

LANDOWNER PERSPECTIVES ON ATTRIBUTES OF THE WEST VIRGINIA FOREST STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT.—We surveyed participants of the West Virginia Forest Stewardship Program to evaluate its status and effectiveness following a decade of program implementation. The questionnaire used permitted the respondent to answer freely: “what did you like most?” and “what did you like least?” about the Forest Stewardship Program during their participation in the program. With regard to the desirable attributes, 81% of survey respondents answered; only 65% filled in the blanks concerning the least desirable attributes. The most desirable attributes listed were: usefulness of the plan (23%), professional assistance and advice (20%), and educational aspects (19%). Respondents listed least desirable attributes as not enough follow-up (17%), not enough cost-sharing assistance (10%), and no dislikes (23%). While most comments were favorable, some program participants shared alternative perspectives.

Introduction

The West Virginia Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) has been in place for over 10 years. Five-year (Egan et al. 2001) and ten-year (Jennings 2003) assessments documenting the background of the participants and evaluation of the implementation rates of the recommended practices have been completed and have demonstrated the overall positive impact of this program administered by the West Virginia Division of Forestry (WVDOF). Likewise, high satisfaction ratings of FSP participants in states across the nation have been demonstrated (Esseks and Moulton 2000).

FSP is a federal program that provides cost-share dollars as an incentive for private forestland owners to formulate a management plan. Currently in West Virginia, woodland owners who enroll in the program pay 25% of the cost of having a licensed forester work with them and write an FSP plan; the remainder is paid with federal dollars under the administration of the State Forester, the Director of the WVDOF. This level of incentive has changed over the first decade of the program. During the early years of the program, some landowners were offered cost free plans.

Once a landowner enrolls in the program, the written management plan is the only link to the FSP, as other cost share dollars that might be accessed for plan implementation are available under different federal programs. Thus, the primary outcome of the FSP is to set the framework from which the private forestland owner can make decisions concerning the management of their properties.

Even though the FSP may receive high ratings for the service it provides, evaluations of various facets of the program are important to determine how well it is serving participants. As part of our 10-year assessment, we evaluated whether there were areas of the FSP that could be improved to further increase participants' satisfaction and enhance the service provided by the foresters and administrators of the FSP in West Virginia. To achieve this objective we asked open-ended questions to determine if there were areas in the FSP that should be highlighted and others that could be improved. This paper reports the results of participants' responses to questions about their most positive and negative perspectives of the FSP in West Virginia.

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Methods

A self-administered questionnaire-based survey was utilized to assess implementation rates of recommended practices following the initial 10 years of the FSP in West Virginia. The questionnaire paralleled the 5-year assessment of the program by Egan et al. (2001). Included in the questionnaire were questions dealing with demographics, satisfaction levels of all aspects of the program, motivation behind enrollment, implementation of recommended practices, and participation in other natural resource assistance programs. As part of the development of the questionnaire, West Virginia University Division of Forestry personnel, extension specialists, foresters from the USDA Forest Service and West Virginia Division of Forestry, and landowners from adjacent states made comments and suggestions on clarity and appropriateness of this survey instrument.

Our population included all private forestland owners listed in the WV FSP database as having been enrolled in the first 10 years of the program. At the time of our survey, 3,656 properties had received a management plan under the FSP. In order to avoid duplicate mailings, a single questionnaire was sent to all landowners who were listed more than once due to multiple properties enrolled in the FSP. Additional database filtering removed any participant who did not have an address listed leaving a mailing list that included 3,092 landowners.

Dillman's tailored design method was used for the data collection procedure (Dillman 2000). Questionnaire mailings were made in the following manner beginning in the first week of January 2003: a prequestionnaire announcement postcard, first questionnaire, reminder postcard, and second questionnaire. Addresses of respondents to the first questionnaire were removed from the mailing for the second questionnaire. Stamped return envelopes were sent with the questionnaires and FSP participants were asked whether or not they would like a short summary of the results; this was intended to provide an incentive to complete the questionnaire.

To evaluate how the WV FSP might better benefit the landowners enrolled in the program, we provided space for write-in responses. Two questions were directed questions, where the respondents had the opportunity to answer about: 1) what they liked most about the FSP, and 2) what they liked least about the FSP. A third opportunity for "free" expression was provided at the end of the questionnaire which included space to write in any additional comments they had about the program.

To facilitate analysis and presentation of the open-ended questions, we categorized these into groups of similar responses. One researcher preformed this categorization. Following the initial categorization of each of these three write-in areas, we again went back and reconfirmed that our categorization was stable and that there were minimal discrepancies in categorization. Some responses, particularly those of the general comments section, could have multiple categories. In categorizing these it was difficult to limit our subjectivity; therefore we classified these multiple types into the category that we felt was most strongly expressed by the respondent and this was by and large the first statement.

Results

The overall survey response rate was 63%, with 1,672 returned questionnaires from the total of 3,092 that were mailed. This response rate excludes the 436 mailings that were returned for insufficient or incorrect addresses. We examined nonresponse bias with respect to acreage and found no significant difference in average property size among respondents (200 ac) and nonrespondents (150 ac).

What Did You Like Most About The Program?

A total of 1,087 survey respondents answered the question concerning the most favorable attributes of the FSP. Four categories comprised 78% of the total responses for the most desirable attributes of the FSP (table 1). The plan itself was the top-ranking category and many respondents indicated that the plan gave a comprehensive perspective of their forested property. Program participants noted as a positive attribute the inventory portion of the plan, which provides a "detailed" list of the quantity of timber, the species present, and the location of different timber types on their properties. The set of

compiled maps included in the stewardship plans also were frequently listed as one of the most desirable attributes of the FSP.

Technical assistance ranked as the second most positive attribute of the FSP. Most respondents under this category listed as desirable attributes the opportunity to walk through their woods with a “professional” and to gain valuable insight into the value and variety of trees on the property, as well as being able to learn about potential management opportunities. In the words of one landowner, the “good plan made me aware of things I wasn’t originally aware of....”

The education/information category overlapped to a large extent with the first two categories, although we were not able to establish the direct source (the plan or foresters) of their educational experience. Landowners reported to have learned about specific opportunities such as how to create different wildlife habitat, timber stand improvement, and programs to support future management activities. They frequently mentioned the forester by name and cited as desirable “the personal attention to my needs from the forester.”

The fourth ranking category of “the best” of the FSP was what we have called “improving property”. In this category respondents cited reasons like “it provides goals and objectives to work towards” and the “opportunity to manage the land for the future” as the key benefits of the FSP.

All other categories totaled less than 10% of all responses. Despite this low percentage, cost sharing, tax incentives, and the on-the-ground practices implemented by the responding landowners were the single most important benefits of the program for their specific properties.

What Did You Like Least About the Program?

Fewer survey respondents (875) filled out this question regarding the least desirable attributes of the FSP than in the previous question (table 2). Moreover, nearly one in four (23%) who responded indicated there were no undesirable aspects that they could list.

Of those who did list undesirable attributes, 150 reported the fact that they did not receive any follow-up or contact with the forester or other administrators of the program following the initial plan or the initial visit by the forester who wrote the plan.

Table 2. —Number and percentages for responses to the question “What did you like least about the forest stewardship program.”

Category	Number	Percent
None	202	23
No follow-up	150	17
Other	86	10
Insufficient cost-share	85	10
Administrative barriers	68	8
Communication/Information	64	7
Inconsistent objectives	61	7
Inadequate plan	50	6
Unsatisfactory contacts	42	5
Management cost	26	3
Taxes	25	3
Management assistance	16	2
Total	875	100 ^a

^a Table entries do not add to 100 because of rounding error.

Table 1.—Number and percentages for responses to the question “What do you like most about the Forest Stewardship Program”.

Category	Number	Percent
Plan	249	23
Technical assistance	216	20
Education/Information	201	19
Improving property	187	17
Other	86	8
Cost sharing	66	6
Tax incentive	57	5
Implemented practices	25	2
Total	1087	100

All other categories each accounted for 10% or less of the total response for this question. Insufficient cost-share funding (10% response rate) was cited most frequently for either having insufficient funds (to help apply recommended management practices) or as having uncertainty with whether or not the funds would be available in a given year.

Importantly, 7% specified the most undesirable attribute as having objectives, either perceived or written, in the plans that were inconsistent with their own. Many expressed that the planwriters (or the

program in general) focused primarily on timber production and short-term economic gain. For example, one respondent reported the “emphasis on making the property into a timber producing business.”

Other categories, while not accounting for a large percentage of the total, reflected important concerns. Administrative barriers such as the amount of “paperwork”, time spent enrolling in the program, generic nature of some plans that appeared to be “boilerplate” plans, incorrect maps, and either too much or too little detail in the plans were included in this category. Management costs apart from the financial assistance available through FSP or other cost-share programs were listed by only 3% of the respondents.

Other Comments

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked, “Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about the Forest Stewardship Program?” The responses were extremely diverse among the 509 responses. Our “explanations” category (table 3) accounted for 23% of the total. In this category people expressed reasons why activities specified in plans had not been carried out. Many expressed the lack of time or other resources, or the fact that they do not live on the property.

Compliments were given to the program from 15% of those who filled out this section. These respondents felt strongly about the general “excellence” of the program or were more specific in giving credit to many of the WVDOF and consulting foresters whom they had worked with and associate with the program. Appreciation for the services rendered by these foresters was described as “excellent”, “outstanding”, or “very helpful”.

Several recommendations for improving the FSP were made and 68 respondents were included in this category. Most related to the comments in the “least desirable” section of the questionnaire, e.g., needing more financial cost-share, technical assistance, and plan follow-up.

Responses we labeled as “complaints” were found on 1 in 10 questionnaires. Complaints were often expressed as a matter of unfulfilled expectations such as the inability to receive any follow-up contact, or contact at all with respect to the implementation of the plan-writing phase. One expressed discomfort with the unannounced visit of the property by the foresters (“strangers”) writing the plan. Others were disappointed with the results of forest management activities—such as timber harvesting—subsequent to the plan-writing phase, but still associated with the program. Again, many were not satisfied with the quantity of financial and technical assistance available.

Discussion

Contrary to popular thoughts within the circle of natural resources professionals (e.g., Schmidt 2003), not all perceptions of foresters in our study were negative and suspicious. While some of the comments received concerned this issue, many more gave praise to the services rendered to respondents of this questionnaire.

As presented in this paper, the need for follow-up contacts, and additional technical and financial assistance are in demand by private forest owners. This corroborates with research by Magill and others (2004, in press) that of three types of assistance most frequently offered to forest landowners (financial,

Table 3. —Number and percentages by categories in general comments of FSP by questionnaire respondents.

Response	Number	Percent
Explanations	116	23
Compliments	77	15
Recommendations	68	13
Request assistance	60	12
Complaints	50	10
Philosophy	43	8
Activities	35	7
Change of ownership	16	3
No contact	12	2
Conflicting objectives	12	2
No plan/ Not in program	11	2
Waiting	9	2
Total	509	100 ^a

^a Table entries do not add to 100 because of rounding error.

technical, and educational), preference for direct technical assistance ranks highest. The opportunity to have a professional natural resources agent visit private forestland with the landowner is highly valued as suggested by the compliments paid to the WV FSP and by the recommendations given by the respondents of our questionnaire.

While most comments were favorable, many added insight into areas of the FSP that might be improved. Clearly, elicitation made by FSP participants claiming that the program, or specific foresters they worked with, did not take their objectives into account should be well heeded. Many studies have indicated that both forest owners and the general public—rural and urban—have opinions and objectives that diverge from those of natural resources professionals (Bliss et al. 1997; Egan et al. 1997). As Schmidt (2003) suggests, it is “once the [management] objectives have been settled on, the forester takes over.”

As with any program, the need for consistent information and service is crucial to the long-term stability of the program. Unfortunately, cost-share programs such as the Stewardship Incentives Program have been vulnerable to political and economic vagaries over the course of the FSP. Policies aimed at supporting management on private forests should maintain consistency in funding over long-term planning horizons. Given the program’s availability, most users taking advantage of the opportunity are pleased with the outcome; this can be beneficial to the long-term stability of FSP if conveyed to and understood by political decision-makers.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful for the administrative assistance of the West Virginia Division of Forestry and the funding made available through the West Virginia Forest Stewardship Program. Also helping with this manuscript were three anonymous reviewers who provided helpful comments and suggestions. The Director of the West Virginia Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station approved publication of this manuscript; Scientific Article No. 2863.

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