

IDENTIFYING PRIORITY FOREST MANAGEMENT ISSUES IN WEST VIRGINIA—A SURVEY OF STATE SERVICE FORESTERS

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ABSTRACT.— West Virginia Division of Forestry (WVDOF) State Service foresters have a wide range of responsibility. We surveyed this group of foresters to illuminate the critical issues facing them and the WVDOF. Forty-eight of the sixty-six questionnaires were returned (73% response). Within the six issues categories in the questionnaire, top concerns listed by WVDOF foresters were: harvesting in poor weather conditions, harvesting with little regard for desired future conditions, prohibitive workers compensation rates, lack of landowner education, negative publicity from uninformed sources, and number of landowners implementing stewardship practices.

Introduction

West Virginia Division of Forestry (WVDOF) State service foresters have a wide range of responsibility—assisting at fire incidents, checking compliance of timber harvesting operations with best management practices and the Logging Sediment Control Act, and providing technical assistance on private forests. In this latter function, during the past decade, WVDOF Service Foresters were responsible for writing over a third of the forest management plans under the Forest Stewardship Program (FSP; Egan et al. 2001, Jennings 2003). Moreover, the WVDOF oversees all FSP activities at the state level. Along with these duties, some state service foresters coordinate the management of the eight state forests and coordinate special fire and watershed education programs.

Service foresters are state employees of the WVDOF and are closely linked with the communities they serve. They fit a niche that has responsibilities to answer to politicians, private landowners, advocacy groups, other foresters, and forest products industry. In these roles, the state service foresters have a unique opportunity to work with diverse clients, from loggers to private landowners and develop a unique understanding of the issues facing the forestry sector in the state.

Over the past decade, big changes have occurred in the forestry sector in West Virginia. New issues have emerged as well in the realm of forest management and along with new laws like the Logging Sediment Control Act of 1992, and have brought additional responsibilities and work loads to the state's service foresters. Several large mills have been established in the state during this period as well, adding to the demand for timber from private forests. In addition, several new transportation corridors have been opened, or are in the process of opening, increasing the "exurbanization" and "greening" of rural communities that has been shown to lead to changes in conservation perceptions in these communities (Egan and Luloff 2000, Johnson and Beale 1998, Jones et al. 2003).

Because of these recent changes in the forestry sector and the potential changes this could bring to the state with respect to forest resources management, we initiated a study to compile the opinions of our state service foresters on priority management issues. Our objectives included determining what WVDOF foresters view as the most relevant forestry issues confronting the forest sector in West Virginia today.

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Methods

In summer 2001, a two-part mail survey was conducted (Westfall 2001). The sample frame consisted of West Virginia Division of Forestry service foresters at the county, district, and state headquarters levels. Names and addresses were obtained from the 2001 WVDOF employee list. The employee list was checked with individual district foresters to assure its accuracy.

First, to “flesh out” issues facing the forestry sector in West Virginia, a letter was mailed to all county and district level service foresters (n=56) asking each of them to list five major problems facing the forest sector in West Virginia. The response rate was 32%.

Based on these initial responses, a questionnaire was developed with 48 problem statements. Respondents, this step including state level foresters and State Forest foresters (n=66), were asked to rank the level of severity of these problems on a scale of 1 (no problem) to 4 (severe problem) following recommendations by Tuckman (1999). A second letter with a questionnaire was sent to all nonrespondents three weeks after the first. Forty-eight of the sixty-six questionnaires were returned (73% response).

Survey questions reported in this paper concern six resource management categories:

- 1) Timber harvesting,
- 2) Forest management and planning,
- 3) Forest policy, legislation, and regulation,
- 4) Continuing and outreach education,
- 5) Public relations, and the
- 6) Forest Stewardship Program.

For comparing the magnitude of concern in discussion for various issues, we viewed average ranked responses with “scores” of greater than 3.0 as “of greatest concern” and those less than 2.0 as “of least concern”. We considered average scores greater than 3.5 as crucial issues.

Results and Discussion

The top seated issues with all foresters among the six, topic categories were prohibitive worker's compensation rates (mean score=3.7), harvesting with little regard for desired future condition of the stand being harvested (3.6), negative publicity for forestry from uninformed sources (3.6), and the overuse of diameter limit cutting (3.5; table 1a and 1b). Eight other issues had scores that averaged between 3 and 3.5, indicating the importance of these as issues deserving attention of resource management agencies.

At least one issue from each of the six categories had average scores of 3 or higher. The forest management and planning category, consisting of issues involving various parts of silvicultural prescriptions and harvest planning, had the greatest number of issues with averages greater than 3.0. Despite the requirements of the West Virginia Logging Sediment Control Act which requires licensed and certified timber harvesting operators and the notification of intent to harvest timber (WVDOF 2002), according to WVDOF service foresters preharvest planning for silvicultural and road engineering purposes is lacking. It is likely that with increased attention to water quality from nonpoint sources, that these concerns will increasingly surface in both natural resources and political arenas.

Importantly, some issues were of very low concern to the WVDOF foresters, although none of the issues had average scores below 1.5. The lowest average scores were generally found in the Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) category where four issues resulted in average scores less than 2.0. Low scores for availability of foresters to write stewardship plans, access to information concerning the FSP, the quality of plan writer training sessions, and the number of training session required to permit a forester in qualifying as an FSP planwriter suggest that these issues are adequately managed in the eyes

Table 1a.—Statements and ratings from West Virginia Division of Forestry foresters. Forest management issue statements were generated from an initial questionnaire, and then put before the service foresters for rating. Ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 4 (1= *not a problem*, 4= *severe problem*).

Statements	Mean
<i>Timber harvesting</i>	
Operating when weather conditions are poor.	3.2
Increased size of equipment leads to more site damage	3.0
Small independent loggers going out of business	2.8
Damage to county roads by logging trucks	2.5
Shortfall of trained sawyers and equipment operators.	2.4
Timber regulation should be done by independent agency	1.7
Private industry sector is tied too closely to the WVDOP	1.7
<i>Forest Management and Planning</i>	
Harvesting with little regard for desired future conditions	3.6
Overuse of diameter-limit cutting	3.5
Lack of silvicultural prescriptions on private property.	3.4
Need for planned road system prior to harvesting	3.2
Need for preharvest regeneration assessment	3.0
Need for comprehensive preharvest management plan	2.7
Need for more clearcutting and less partial cutting.	2.4
Need to reevaluate minimum product size.	2.2
Need for protecting wildlife and their habitat.	1.9
<i>Forest Policy/Legislation/Regulations</i>	
Prohibitive workers compensation rates	3.7
Lack of penalties in BMP and LSCA violations	3.2
Lack of enforcement powers WVDOP	3.2
Non-payment of severance taxes and high estate taxes	2.8
Foresters enforcing LSCA laws differently	2.7
Timber industry does not appear fully committed to LSCA.	2.7
Companies buying/selling timber from unlicensed loggers.	2.6
Loggers are not paying workers compensation rates	2.6
Increase in timber trespass complaints.	2.6
Need for clearer BMP standards	2.3

of the WVDOP foresters. Indeed, we have heard many complimentary remarks from FSP administrators and from the FSP landowners concerning the high quality of the program in West Virginia (Jennings 2003).

Foresters reflecting on the state of the forest products sector in West Virginia simultaneously emphasized concern for future site productivity, as indicated by their emphasis on “desired future conditions”, and for the ability of timber harvesting firms to be able to function from a business standpoint. Workers compensation rates were identified to be a crucial issue, but whether this was out of interest of the inability of the “small, independent logger” to compete in the market or just a general awareness of the problem as an industry, it is difficult to determine. Currently, logging firms pay about 48 cents on the dollar for this insurance premium.

Some of the concerns expressed by the WVDOP foresters are being addressed by the forest sector in the form of best management practices, although currently the state’s Best Management Practice handbook focuses exclusively on methods for controlling sedimentation and erosion, and nothing on silvicultural opportunities (WVDOP 2002).

This survey corroborates the work of Fajvan and others (1997) showing very little evidence of silvicultural practices applied to the majority of the 100 recently harvested stands they sampled. Then, only clearcuts could be identified as having a specified silvicultural practice. Most of the stands they

Table 1b.—Statements and ratings from West Virginia Division of Forestry foresters. Forest management issue statements were generated from an initial questionnaire, and then put before the service foresters for rating. Ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 4 (1= *not a problem*, 4= *severe problem*).

Statements	Mean
<i>Continuing and Outreach Education</i>	
Lack of landowner education	3.32
WVU and WVDOF lack outreach programming	2.79
Need for industry sponsored outreach education	2.70
<i>Public Relations</i>	
Negative publicity for forestry from uninformed sources	3.57
Need to enhance image of loggers	3.30
Timber companies shifting responsibility to contract loggers	2.91
Timber industry not taking responsibility for logging practices	2.89
Lack of willingness by corporate forest products firms to dialogue with groups opposed to logging and good forestry practices.	2.55
<i>Forest Stewardship Program</i>	
Number of landowners implementing FSP recommendations.	3.36
Shortfall in personnel to check forestry practice implementation.	2.77
Lack of private landowner demand for plans.	2.21
Statewide opportunities for landowners with plans to learn more about the program.	2.21
Adequate funding to write plans.	2.02
Availability of foresters to write plans.	1.83
Access to information regarding the FSP.	1.70
Quality of plan writer training sessions.	1.66
Number of required plan writing training sessions.	1.66

sampled were cut using a diameter limit protocol, a protocol that does not necessarily evaluate the spatial distribution of residual stems nor the regeneration potential of the stand slated for harvest. WVDOF foresters reflect the urgency of this issue by indicating there is little regard for desired future condition of harvested stands and that there are “too many” diameter limit cuts.

WVDOF foresters manage private forests. These are the most unregulated of all forestlands in the state and make up the largest component of forestland in the state. In contrast, large industrial forests are typically under third party certification programs or self certifying programs like the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI 2003). These programs bring attention to issues like sedimentation and erosion to the forefront of the attention of the industrial field foresters that manage these properties. However, on small, private forests, landowner contact with professional foresters is rare (Fraser and Magill 2000) and their management preferences often misunderstood (Bliss and others 1994, Jones and others 1995). Concern by the WVDOF foresters in this study for lack of landowner education points to the need for more attention in this area.

These responses from the WVDOF service foresters were made in a time period of increasing timber harvesting activity, stricter requirements to follow BMPs, and greater attention on compliance with the WV LSCA. Moreover, several recent years have had abundant fires, which further burdens available WVDOF resources. But because of the similarity of viewpoints held by the majority of administrative levels, the primary aims and operational direction of the agency will likely to focus resources (when they become available) towards these critical issues.

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