

Wisconsin DNR State Lands 2015 SFI Public Summary Recertification Audit Report

The SFI Program of the Wisconsin DNR has achieved continuing conformance with the SFI 2015-2019 Standards and Rules®, Section 2, according to the NSF SFIS Certification Audit Process. This report describes the 2015 Recertification Audit designed to consider the entire program and all requirements, including any changes in operations, the management review system, and efforts at continuous improvement.

The Wisconsin State Forests have been certified to the Sustainable Forestry Initiative® (SFI) Standard since May 5, 2004 (SFI certificate #NSF-SFIS-1Y941). In 2009 the scope of the Wisconsin SFI Program was expanded, and the program was recertified including programs for management of several categories of state lands beyond state forests, including parks, wildlife lands, and other categories of generally forested lands. DNR land included in the project includes approximately 1,558,761 acres. Excised acreage includes predominantly special purpose lands (such as fish hatcheries, tree nurseries, communications towers, and administrative sites) and land under easement where DNR does not have land management authority. The program was recertified to the SFI 2010-2014 Standard in 2012 and has updated to the 2015-2019 Standard with the 2015 Recertification Audit.

An Overview of Forest Management on Wisconsin State Forests

Wisconsin DNR lands are managed for multiple-use objectives. Along with non-timber objectives, the DNR lands are used to demonstrate various forest practices to the public, while meeting a variety of habitat objectives. Resource managers within the Department of Natural Resources use these objectives in conjunction with other demands to manage each state forest as a healthy ecosystem. In recent years the average annual harvest has been budgeted at 18,000 acres. This is a very conservative number and is based on area regulation. A majority of the harvests occur on State Forests (which constitute 1/3 of the DNR land base). Reflecting a greater focus on non-timber objectives, other DNR land such as wildlife areas and state parks (with 2/3 of the land base) produce 1/3 of the average annual harvest acreage.

Of the area harvested a majority of the management prescriptions are thinnings, which reduce the density of stems to accelerate growth of the remaining trees and vertical structural diversity within the stand harvested. The remaining stands that are actively managed are harvested using regeneration techniques. After harvest these stands are either replanted or regenerate naturally and will continue to grow and produce forests and wood products for future generations. These regenerating forests also provide important habitat for species associated with young forests such as the snowshoe hare and woodcock.

Harvested stands are either regenerated naturally or are planted with seedlings. The determination of which method to use is based on the ability of the site to regenerate naturally and the ability of the desired species to regenerate on a particular site. For example, if a site experiences hot and dry conditions planting may be the best alternative. This is most common for the pine species, especially jack pine.

Even-aged and uneven-aged management schemes are the harvest systems employed on Wisconsin DNR's land. Even-aged management includes clearcuts, clearcuts with reserves, seed tree methods, shelterwood cuttings, and intermediate thinnings. Uneven-aged management includes both individual and group selection techniques. Each of these systems and techniques are designed in conjunction with a particular tree species or community of trees. For example, uneven-aged single tree and group selection techniques are used in northern hardwoods, hemlock-hardwood, and swamp hardwood stands. In contrast, even-aged clearcuts are used in pine (red, white, and jack), paper birch, aspen, oak, northern hardwoods, scrub oak, aspen, fir-spruce, and black spruce stands. The selection of a management system and specific technique depends on many factors including tree composition, age of the stand, location, accessibility, and most importantly the long-term objectives for the stand under consideration."

An Overview of Forest Management on Wisconsin State Park Lands

Source: Managing Forests on Wisconsin State Park Lands 2010

Background

Wisconsin's forested lands are some of our state's most valuable resources, prized by visitors and citizens alike. People come to these special places for moments of quiet reflection or simply to be in the great outdoors. They pursue recreational opportunities ranging from biking and hiking to camping, wildlife watching, and cross country skiing.

Scenic beauty — or “visual quality” — is one of the primary reasons people choose to spend their recreation and vacation time in or near forested areas and within Wisconsin State Park System (WSPS) properties. They are also attracted by the serenity and solitude of the outdoors. Forested landscapes inspire spiritual and emotional connections resulting in deeply personal experiences for many people.

Protecting and enhancing this sensory experience is a priority for those entrusted with managing WSPS properties. In addition, management must work to sustain healthy communities that provide economic, social, and ecological benefits, now and for future generations. This careful oversight of our natural resources is a cornerstone of the WSPS mission.

Overall Management Priorities

Sustaining healthy forests is a vital role of WSPS properties, and the key to sustaining healthy forests is pro-active management. To ensure that management practices are consistent with the goals and objectives of the WSPS, several management priorities have been established but may vary depending on site characteristics:

- **Aesthetics:** Protect scenic views and allow forest cover to provide settings for solitude and privacy.
- **Recreation:** Sustain large canopy cover and shade in picnic areas, campgrounds, along nature trails, and high use areas.
- **Habitat:** Provide habitat for a wide variety of wildlife and plants, including endangered and threatened species.
- **Forest Health:** Allow for regeneration of the forest through quality forest management and seek opportunities that enhance or maintain the overall health and vigor of the forest ecosystem.
- **Pest management:** Manage invasive plant and animal species, pests, diseases, and nuisance wildlife through prevention, control, and eradication activities.
- **Education and research:** Provide opportunities for interpretation, education, and scientific research.
- **Water quality:** Sustain and enhance local watersheds and water resources including erosion control along waterways, trails, and other property features.”

An Overview of Forest Management on Wisconsin Wildlife Areas

Since 1876, the State of Wisconsin has been acquiring land to meet conservation and recreation needs. Public lands managed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources provide many opportunities and public spaces for people to hunt, fish, trap, hike, canoe, or watch or photograph wildlife. All Wildlife Areas are managed to sustain the wildlife and natural communities found on the properties and to provide a full range of traditional outdoor recreational uses.

The forest resources on state wildlife areas can be broadly characterized as Oak and Pine Barrens, Southern Forests, Oak Savanna, and Northern Forests.

Oak and Pine Barrens

Less than 1% of the pre-settlement oak and pine barren habitat remains. The long term sustainability of this habitat and the organisms that it supports will require that we protect and connect the existing scattered sites. The composition, structure, and ecological function of these communities depend on periodic fires as a management tool but may be mimicked with appropriately applied timber management strategies and aggressive post-sale treatment applied as a shifting mosaic across the appropriate ecological landscapes.

Southern Forests

Although the southern forest type is common, large, high-quality, unbroken tracts are becoming rare. Oak regeneration continues to be a problem on dry-mesic and mesic sites. With lack of fire or other disturbance, oak forests are continuing to convert to more mesic forest species. Oak wilt and competition from invasive shrubs continue to be a problem in some areas. Appropriately applied timber management strategies are critical to maintaining the oak resource.

Oak Savanna

In the absence of active management, the future of oak savanna looks very bleak in Wisconsin and throughout its entire range. The increasing abandonment of lightly to moderately grazed wooded pastures and the accelerating succession of oak woodlots toward heavy shade producing trees and shrubs will lead to the decline and possible loss of much of what remains of the savanna flora and fauna, including eventual decline of the oaks themselves. In a few ecological landscapes the recovery potential exists with active management.

Northern Forest

Overall stand age has decreased and tree species relative abundance has changed. Generalist species have increased and specialist species have declined. Invasive species have continued to degrade northern forests. Second growth northern hardwood forests lack species diversity. However, there is still great potential for maintaining and enhancing biodiversity in the northern forest. Identification of "high conservation value" forests via planning processes will increase the likelihood that we'll sustain ecologically important forests. Maintaining a full spectrum of forest ecosystems in the appropriate ecological landscapes with a range of successional stages, patch sizes, ages, geographic distribution, and connectivity is an important timber management goal.

SFIS Recertification Audit Process

The Recertification Audit was performed by NSF on August 17-21, 2015 by an audit team headed by Norman Boatwright, SFI Lead Auditor. The team included Mike Thompson, Team Auditor and Brendan Grady, FSC Lead Auditor. Audit team members fulfill the qualification criteria for conducting SFIS Certification Audits found in Section 9 – SFI 2015-2019 Audit Procedures and Auditor Qualifications contained in Requirements for the SFI 2015-2019 Standards and Rules. The Wisconsin DNR's management representative is Mark Heyde, Forest Certification Coordinator, Wisconsin DNR - Division of Forestry.

The objective of the audit was to assess conformance of the firm's SFI Program to the requirements of the SFI 2015-2019 Standards and Rules, Section 2. The audit served to assess conformance with the entire standard to determine eligibility for a new, three-year certificate. The audit was conducted in conjunction with an FSC audit covering the same lands and organization and by the same audit team. The two processes (SFI and FSC) shared teams and reviewed much of the same evidence, but each program had a different team leader and audit objectives. This report is intended to describe the SFI portion of the evaluation only (more information about the FSC portion of the evaluation is available from WDNR).

The Indicators and Performance Measures of the SFI 2015-2019, Section 2 were utilized without modification or substitution.

The audit was governed by an audit plan and by NSF audit protocols designed to enable the audit team 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 and lists of management activities were provided to the auditors in advance, and a sample of the available field sites was designated by the lead auditor for review. Approximately twenty percent (20%) of the sites visited were randomly selected. The remaining field sites were selected based on the risk of environmental impact, special features, and other criteria outlined in the NSF-SFI-SOP.

During the audit the audit team reviewed a sample of the available written documentation as objective evidence of SFIS Conformance. The lead auditor 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.

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

2014 Audit Findings

An opportunity for improvement was identified during the 2014 Surveillance Audit:

CI 4.1.5: Program for assessment, conducted either individually or collaboratively, of forest cover types, age or size classes, and habitats at the individual ownership level and, where credible data are available, across the landscape, and take into account findings in planning and management activities. Where Master Plans don't exist, there is an opportunity to improve the assessment of forest cover types, age and size classes and habitats at the landscape level when formulating Interim Forest Management Plans.

Review of the Interim Forest Management Plans for sites visited indicate that CI 4.1.5 was adequately addressed.

2015 Audit Findings

No new non-conformances or opportunities for improvement were observed.

The following list describes areas where the Wisconsin DNR's practices exceed the SFI Standard requirements:

CI 2.4.3: Participation in, and support of, fire and pest prevention and control programs. The Department has an exemplary program across Bureaus to manage, control and eradicate invasive species.

CI 4.1.1: Program to incorporate the conservation of native biological diversity, including species, wildlife habitats and ecological community types at stand and landscape levels. The Department has an exemplary program across Bureaus to maintain and improve native biological diversity including prairie and grassland establishment and management.

CI 4.1.5: Program to address conservation of known sites with viable occurrences of significant species of concern. Wetland habitat restoration activities including the installation of water control structures on the Rowan Creek Fishery Area and French Creek Wildlife Area. Also, during the timber sale recon for of the sales on the Rowan Creek Fishery Area, a blue heron rookery was identified, a significant buffer installed and the area denoted in the GIS database.

CI 4.1.7: *Participation in programs and demonstration of activities as appropriate to limit the introduction, spread and impact of invasive exotic plants and animals that directly threaten or are likely to threaten native plant and animal communities.* DNR has a comprehensive program for identifying, controlling, and monitoring the occurrence of invasive exotic plants and animals that threaten the ecological integrity of the state's ecosystems.

CI 5.4.1: *Provide recreational opportunities for the public, where consistent with forest management objectives.* Recreation opportunities are implicit to DNR's mission. State Parks, Wildlife Areas, State Forests, fisheries properties and many other types of state owned forest lands are developed for a variety of developed and primitive recreation experiences. The Natural Resources Board has emphasized opening lands suitable for motorized access and the department is updating its road and trail inventory to identify additional opportunities for motorized public access.

CI 10.1.1: *Financial or in-kind support of research to address questions of relevance in the region of operations. Examples could include, but are not limited to, areas of forest productivity, water quality, biodiversity, community issues, or similar areas which build broader understanding of the benefits and impacts of forest management.* DNR funds research (internal and external) on a broad range of issues: forest health, chemical efficiency, water quality, wildlife management, conservation, social issues, energy efficiency, forest operations, etc. The Department develops a forestry research agenda with the Wisconsin Council on Forestry and partners.

PM: 13.1: *Program Participants with forest management responsibilities on public lands shall participate in the development of public land planning and management processes.* Public input opportunities during master planning are superb including: Local outreach to stakeholders and the community level: annual stakeholder meetings, listening sessions, newsletters, integrated property management meetings; outreach is scaled to the public's level of interest and relative risk.

The next audit will be scheduled during the late summer of 2016. This will be a Surveillance audit, covering a portion of the SFI 2015-2019 Standard.

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 – Property master plans serve as management plans for the larger (Tier 1 and Tier 2) parcels. The smaller parcels are covered by agency-specific planning guidance documents, with parcel specific objectives found on-line. The entire ownership is covered by detailed forestry protocols and manuals as well as associated inventory data and WisFIRS inventory analysis and harvest scheduling software. Inventory data was up-to-date. Planning approaches vary depending on property size and intended use.

Objective 2. Forest 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 records associated with each timber harvest (2460 form and associated narratives) were used to confirm practices. Wisconsin DNR 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.

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 the portions of many field sites that were close to water resources, based on a field sample that was oriented heavily towards such sites.

Objective 4. Conservation of Biological Diversity including Forests with Exceptional Conservation Value - 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, use of college-trained field biologists, availability of specialists, and regular staff involvement in conferences and workshops that cover scientific advances were the evidence used to assess the requirements involved biodiversity conservation. The close support and cooperation of various agencies, including those responsible for wildlife, fisheries, recreation, and endangered resources, were another key factor in the assessment.

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. Further maps of recreation sites, combined with field visits, helped confirm a strong recreation program. Recreational use and esthetics were priority concerns where appropriate.

Objective 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.

Summary of Evidence – Field observations of completed operations, records of special sites, training records, and written protection plans were all assessed during the evaluation. The strong program of Scientific Natural Areas contributed to the conclusions.

Objective 7. Efficient Use of Forest Resources - To minimize waste and ensure the efficient use of fiber resources.

Summary of Evidence – Field observations of completed operations, contract clauses, harvest inspection reports, and discussions with supervising field foresters and with loggers provided the key evidence. On those sites where harvests had been completed the indicator was being met through reasonable utilization, harvest inspections, and lump-sum sales.

Objective 8 - Recognize and Respect Indigenous Peoples' Rights - To recognize and respect Indigenous Peoples' rights and traditional knowledge.

Summary of Evidence: The Company's attempts to solicit input from Indigenous Peoples provided the key evidence

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. Most of the requirements were not edited this year, but the ready availability of BMP manuals and access to laws were factors in finding conformance.

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 were confirmed, and some field research sites were visited.

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 and stakeholder interviews were the key evidence for this objective.

Objective 12. Community Involvement in the Practice of Sustainable Forestry - 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 – Wisconsin DNR has an extensive program of outreach and landowner education, including a website and is active in the MI SIC.

Objective 13: Public Land Management Responsibilities - To participate and implement sustainable forest management on public lands.

Summary of Evidence – Interviews and review of documents were used to confirm the requirements. Interviewees included members of "friends" groups for state parks. Wisconsin DNR answers to the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board, providing regular opportunities for citizen input and a long-term and very knowledgeable governing board of citizens as well.

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 Inc. website provided 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, agendas and notes from management review meetings, and interviews with personnel from all involved levels in the organization were assessed. The Forest Leadership Team of the Forestry Division and the Land Leadership Team of the Lands Division are the critical components of management review; minutes of meetings supplemented by interviews served to confirm compliance.

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 zones, and to conform with 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 forests and lands of special significance (ecologically, geologically or culturally important) in a manner that protects their integrity and 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. Avoidance of Controversial Sources including Illegal Logging in Offshore Fiber Sourcing

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.

9. Legal Compliance

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

10. Research

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

11. Training and Education

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

12. Public Involvement

To broaden the practice of sustainable forestry on public lands through community involvement.

13. Transparency

To broaden the understanding of forest certification to the SFI 2010-2014 Standard by documenting certification audits and making the findings publicly available.

14. Continual Improvement

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

Source: Sustainable Forestry Initiative® (SFI) Standard, 2010-2014 Edition

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End of Public Summary Report