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Minnesota's forests take big first step

By Don Arnosti and Katie Marshall

Last month, Governor Pawlenty announced the environmental certification of Minnesota's state forests—over 4.8 million acres of woodland across the state. This is exciting news for Minnesotans and for our natural resources. But now, the hard work begins. If Minnesota wants to reap the environmental and economic benefits that come with certification, some big improvements will have to be made in how our forests are managed.

The biggest driver behind certification was a demand by one of the largest paper buyers in the world, Time Warner, requiring that most of the material in the paper they purchase come from certified forest management. While the initial push came from economic concerns, the primary benefit of certification will be healthy forests.

In order to become certified, the state's forests had to go through a process similar to a financial audit. Record keeping, resource allocation and on-the-ground forestry techniques from a sample of DNR-managed forests all over Minnesota were examined and assessed by a team of third-party experts. The award of certification from the international Forest Stewardship Council and U.S.-based Sustainable Forestry Initiative means that state forestry practices are sufficiently aligned with national and international standards to produce well-managed forests.

But this is just the first step. The real value of certification comes not from the initial certification, but from the continued demand for improvement and the rigorous standards that the state will now be held to. In order to maintain certification, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) will have to address its shortcomings and make real progress toward becoming a consistently better and more effective resource manager.

The lists of required and recommended improvements from this year's audit includes better communication between the DNR and other stakeholders, such as tribal governments; more consistent training of foresters across the state; improved monitoring of forest health; establishment of statewide deer population goals; and enforcement of off-highway vehicle and all-terrain vehicle regulations.

Perhaps the most significant concern raised by the auditors is whether the DNR has sufficient funds and staff devoted to managing our forests sustainably and maintaining forest certification in the long-term. Without adequate



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resources for the DNR, the state could lose certification over time.

The auditors' concern about DNR resources should serve as a wake-up call. It is also a challenge. In order to sustainably meet the demands of Minnesota's forest product industries, to conserve the natural resources that Minnesotans value so highly, and to consistently improve our state's forest management, action is needed. The Minnesota legislature needs to support and encourage these improvements by providing the funds and personnel needed for high-quality forest management. And the public needs to hold both parties accountable to fulfill their responsibilities under certification for all of our benefit.

Certification provides different types of benefits for different constituencies. It is an economic necessity to paper companies that are required by major buyers to provide certified materials. It provides an opportunity for Minnesota to be a leader in local, national and international forestry standards. It is a way for foresters to employ the latest science available for good forest management to protect all the resources of our forests. It can also be a positive force for greater accountability to the public.

Forest certification is a good thing for Minnesota. But it is only a first step. We look forward to realizing the environmental, social, and economic benefits that will come out of continuing to improve Minnesota's forest management. ▣

About Community Forestry Resource Center

The Community Forestry Resource Center is a program of the Minneapolis-based Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. CFRC is certified under Forest Stewardship Council standards and certifies private forestland in four states in the Upper Midwest.