



# 2008 Forest Service Sustainable Operations Summit

## “Walking the Talk: Reducing Our Environmental Footprint”

### Final Report

December 18, 2008

November 18-20, 2008, the Forest Products Laboratory (FPL), Eastern Region, Northern Research Station, and the Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry sponsored the 4<sup>th</sup> Forest Service Sustainable Operations Summit. The FPL was the host site and this meeting successfully utilized video teleconferencing and webinar technology to offer virtual participation to employees across the nation. As one participant said, **“The technological piece this year was phenomenal—what an amazing learning experience for the whole agency! I think the exchange of information from this way of hosting conferences will stimulate discussion long into the future.”**

### Background

In November 2007, the Forest Service launched Sustainable Operations nationally with a summit held in Denver, CO. That meeting expanded on two previous localized conferences. The Eastern Leadership Team accepted the challenge and agreed to sponsor the 2008 National FS Sustainable Operations Summit. This Summit would emphasize video teleconferencing (VTC), webinars, and conference calls to reduce our environmental footprint.

### The 2008 Summit Objectives

- To tackle climate change by connecting sustainable operations and sustainable resource management;
- To share stories, ideas and resources that will help us reduce our environmental footprint and identify areas for further work;
- To open dialogue on policy issues in sustainable operations across geographic, organizational, and agency boundaries, and link policy to practice;
- To support local or regional involvement in place-based sustainable partnerships;
- To model green meeting practices, including the use of technology to reduce the environmental impacts of travel.

### Summary of Key Points

- Approximately **380 participants attended at 25 conference sites, with 76 attendees on-site at FPL**. The 25 sites represented every region and included most of the research stations (see attached list—Appendix 1).
- The cost for all meeting arrangements totaled \$28,686.83, including \$4,251.00 from registration fees for food. (see attached budget—Appendix 2)
- The conference consisted of plenary sessions and three concurrent sessions. Plenary sessions used video teleconferencing equipment. Concurrent sessions used webinars—an Internet meeting for sharing visuals and telephone lines for audio (see attached agenda—Appendix 3). The technology proved to be effective for this type of meeting, as stated by one participant, “Excellent use of technology to reduce green house gases, save energy, and save money while demonstrating and communicating what is happening regionally, nationally, and internationally within the Forest Service in the sustainability arena.”
- A short summary presentation and all presentations are posted on the FS Sustainable Operations Website at <http://www.fs.fed.us/sustainableoperations/susops-summit-2008.shtml>
- We developed an environmental footprint statement to direct specific actions that would be taken to reduce our environmental footprint, such as using video conferencing and webinars; attendees providing their own reusable coffee cups and water bottles; obtaining food locally; and recycling.

➤ **Estimated greenhouse gas emission savings from virtual participation:**

This year's summit had 76 in-person and over 380 virtual participants; we generated approximately 38 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>-equivalent (CO<sub>2e</sub>) emissions directly related to our travel. However, we **saved approximately 287 tons of CO<sub>2e</sub> from being emitted** by hosting the summit virtually, based on this year's participation numbers! If we compare to last year's summit, we saved at least 133 tons of CO<sub>2e</sub> from being emitted. (see attached calculation spreadsheet—Appendix 4).

These figures are conservative estimates, because they only take into account emissions directly related to travel, without considering emissions associated with hotel stays, restaurant meals, local transportation, etc.

- Hosting the summit virtually generated significant cost savings, and engaged a far greater number of FS employees than would have been possible if they had to attend in-person. As one virtual participant stated, **“The technology was amazing and allowed people from all over the country to participate.”**

### **Participant Evaluations of the Summit**

Participants were asked to evaluate the summit using an on-line evaluation form. Twenty-nine of the 76 in-person participants and 58 of the 388 virtual participants submitted an evaluation.

- **94% of participants that responded rated the overall content “good” or “very good.”** In person participants rated the overall content slightly higher (with 72% rating it “very good”). As one virtual participant said, “The information, content, and questions were...fantastic.”
- 84% of the virtual participants that responded stated that the video conference portions of the summit were effective and 76% responded that the webinar portions were effective. As stated by one virtual participant, “The virtual option worked well and was an example of the agency leading by example by reducing the need to travel.” The slightly lower ratings for the webinar portions are likely due to audio issues during the webinar (combination of speaker volume and positioning of microphones in Madison and lower quality conferencing phones at virtual sites), as pointed out by two of the virtual participants, “The audio portion was difficult at times.” “A few of the speakers were difficult to hear (webinars); this may have been due to equipment issues or it may have been due to the orientation of the speakers to the equipment.”
- In person participants responded overwhelmingly that this event was “good” (48%) to “very good” (52%) for helping them to network with others interested in sustainable operations. As one participant stated, “The conference was good and I enjoyed the virtual portion to reduce footprint, however this does result in reduced networking opportunities at the time.” Surprisingly, 50% of the virtual participants felt this event helped them network with others interested in sustainable operations. This aspect of the meeting can be enhanced in future summits by facilitating more opportunities for virtual sites to host speakers, share information, and engage in dialog with each other. As one participant said, “Give more time for open discussion—that will help us to feel connected and not just talked at.”

### **Recommendations and Lessons Learned**

- Engage virtual sites more often such as an introduction at the beginning and at various occasions during the meeting.
- Webinars can be used to handle audio instead of relying on separate telephone systems for more seamless delivery. However, we must have changes in FS policy to do this.

- If you must use telephone lines for audio portion, schedule the carrier operator to handle entrance and exit to the conference call to avoid unnecessary noise. As an alternative, set up the telephone audio for “silent” entry and exit and “no announcement” of participant names.
- Guidelines for presentations need to be provided to presenters ahead of time so that large powerpoints files can be avoided. Large files hog bandwidth and delay the response time.
- Adjust camera position between speakers and audience. There were times when other video conference sites only saw the podium at FPL; they would have enjoyed seeing the audience occasionally.
- Line up keynote speakers or keynote activity that gets people engaged. The “Extreme Makeover” should have been the keynote activity because it was engaging and fun.
- The importance of practice sessions with all sites is critical. We had three practice sessions and each session provided new insights into streamlining videoconference sessions.
- If the entire conference is virtual, there should be more joint sessions than concurrent sessions. This simplifies logistics and allows speakers to have a larger in-room audience.
- Have more general sessions for beginners and more in depth sessions for professionals in sustainability and identify the target audience for each (leadership, engineers, resource specialists, purchasing, etc.). Provide an abstract in advance for each presentation.
- Allow more down time in the agenda and have breaks that are longer than 15 minutes.
- Take into account time differences between East coast and West coast in developing the agenda. For example, the East Coast could have tours during the morning and West Coast could have tours during the afternoon. Also, some morning sessions could be repeated in the afternoon.

## Conclusions

- The Sustainable Operations Summit set a high standard for greening the agency by encouraging innovative thinking and practices, and increasing our capacity to use virtual meetings in place of travel.
- The conference was successful in meeting objectives in an environmentally friendly manner through virtual participation. Furthermore, this year’s virtual summit enabled us to connect with many more Forest Service employees than a conventional summit would have, while saving money on travel and venue.
- Strong leadership support, the dedication of planning team members, good technical support, and enthusiasm of video conference site coordinators were integral to the success of a virtual meeting of this scale.
- Enthusiasm was maintained even though we used video conferencing and webinars. This is due to the slate of outstanding speakers that kept everyone enthralled.
- Equipment and service upgrades such as integrated audio capability for web conferencing or increased video conference capacity would facilitate future meetings of this type, leading to further environmental and financial benefits.
- The conference exposed more FS staff to video conferencing and webinar technology and showed them that it can work and is likely to have a greater impact beyond the time from when the summit took place.

As best summarized by a virtual participant, **“I applaud the planning team for sticking with the virtual technology. It was groundbreaking for the Forest Service to use this technology on such a grand scale. I know that it took lots of time to plan for the use of this technology. Yes, there were some glitches. But overall, it was amazing to see the technology in action.”**

## **Commendations**

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- Moderators and Speakers (see attached agenda—Appendix 3)
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