
St. Louis County Land and Minerals Department Public Summary Report - 2016

Introduction

The SFI Program of the St. Louis County Land and Minerals Department has achieved conformance with the 2015-2019 SFI® Forest Management Standard according to the NSF Audit Process.

St. Louis County Land and Minerals Department was originally certified to the SFI Standard in 2004 and has undergone successful surveillance and re-certification audits annually as required. This report describes the 2016 reassessment audit. The audit was designed to focus on field forestry operations, on changes in programs or operations, on the management review system, and on efforts at continuous improvement. In addition, a subset of SFI requirements were selected for detailed review.

The St. Louis County Land and Minerals Department is responsible for management of the state tax forfeited lands in St. Louis County. The St. Louis County Land and Minerals Department has established the following objectives for its State tax forfeited land base:

1. Retain a minimum land base of approximately 879,000 acres of tax forfeited trust land suitable for ongoing management for multiple values including forest products, recreation, and ecological functions.
2. Consolidated ownership with most land contained in large contiguous blocks and significantly reduced amount of land in isolated, unmanageable parcels so as to facilitate more effective overall management.

Over half the resource is in the northern mixed forest type – aspen, birch, spruce, fir. Within this mix, stands dominated by aspen are by far and away the most prevalent. Lowland conifers (not including stagnated stands) are next largest group at 23%. Although their percentages are small, due to the County's large land base, there are considerable acreages (37,000) in white/red pine (3.6%) and jack pine/upland black spruce. Northern hardwoods/oak are limited by inherent ecological conditions. Some of the aspen and birch stands may likely be northern hardwood types.

To achieve its strategic objectives for its land base, the St. Louis County Land and Minerals Department undertakes the following initiatives:

1. Land management: Identify land essential for County management objectives or which must be retained for other reasons (e.g., law), expressly designate this land for retention, and establish management objectives for it.
2. Land sale: Increase opportunities for private development and enhancing the tax base by selling State tax forfeited trust land that is not suitable for achieving county management objectives. This land will be identified and proactively offered for sale over the long term through public auction.
3. Land acquisition: Establish a program to identify specific land parcels for acquisition to consolidate land base, minimize or eliminate future public service costs to remote private lands, and proactively seek to acquire this property. Lands gained through this program will be balanced by the disposal of other county lands so as to retain the property tax base.
4. Land exchange: Undertake a proactive program whereby specific county-administered lands are identified and negotiated for exchange (e.g., isolated and small parcels) with specific landowners

Recertification Audit Process

The recertification audit was performed by NSF on August 22-26, 2016 by an audit team headed by Mike Ferrucci, Lead Auditor and including Keri Yankus, Team Auditor. Both auditors 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 continuing conformance of the firm's SFI Program to the requirements of the SFI 2015-2019 Standards and Rules®, Section 2 – Forest Management and a sample of the other existing requirements. The scope of the SFIS Audit included the entire St. Louis County Land and Minerals Department system. This review included field sites in both of the areas: Southern Area and Northern Area. In the Northern Area all three zones were included: Cook, Virginia, and Ely. Forest practices that were the focus of field inspections included those that have been under active management over the past year, in order to include

planned, ongoing, and completed operations. Practices conducted earlier were also reviewed as appropriate (regeneration and BMP issues, for example).

The SFI Standard was used without modifying any requirements. The following indicators are not applicable:

- Indicator 2.1.3: St. Louis County Land and Minerals Department doesn't plant exotic trees.
- Indicator 2.1.5: Planting is not done to change forest composition but to maintain it.
- Performance Measure 8.3: Working with Indigenous Peoples on private lands.
- Indicator 11.2.3: Minnesota does not have a logger certification program.
- Indicator 10.1.2: St. Louis County Land and Minerals Department is not engaged in research addressing genetic engineering of trees.

The review was governed by a detailed audit protocol designed to enable the audit team to determine conformance with the applicable SFI requirements. The process included the assembly and review of audit evidence consisting of documents, interviews, and on-site inspections of ongoing or completed forest practices. Documents describing these activities were provided to the auditor in advance, and a sample of the available audit evidence was designated by the auditor for review.

The possible findings of the audit include Full Conformance, Major Non-conformance, Minor Non-conformance, Opportunities for Improvement, and Practices that Exceeded the Requirements of the SFIS.

Overview of Audit Findings

SLC's SFI Program was found to be in overall conformance with the SFI 2015-2019 Forest Management Standard. There were two Minor Non-conformances, three "Opportunities for Improvement" and seven areas of "Exceptional Practices" as shown below.

Minor Non-conformance 1: Two portions of the active, nearly-completed Lost Badger Timber Sale have rutting and/or extensive soil compaction covering an estimated 1½ acres. Trails in these portions of the harvest were not protected by the use of logging slash, and the skidder routes were parallel, impacting broad swaths of the harvest block. The other portions of this 78-acre timber sale were harvested using appropriate practices that fully protected site productivity.

SFI Indicator 2.3.3 requires "Post-harvest conditions conducive to maintaining site productivity (e.g., limited rutting, retained down woody debris, minimized skid trails)."

Minor Non-conformance 2: BMPs on two sections of the main access road for the Jack Pine Savage Timber Sale are not in place consistent with Minnesota's Forest Management Guidelines.

One section of surface erosion about 100 feet long was observed on the lower portion of a 200-foot slope (3-5%) on this access and skid road. The road is embedded into the surrounding terrain, with a side slope profile, and no waterbars or diversions. The road was seeded with clover, but the section that was eroding does not have sufficient cover to prevent erosion or stabilize the road.

SFI Indicator 3.1.1 requires a "Program to implement federal, state or provincial water quality best management practices during all phases of management activities."

Opportunities for Improvement

There is an Opportunity for Improvement in the knowledge of field personnel regarding landscape planning and landscape goals.

SFI Indicator 4.1.4 states that "Program Participants shall participate in or incorporate the results of state, provincial, or regional conservation planning and priority-setting efforts to conserve biological diversity and consider these efforts in forest management planning. Examples of credible priority-setting efforts include state wildlife action plans, state forest action plans, relevant habitat conservation plans or provincial wildlife recovery plans."

There is an Opportunity for Improvement in the currency of the intranet site used to provide access to laws and regulations.

SFI Indicator 9.1.1 requires "Access to relevant laws and regulations in appropriate locations."

There is an Opportunity for Improvement in the knowledge about climate change predictions for northeastern Minnesota and its potential impacts

SFI Indicator 10.3.2 requires that "Program Participants are knowledgeable about climate change impacts on wildlife, wildlife habitats and conservation of biological diversity through international, national, regional or local programs."

Exceeds the SFI Requirements

Planning at the site and project level is exceptionally detailed and well-documented.

SFI Indicator 1.1.1 requires "Forest management planning at a level appropriate to the size and scale of the operation."

Documentation of all practices is detailed, well-organized, and contributes to program success in meeting sustainable forestry objectives.

SFI Indicator 1.1.5 requires “Documentation of forest practices (e.g., planting, fertilization and thinning) consistent with assumptions in harvest plans.”

The programs for regenerating harvested stands, including the use of an ecological classification system to align species with the appropriate site and significant ongoing (and patient) investments in securing pine regeneration, were found to be exceptional.

SFI Indicator 2.1.2 requires “Clear criteria to judge adequate regeneration and appropriate actions to correct understocked areas and achieve acceptable species composition and stocking rates for planting, direct seeding and natural regeneration.”

The nature and extent of retention of stand-level wildlife habitat elements such as snags, stumps, mast trees, down woody debris, den trees and nest trees as well as green trees which can, over time, develop into these other critical wildlife habitat elements was exceptional. Of particular note are efforts to retain long-lived conifers as well as larger Aspen trees within and adjacent to harvested blocks.

SFI Indicator 4.1.2 requires “Development of criteria and implementation of practices, as guided by regionally based best scientific information, to retain stand-level wildlife habitat elements such as snags, stumps, mast trees, down woody debris, den trees and nest trees.”

Training (and experience) of St. Louis County Land and Minerals Department foresters, including formal and informal methods of learning, are notable strengths of the program.

SFI Indicator 11.1.3 requires “Staff education and training sufficient to their roles and responsibilities.”

St. Louis County Land and Minerals Department has developed an exemplary program for contractor training.

SFI Indicator 11.1.4 requires “Contractor education and training sufficient to their roles and responsibilities.”

The management system, including monitoring, internal audits, and management review driving continuous improvement, is exceptional and contributes to the achievement of the mission and vision for the St. Louis County Land and Minerals Department.

SFI Objective 15, Performance Measure 15.1 states: “Program Participants shall establish a management review system to examine findings and progress in implementing the SFI 2015-2019 Forest Management Standard, to make appropriate improvements in programs, and to inform their employees of changes.”

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 evidence of conformance for this indicator included:

- St. Louis County Land Department, Long-Term Resource Management Plan
- Inventory data and growth modeling summary
- Minnesota Forest Resources Council (MFRC) Site-Level Forest Management Guidelines
- Minnesota Ecological Classification System/Native Plant Community Keys
- Minnesota Forest Resources Council Landscape Program
- Selected management plans for special sites and
- Silvicultural Prescriptions and other information on Timber Sale Synopses

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. St. Louis County Land and Minerals Department has programs for reforestation, for protection against insects, diseases and wildfire, and for careful management of activities which

could potentially impact soil and long-term productivity. Key field records including Timber Sale Checklists, Prospectuses, Maps, Harvest Provisions and Synopses, Resource Data Appraisal Forms, Permit Activity Reports, and other data from various database systems were reviewed.

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 reviewed portions of selected field sites that were close to water resources. MFRC Site-Level Forest Management Guidelines (BMPs) are also an important part of the program to protect water resources. Selected harvest inspection reports were reviewed, and foresters administering timber sales were interviewed.

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, and interviews confirming knowledge of biodiversity issues and the habitat needs of Endangered and Threatened Species as well as Species of Special Conservation Need were the core evidence used to determine conformance.

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 the implementation of policies for visual quality and for managing clearcut size and adjacency were assessed during the evaluation.

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 all assessed during the evaluation. Management Plans have been developed for 43 special sites.

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, and discussions with supervising field foresters and with loggers provided the key evidence. Foresters monitor utilization during all harvests and consider the new biomass harvesting guidelines. Selected harvest inspection reports were reviewed, and foresters administering timber sales were interviewed.

Objective 8 Recognize and Respect Indigenous Peoples' Rights

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

Summary of Evidence:

The department's tribal policies and records of tribal outreach activities were used to determine conformance.

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. Regulatory compliance has been very strong.

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:

Records of research support and interviews with foresters confirmed conformance.

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 logger 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:

Review of documents showing outreach activities and interviews with staff and stakeholders were sufficient to assess conformance with the requirements selected for review during this audit.

Objective 13 Public Land Management Responsibilities

To participate and implement sustainable forest management on public lands.

Summary of Evidence:

Interviews and review of documents and correspondence as well as the St. Louis County Land and Minerals Department's website 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:

Interviews, copies of reports filed with SFI Inc. and the SFI Inc. website provided evidence of conformance.

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, agendas and notes from management review meetings, and interviews with personnel from all involved levels in the organization were assessed. Follow-up actions for internal audit findings were also reviewed.

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

For Additional Information Contact:

Norman Boatwright
NSF Forestry Program Manager

PO Box 4021
Florence, SC 29502
843-229-1851

nboatwright12@gmail.com

Daniel Freeman
NSF Project Manager

789 N. Dixboro Road
Ann Arbor, MI 48105
734-214-6228

dfreeman@nsf.org

Jason Meyer
Deputy Land and Minerals Director
St. Louis County Land and Minerals Department
320 W 2nd Street
Duluth, MN
(218) 726-2606

meyerj@stlouiscountymn.gov