscape-based forest resource planning, the council shall establish regional forest resource committees."*

Regional committees provide an opportunity to involve private citizens, forestry professionals and members of special interest groups in implementing landscape-level planning that will promote forest sustainability. 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."* It charges the regional committees to: 1) include representative interests; 2) serve as a forum to discuss issues; 3) identify and implement an open and public process whereby landscape-level strategic planning can occur; 4) identify sustainable forest resource goals for the landscape and strategies to achieve those goals; and 5) provide a regional perspective to the council.

In November, 1997 the "Minnesota Forest Resources Council" (the Council) approved a policy statement on the process for establishing regional committees; and, in December, 1997 a pilot project was authorized to determine how this process would work. The pilot region selected was the NE region of the state consisting of Carlton, St. Louis, Lake and Cook counties including the ecological classifications of the Northern and Southern Superior Uplands.

There was a great deal of uncertainty in the level of participation in a regional committee and who would participate. Would there be the usual people that follow forestry issues or would this appeal to others as well? How well would the process work and how long would it take to establish a committee? These were some of the questions the pilot needed to answer.

Interest in participating was higher then expected. Over sixty people expressed an interest in participation, more then enough to establish a committee. Also, a wide variety of interests were represented with over 20 people outside the usual forestry circles. The first regional meeting was held in March, 1998. Participants were asked to define representative interests in the landscape and then nominate people to represent those interests on a "steering" committee. The meeting concluded with no agreement on representative interests and who should be selected.

Using the feed back received at the March meeting, a new process of establishing regional committees to defuse the polarization was developed and implemented during the summer of 1998. This concept called for smaller functional working groups to be coordinated by a convener group. Rather then a selection process, a volunteer system was used with participants volunteering for one or more working groups. The conveners were appointed by the Council's Landscape Committee. The second regional meeting was held in September to build understanding of the new process and give the working groups some overall direction. Concurrent with the establishment of the NE regional committee a team of technical information specialists from a variety of agencies and private industry were organized by Council staff to put together existing information that would be useful to the regional committee. An " Information Atlas" was complied by this group under the overall umbrella of the Interagency Information

Cooperative. The Atlas contains social, economic and ecological information across all ownerships in the landscape. It will serve as a starting point for the assessment and collective knowledge base for committee members.

Establishing the pilot landscape regional committee in the NE was a success. The functional working group organization is operational with each group organized and co-chairs designated. Participation has dropped to half of the original sixty. However, there is a good core of active participants. Seeing tangible progress and keeping the momentum going will be the big challenge for the participants as they deal with the ambiguity and long term nature of the process.

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

Following is a short chronology of events in the pilot process:

September, 1997	Interdisciplinary group established to assist in developing a prototype landscape assessment; their goal was to determine what information was needed, what data was available and how to format into an assessment.
November, 1997	Council approves the "Regional Committee Process" paper #LP 1197 (Appendix 1).
December, 1997	NE landscape region approved as pilot to establish first regional committee; implementation strategy developed (Appendix 2).
January - February, 1998	An information package was developed to use when contacting key individuals and newspapers; issued news releases and purchased ads in papers; held three informational meetings for the public to learn about the process; 60 people completed participation forms expressing their interest in program; interdisciplinary information group completes its task and gives to staff to prototype for pilot region.
March, 1998	Held first NE Regional Forest Resource Committee meeting in March; 45 participants attended; the concept of using representative interests and a steering committee approved by Council was not well received by participants (Appendix 3, Minutes of Landscape Committee meeting, March 12th); needed to re-evaluate the organization of regional committee.
April - May, 1998	Council's landscape committee evaluated feedback from the March meeting and reorganized regional committee structure into one with functional work groups and a convener group; all participation will be on a voluntary basis with no formal nominating process or approval; a group of 8 "interim" conveners were appointed to get regional committee structure started (Appendix 4 Outcomes).
June - August, 1998	Convener group meets three times and establishes 3 working groups (Coordination, Outreach & Education, Assessment & Monitoring) and convenes the next regional committee meeting; all working groups hold their first meeting to start organizing; staff presents an "Information Atlas" to the Assessment & Monitoring group to help them with assessment information (Appendix 5 Atlas Summary).

September - October, 1998	Twenty five people attended second regional committee meeting the September; purpose to build understanding of the process and organization; regional committee provides direction to working groups; conveners meet to provide direction on process to working groups; working groups continue to meet to refine roles and work through issues and respond to direction.
November-December, 1998	Evaluation of pilot project is completed and presented to Council (Appendix 6 Participant Observations); regional committee is operational; assessment is started several coordination needs are identified; and outreach and education activities are starting; Council approves the formation of an interdisciplinary technical group (Resource Assessment & Monitoring Advisory Team) to provide support for regional committees and develop ecological inventory across ownerships.

LESSONS LEARNED

The following are lessons learned that give rise to making some changes as we move to expand the program throughout the state:

, **Establishing the pilot landscape regional committee in the NE was a success.**

The functional working group organization is operational with each group organized and co-chairs designated. Participation has dropped to half of the original sixty. However, there is a good core of active participants. Seeing tangible progress and keeping the momentum going will be the big challenge for the participants as they deal with the ambiguity and long term nature of the process.

, **The ability to provide timely information, analysis, resources and staff support is critical to the success of the regional committees.**

The "Information Atlas" was very well received. Participants want to know more about what is happening in the landscape. Start to finish the Atlas took approximately six months to complete. Gathering existing social, economic and ecological data and putting it into a usable format was a huge task. The "Interagency Information Cooperative (IIC) had two summer interns working on this and a $10,000 contract for social economic data; Chris Edgar lead the effort on ecological data.

Staff to organize, facilitate and follow up on regional committee operations is estimated at approximately a half time position per regional committee. This work includes getting the committee established, all administrative work, meeting facilitation and follow up. Taking this burden off the volunteer is vital for success.

, **There is a lack of adequate forest resource data for landscape assessment and analysis.**

This fact was recognized early on with the formation of the interdisciplinary information group which lead to the development of the "Atlas". The Atlas made use of existing social, economic and ecological data to respond to identified issues. Existing social and economic data is generally adequate to conduct landscape assessment. However, ecological data does not provide adequate detail for ecological analysis across the landscape. Until we agree on a forest inventory system that collects adequate ecological data across all forest ownerships, landscape assessment will be inadequate to meet the needs of regional committees.

, **Time commitments and timing of meetings are an issue when trying to get broad based citizen participation.**

This is not a new learning experience but it needs mention because of the nature of the subject--forest sustainability. It is a very complex, value-laden subject that professionals in the field have difficulty understanding. To expect private citizens get a grasp of the subject requires a steep learning curve that takes time. Couple this with

the time it takes for driving and attending meetings is asking a lot of volunteer citizens. Issues such as day vs. evening meetings; weekday vs. weekend; "paid participants" vs. volunteer participants and the residency requirement are still there.

, **Tightly controlled process did not work well.**

The process approved to establish regional committees (refer to Appendix 1) was translate into setting up a "steering committee" of representative interests from the participants that applied. This smaller, more manageable group would then represent the larger group of interests. This concept as well as the idea of Council approval of members was not accepted by the participants. Trying to determine representative interests tended to polarize people into separate camps and defeated the purpose in trying to work together as citizens.

, **Establishing a volunteer working group concept with an interim "convener"group to help organize worked well**.

The working group concept (refer to Appendix 4) diffused the polarization that occurred after the first meeting. Participants related better to the functional group and since there is no selection there is no politics. Appointment of interim convener group by Landscape Committee started to build ownership and understanding of the process. It also gave some degree of control to the Council as to who would help organize the committee. The interim nature of the convener group is over and it is an established coordinating group.

, **There was/is a lack of ownership in the process and organization by the participants.**

The establishment of the pilot regional committee was a top down process. Staff played a leadership role in getting the committee established. As a result the ownership of the process was primarily with the staff until late in the game. The interim conveners were established and given a new organizational concept in which they had no ownership yet were asked to implement. Appointing the interim conveners first and then having them decide the organization to implement would have gained more ownership.

, **Make outcomes and goals of the process clearer to the participants at the beginning.**

People did not relate to SFRA or the framework we had developed. They had very little knowledge of the GEIS, Roundtable and other activities related to SFRA. The first regional committee meeting was an attempt to get agreement on the organization of the committee when many of the participants had no idea of the purpose of the committee. By the second meeting we did prepare a more concise statement of outcomes but we still have participants who think the purpose is vague. There needs to be a clearer focus on tangible products at the beginning of the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As we plan to establish regional committees in other landscapes we must keep in mind that each of the landscapes are different and we must remain flexible to meet each of their needs. However, based on the lessons learned from the NE pilot regional committee, I have the following recommendations on how we should proceed:

Lesson Learned: *Establishing the pilot landscape regional committee in the NE was a success.*

Recommendation:

1. **Using existing staff establish regional landscape committees in landscape regions 4 (central) and 6 (SE).**

   Although the pilot in the NE was successful it is too early to determine if the landscape program will be successful in the state. The NE regional committee needs more time to complete an assessment and deal with some of the identified issues in the GEIS before we know if the participants will continue to stay interested. However, we do have opportunities to move forward in other regions and continue to test the landscape management concept (Appendix 7, Thumbnail Sketch of Opportunities). We should do this by partnering with existing programs in the landscapes where possible and using consultants to maintain flexibility. Landscapes 4 & 6 have the most opportunity to follow this approach. The Council will need to evaluate the program in a year to determine if it is successful and gaining momentum in the state.

Lesson Learned: *The ability to provide timely information, analysis, resources and staff support is critical to the success of the regional committees.*

Recommendation:

2. **Increase staff time in the IIC by making the current 60% position full time and consider options for improving the administrative organization of the IIC; maintain GIS and Modeler skills.**

   The role of the IIC from the landscape perspective is to provide "one stop shopping" for information that the regional committees need. We did not fully test the ability of the IIC to do that with the pilot, but we did test it enough to know what we have now is not adequate for the future. Establishing a full time position will provide added emphasis and time to the work of the IIC. How best to administer the IIC as the program expands needs to be explored.

   The Council's GIS and Modeler positions are adequate to meet the current needs. As more regional committees are established additional needs will come from participating agencies.

Lesson Learned: *There is a lack of adequate forest resource data for landscape assessment and analysis.*

Recommendation:

3. **Council and Partnership must play a leadership role in accelerating existing integrated data gathering efforts and obtaining agreement on an ecological type that will meet landscape analysis needs.**

   The landscape program cannot be fully successful until we have adequate ecological information across the landscape. Agreements must be made to share data across ownerships and to develop an ecological inventory format for the future. The recent establishment of the "Resource Assessment & Monitoring Advisory Team" is step in the right direction to meet the need for an ecological inventory. The Council must continue to serve as a catalyst for getting agencies to work together toward this end.

Lessons Learned: *Establishing a volunteer working group concept with an interim "convener"group to help organize worked well.*

Time commitments and timing of meetings are an issue when trying to get broad based citizen participation.

Recommendations:

4. **Continue to use the same criteria for membership and the use of volunteers.**

   The original criteria for participation, including the residency requirement, worked well and there is no reason to change. A volunteer system rather then one of selection by the Council sends a more favorable message to people and reduces the opportunity for polarization.

5. **Establish an interim group of people in the landscape to provide advice and leadership in establishing the regional committee.**

   The interim convener group was effective because the members had the time, energy, knowledge of landscape and commitment to provide the citizen leadership in organizing a regional committee. Concentrate initial staff efforts to seek out key groups and individuals who have commitment to forest sustainability then have the Landscape Committee appoint an interim group. The interim group would work with staff to provide advice and leadership in establishing a regional committee.

   Staff plays a behind the scenes role of guidance and support rather then the lead role in getting participants involved. This is more of a bottom up approach that builds front ownership in the process.

Lessons Learned: *Make outcomes and goals of the process clearer to the participant at the beginning.*

*There was/is a lack of ownership in the process and organization by the participants***.**

Recommendation:

6. **Complete a draft assessment of the landscape first before organizing the regional committee.**

   Use the interim group to begin the assessment of the landscape. Initially, focus the draft assessment on the GEIS Tactical Recommendations and the Council approved goals. The interim group can use the draft assessment to galvanize interest in landscape issues and to organize the regional committee. The "Atlas" should be re-arranged into a landscape assessment format with up front analysis on current conditions and trends. This will give the regional committee a tangible starting point when they come together for the first time.

APPENDIX

1. **Regional Forest Resource Committees Process**

2. **Implementation Strategy**

3. **Landscape Committee Minutes, March 12th**

4. **Committee Organization, Outcomes, and Roles**

5. **Atlas Summary**

6. **Participant Observations**

7. **Thumbnail Sketch of Opportunities in Other Landscapes**

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS

An evaluation questionnaire was sent to all NE Regional Forest Resource Committee participants (Appendix 5 Evaluation Survey). The questionnaire asked participants to update their participation status and comment on the process to date. A summary of the questionnaire and comments follow:

Total questionnaires sent: **53**

Total returned: **28**

Active: 19
Interested: 2
Informed: 7

Active participants not returned: **10**

The following comments are taken verbatim from the participant questionnaires:

What worked well:

- Fortunate to have people interested and able to participate
  - Staff support
  - Convener committee
  - Initial informational meetings in Jan-Feb were informative
  - Got information out
  - The timetable has worked well
  - Moving along in working groups
  - Good facilitator in 2 regional committee meetings

What would you improve:

- Increase efforts to define the tasks before us; must focus on tasks given to us through legislation and Council
- Make outcomes/goals much clearer to all participants at the beginning
- March meeting model did not work well; September was infinitely better but still fell short in that we did not have enough time for discussion and did not get down to specifics
- Try to get groups to work together better

- Regional committees seem very large, may be trying to please too many people
- End residency requirement; user surveys and focus groups to measure public attitudes of forest issues and tradeoff is; participation stipends for non-profit groups and individuals; Council resources not adequate for the task
- Have a large meeting of all working groups to get coordinated direction
- Continue to try to advance in the working groups
- Stress the time commitment and that you have to work together not hammer out your own position
- Direction seems lacking, need the working groups to relate to each other; keep meeting and building on base; need to find a goal and accomplish something tangible
- It will take time to get groups to think toward the end result, which I find vague except as a concept at this time
- Group co-chairs need to keep group members focused on agenda items and not allow members to steer the meeting into ancillary issues
- Have more input on the changes
- I see much information about the goals and process but not much about the issues being discussed
- Process seems too lengthy to get things started; direction of working groups seem to be ambiguous
- Staying flexible and taking time to build trust between groups and people is very important
- Need to keep momentum going
- Decisions by the full committee should come only after working groups make proposal
- Simplify objectives and direction
- Headed in right direction and need to get some positive results

What changes would you make in the future:

- Need to find a process to give direction to the working groups; process should be well documented
- The "Atlas" was an excellent idea and will be better on CD
- We've done a lot of "wheel spinning" and have made little progress to move forward; the establishment of working committees has helped but there is still a vagueness of overall purpose; until each member has a clear sense of what we are suppose to accomplish progress toward an end result will be slow

- Need to address issues and work on them one at a time and not try to do all issues at one time
- Alternate facilitators; environmental community support is falling fast after the gutting of the guidelines; change the SFRA to eliminate contradictions and provide clear direction
- Too early to tell at this point to how assessment and monitoring group is progressing
- Make definite goals and accomplish something measurable; need to progress beyond meeting and meeting
- Perhaps working group membership should require professional background or expertise in subject matter
- Keep forest health in mind more
- Make meetings, at least more, in evenings or weekends so paid lobbyists do not dominate the 9-5 folks
- Distribute forest fact sheets and position papers to organizations that can help educate people about the process and why it is needed
- Use existing DNR and Forest Service and other data to get something done
- Working by committees in a voluntary format on such a complicated resource topic such as forestry takes time and patience; we should remind ourselves of that and try to keep an open mind.