

Wisconsin County Forest Program 2016 SFI Public Summary Audit Report

Introduction

The SFI Program of the Wisconsin County Forest Program has demonstrated conformance with the SFI 2015-2019 Standard and Rules, Section 2 – Forest Management Standard, according to the NSF Certification Process.

Wisconsin County Forest Program includes over 2.3 million acres of forestland managed by 29 counties in the central and northern portions of Wisconsin. The scope of the SFIS Certification encompasses sustainable forestry activities of participating counties within the Wisconsin County Forest System and land management operations in 25 Wisconsin County Forests encompassing approximately 2.2 million acres of publicly owned forests, including the following counties:

Ashland, Barron, Bayfield, Burnett, Douglas, Eau Claire, Florence, Forest, Iron, Jackson, Juneau, Langlade, Lincoln, Marathon, Marinette, Oconto, Oneida, Polk, Price, Rusk, Sawyer, Taylor, Vilas, Washburn, Wood

Responsibility for management of these forests rests with elected county boards, with management activities implemented by county-employed foresters supported by DNR personnel. The forests are managed to provide revenue, habitat, recreational opportunities, and to protect biodiversity values and special sites. The lands abound with a variety of game and non-game wildlife species, and attract a variety of recreationists from hunters to trail users to nature enthusiasts. The most common tree species in order are aspen, sugar maple, red maple, red oak, red pine, basswood, and white birch. Harvest levels over the past decade have averaged over 18 million board feet and 770,000 cords per year.

The Wisconsin County Forest's SFI Program is managed by the Wisconsin DNR County Forest Specialist. A County Forest Certification Committee comprised of representatives of the counties, the Wisconsin County Forests Association (WCFA), and DNR staff help implement the SFI program, reviewing progress and making suggestions for improvements or changes as needed. The Wisconsin County Forests Association provides considerable support for certification-related activities and is a key support mechanism for the program. The 25 participating Wisconsin County Forests have been certified to the Sustainable Forestry Initiative® Standard since December 10, 2004

The audit was performed by NSF on August 9-12, 2016 by an audit team headed by Mike Ferrucci, Lead Auditor, supported by Michelle Matteo, Auditor. Audit team members fulfill the qualification criteria for conducting audits contained in SFI 2015-2019 Standards and Rules, Section 9 - Procedures and Auditor Qualifications and Accreditation.

The objective of the audit was to assess conformance of the firm's SFI Program to the requirements of the SFI 2015-2019 Standard and Rules, Section 2 – Forest Management.

The scope of the audit included forest management operations. Forest practices that were the focus of field inspections included those that have been under active management over the planning period of the past 3 years. In addition practices conducted earlier were also reviewed as appropriate (regeneration and BMP issues, for example), SFI obligations to promote sustainable forestry practices, to seek legal compliance, and to incorporate continual improvement systems were also within the scope of the audit.

Several of the SFI Section 2 requirements were outside of the scope of Wisconsin County Forest Program's SFI program and were excluded from the scope of the SFI Certification Audit as follows:

- Indicator 2.1.3 - No planting of exotic trees.
- Indicator 2.1.5 - No afforestation program.
- Indicator 10.1.2 - No research on genetically engineered trees.

The next surveillance audit is tentatively scheduled for the week of August 9, 2017.

Audit Process

The audit was governed by a detailed audit plan designed to enable the audit team to efficiently determine conformance with the applicable SFI requirements. The plan provided for the assembly and review of audit evidence consisting of documents, interviews, and on-site inspections of ongoing or completed forest practices.

During the audit NSF reviewed a sample of the written documentation assembled to provide objective evidence of Conformance. NSF also selected field sites for inspection based upon the risk of environmental impact, likelihood of occurrence, special features, and other criteria outlined in the NSF protocols. NSF also selected and interviewed stakeholders such as contract loggers, landowners and other interested parties, and interviewed employees within the organization to confirm that the SFI Standard was understood and actively implemented. There were no minor non-conformances or corrective actions identified in the previous audit subject to review in the 2016 audit.

The possible findings of the audit included Full Conformance, Major Non-conformance, Minor Non-conformance, Opportunities for Improvement, and Practices that exceeded the Basic Requirements of the standard.

Overview of Audit Findings

The Wisconsin County Forest Program was found to be in overall conformance with the standard. NSF determined that there was one minor non-conformance: Use of SFI Logos did not fully conform with Section 5 - Rules for Use of SFI On-Product Labels and Off-Product Marks. A plan is in place to resolve this issue.

One opportunity for improvement was identified: There is an Opportunity for Improvement in the criteria and implementation of stand level retention within larger Aspen clear-cut blocks.

NSF also identified the following areas where forestry practices and operations of Wisconsin County Forest Program exceed the basic requirements of the SFI Standard:

- Wisconsin County Forest Program exceeds forest management planning requirements with exceptionally detailed and comprehensive management plans and planning documents.
(Indicator 1.1.1 requires 1.1.1. Forest management planning at a level appropriate to the size and scale of the operation...).
- The Wisconsin County Forest Program is exceptional by providing an extensive range of quality recreational activities within their forests.
(Indicator 5.4.1 requires participants to “Provide recreational opportunities for the public, where consistent with forest management objectives.”)
- The Wisconsin County Forestry Program, through the work of county forestry personnel, WDNR personnel who have significant duties in the program, and the Wisconsin County Forests Association provides an exceptional amount of leadership and support for numerous and diverse activities for public outreach, education and involvement related to sustainable forest management.
(Indicator 12.2.1 requires Periodic educational opportunities promoting sustainable forestry, such as
 - a. field tours, seminars, websites, webinars or workshops;
 - b. educational trips;
 - c. self-guided forest management trails;
 - d. publication of articles, educational pamphlets or newsletters; or
 - e. support for state, provincial, and local forestry organizations and soil and water conservation districts.)
- The Wisconsin County Forest Program engages in an exceptional amount of involvement with a wide range of county, state, federal, and public entities in their land planning and management activities. This work is done by county board members, forest administrators, and county foresters, with the WCFA providing leadership, guidance, support and coordination.
(Indicator 13.1.1 requires “Involvement in *public land* planning and management activities with appropriate governmental entities and the public”.)

Wisconsin County Forest Program maintains a high level of contact with local stakeholders over forest management issues through state, federal and individual collaboration. (Indicator 13.1.2 requires “Appropriate contact with local stakeholders over forest management issues through state, provincial, federal or independent collaboration”.)

General Description of Evidence of Conformity

NSF's audit team used a variety of evidence to determine conformance. A general description of this evidence is provided below, organized by SFI Objective.

Objective 1 Forest Management Planning

To ensure forest management plans include long-term sustainable harvest levels and measures to avoid forest conversion.

Summary of Evidence: *The county forest management plans (Washburn, Burnett, Polk, and Sawyer counties), Timber Sale Notice and Cutting Reports for selected timber sales, supporting documents including WDNR manuals and handbooks, and the county forest inventory reports produced from the WisFIRS system were the key evidence of conformance.*

Objective 2 Forest Health and Productivity

To ensure long-term forest productivity, carbon storage and conservation of forest resources through prompt reforestation, afforestation, minimized chemical use, soil conservation, and protecting forests from damaging agents.

Summary of Evidence: *Field observations and associated records were used to confirm practices. There are ongoing programs for reforestation, for protection against insects and diseases and wildfire, and for careful management of activities which could potentially impact soil and long-term productivity.*

Objective 3 Protection and Maintenance of Water Resources

To protect the water quality of rivers, streams, lakes, wetlands and other water bodies through meeting or exceeding best management practices.

Summary of Evidence: *Field observations of a range of sites were the key evidence. Auditors visited portions of selected field sites that were closest to water resources and reviewed maps and harvest plans.*

Objective 4 Conservation of Biological Diversity

To manage the quality and distribution of wildlife habitats and contribute to the conservation of biological diversity by developing and implementing stand- and landscape-level measures that promote a diversity of types of habitat and successional stages, and the conservation of forest plants and animals, including aquatic species, as well as threatened and endangered species, Forests with Exceptional Conservation Value, old-growth forests and ecologically important sites.

Summary of Evidence: *Field observations, written plans and policies, interviews of college-trained Wisconsin DNR field biologists who support the program, the availability of specialists, and regular staff involvement in conferences and workshops that cover scientific advances were the evidence used to assess the requirements that involved biodiversity conservation.*

Objective 5 Management of Visual Quality and Recreational Benefits

To manage the visual impact of forest operations and provide recreational opportunities for the public.

Summary of Evidence: *Field observations of completed operations and policies/procedures for visual quality were assessed during the evaluation. Maps of recreation sites as well as field visits to several recreational areas and trails helped confirm a very strong commitment to recreation programs and facilities.*

Objective 6 Protection of Special Sites

To manage lands that are geologically or culturally important in a manner that takes into account their unique qualities.

Summary of Evidence: *Field observations of completed operations, records of special sites, training records, and written protection plans were assessed during the evaluation.*

Objective 7 Efficient Use of Fiber Resources

To minimize waste and ensure the efficient use of fiber resources.

Summary of Evidence: Field observations of completed operations, contract clauses, inspection reports, and discussions with supervising foresters and with loggers provided the key evidence.

Objective 8 Recognize and Respect Indigenous Peoples' Rights

To recognize and respect Indigenous Peoples' rights and traditional knowledge.

Summary of Evidence: Interviews and documentation of systems for communication and cooperation were used to confirm the requirements.

Objective 9 Legal and Regulatory Compliance

To comply with applicable federal, provincial, state and local laws and regulations.

Summary of Evidence: Field reviews of ongoing and completed operations were the most critical evidence. Information provided by Wisconsin DNR was also a factor.

Objective 10 Forestry Research, Science and Technology

To invest in forestry research, science and technology, upon which sustainable forest management decisions are based and broaden the awareness of climate change impacts on forests, wildlife and biological diversity.

Summary of Evidence: Financial records and awareness of predicted climate change impacts were confirmed.

Objective 11 Training and Education

To improve the implementation of sustainable forestry practices through appropriate training and education programs.

Summary of Evidence: Training records of selected personnel, records associated with harvest sites audited, and stakeholder interviews were the key evidence for this objective.

Objective 12 Community Involvement and Landowner Outreach

To broaden the practice of sustainable forestry through public outreach, education, and involvement, and to support the efforts of SFI Implementation Committees.

Summary of Evidence: Interviews, agendas for meetings, and participation in the Wisconsin SFI Implementation Committee were sufficient to assess the requirements.

Objective 13 Public Land Management Responsibilities

To participate and implement sustainable forest management on public lands.

Summary of Evidence: Interviews and review of policies were used to confirm the requirements.

Objective 14 Communications and Public Reporting

To increase transparency and to annually report progress on conformance with the SFI Forest Management Standard.

Summary of Evidence: Reports filed with SFI Inc. and the SFI website were the key evidence.

Objective 15. Management Review and Continual Improvement

To promote continual improvement in the practice of sustainable forestry by conducting a management review and monitoring performance.

Summary of Evidence: Records of program reviews including annual "Partnership Meetings", periodic internal audits, and agendas and notes from management review meetings, and interviews with personnel from all involved levels in the organization were assessed.

Relevance of Forestry Certification

Third-party certification provides assurance that forests are being managed under the principles of sustainable forestry, which are described in the Sustainable Forestry Initiative Standard as:

1. Sustainable Forestry

To practice sustainable forestry to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs by practicing a land stewardship ethic that integrates reforestation and the managing, growing, nurturing and harvesting of trees for useful products and ecosystem services such as the conservation of soil, air and water quality, carbon, biological diversity, wildlife and aquatic habitats, recreation and aesthetics.

2. Forest Productivity and Health

To provide for regeneration after harvest and maintain the productive capacity of the forest land base, and to protect and maintain long-term forest and soil productivity. In addition, to protect forests from economically or environmentally undesirable levels of wildfire, pests, diseases, invasive exotic plants and animals and other damaging agents and thus maintain and improve long-term forest health and productivity.

3. Protection of Water Resources

To protect water bodies and riparian areas, and to conform with forestry best management practices to protect water quality.

4. Protection of Biological Diversity

To manage forests in ways that protect and promote biological diversity, including animal and plant species, wildlife habitats, and ecological or natural community types.

5. Aesthetics and Recreation

To manage the visual impacts of forest operations, and to provide recreational opportunities for the public.

6. Protection of Special Sites

To manage lands that are ecologically, geologically or culturally important in a manner that takes into account their unique qualities.

7. Responsible Fiber Sourcing Practices in North America

To use and promote among other forest landowners sustainable forestry practices that are both scientifically credible and economically, environmentally and socially responsible.

8. Legal Compliance

To comply with applicable federal, provincial, state, and local forestry and related environmental laws, statutes, and regulations.

9. Research

To support advances in sustainable forest management through forestry research, science and technology.

10. Training and Education

To improve the practice of sustainable forestry through training and education programs.

11. Community Involvement and Social Responsibility

To broaden the practice of sustainable forestry on all lands through community involvement, socially responsible practices, and through recognition and respect of Indigenous Peoples' rights and traditional forest-related knowledge.

12. Transparency

To broaden the understanding of forest certification to the SFI Standard by documenting certification audits and making the findings publicly available.

13. Continual Improvement

To continually improve the practice of forest management, and to monitor, measure and report performance in achieving the commitment to sustainable forestry.

14. Avoidance of Controversial Sources including Illegal Logging in Offshore Fiber Sourcing

(Applies only to the SFI 2015-2019 Fiber Sourcing Standard)

To avoid wood fiber from illegally logged forests when procuring fiber outside of North America, and to avoid sourcing fiber from countries without effective social laws.

Source: Sustainable Forestry Initiative® (SFI) Standard, 2015–2019 Edition

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