



# FSP 20twenty

## The Forest Stewardship Program's Strategy for the Future

### Introduction

The Forest Stewardship Program is the principal Forest Service program focused on our nation's private forests. The Program is delivered to landowners through a vast and long-standing network of forestry technical assistance providers, forestry consultants, state forestry agencies, non-profit partners, and others. The most prominent of these partners is the National Association of State Foresters (NASF), who link Forest Stewardship Program resources with the landowners in their states.

Because the Forest Stewardship Program plays such a central role linking landowners with available assistance resources, and because most of our nation's forests are privately owned, the program is essential to addressing our most pressing resource management concerns including: forest insects and pests; invasive species; the economic viability of private forest ownership and management; renewable energy needs; threat of wildfire; soil conservation; wildlife habitat; water quality and supply; and climate change. All of these concerns cross multiple ownerships and can be much more effectively addressed by the Forest Service and its partners at the landscape-scale.

The Forest Stewardship Program plays a fundamental role in keeping forests as forests in the face of increasing pressures towards urbanization. Methods include: preparing forest owners for financial incentive and property tax abatement programs; providing access to forest certification and new markets for forest products and ecosystem services; and creating forest sector jobs in rural communities. The program also helps conserve and restore farmland with the introduction of agroforestry practices.

Many rural economies rely on the proximity of forests and forestry sector jobs. Sustaining forest health on private ownerships through the Forest Stewardship Program is thus vitally important - not only for the environment, but also for the economic and social well-being of surrounding communities.

Since being authorized by the 1990 Farm Bill, the Forest Stewardship Program has:

- Served as the primary, most extensive private forest owner assistance program in the U.S., both in reach and scope;
- Successfully created and sustained a vast, effective network of forestry technical assistance providers and programs;

- Provided more than 350,000 comprehensive management plans covering more than 40 million acres nationwide;
- Reached millions of forest landowners through various education and technical assistance programs;
- Established lasting partnerships with state foresters, conservation districts and other partners to encourage broader forest landowner participation in USDA conservation programs; and
- Provided private sector jobs for consulting foresters who write management plans and help landowners achieve their unique land management goals.

Still, the need for an even stronger Forest Stewardship Program is evident, as threats to forests and their associated benefits continue to multiply and intensify. Urbanization and development lead to loss and fragmentation of forests. Invasive plants, insects, and pathogens regularly cause widespread tree mortality and change forest ecosystems. Climate change is contributing to increased incidents of catastrophic wildfire. In addition, forest ownership is in flux due to divestiture of forest industry lands and intergenerational transfer of family forests. Economic incentives for landowners are affected by declines in traditional markets and uncertainty about emerging markets for bio-energy, carbon, and certified wood products.

Unfortunately, these increasing threats have not been matched by increasing public investment in the Forest Stewardship Program. Budget cuts in many states have constrained both funding and staffing levels, reducing the capacity for program delivery in ways that are likely to persist into the foreseeable future. Federal funding for the program has, in recent years, also been slowly but steadily declining. This, at a time when evaluations consistently show that providing one-on-one forester contact with landowners is foundational to improving private forest land conditions on the ground.

Perhaps most importantly, healthy forest watersheds are critical to protecting the quantity and quality of America's water resources. Privately owned lands dominate many forested watersheds throughout the country and in many states the Forest Stewardship Program is focused on watersheds where private land stewards are vital to ensuring that these forests remain a part of the landscape and are cared for in a sustainable manner.

The effectiveness and efficiency of the Forest Stewardship Program must be enhanced if it is to successfully address these issues in the future. The program must reach more landowners, especially in areas where social and environmental conditions create significant opportunities. The Forest Service, states and other partners must continue working towards a more focused, landscape-based approach that began in 2004 with the Spatial Analysis Project, has further evolved with spatial accomplishment tracking tools, and was validated in legislation when the 2008 Farm Bill required that each state develop a State Forest Action Plan.

All State Forest Action Plans define priorities intended to focus and drive the future delivery of the Forest Stewardship Program as well as other state and federal forestry assistance programs. Landscape-scale stewardship pilot projects are attempting to gain efficiencies, produce

outcomes and get landowners to better appreciate their role and their contributions as program participants. More and more program coordinators are introducing landscape-scale stewardship to their larger program toolbox of landowner assistance approaches.

### **The 2020 Strategy**

To maintain this and other positive program advancements, state and federal partners have developed a strategy for the Forest Stewardship Program through the year 2020. This strategy defines how the program can promote and support the implementation of State Forest Action Plans in a way that can be measured clearly, consistently, and meaningfully at all levels. It also attempts to grow support for the program by raising public awareness for the importance of private forestland stewardship. The strategy consists of three primary focus areas:

**Communication and Partnerships; Performance Measures and Data Quality; and State Forest Action Plans and the optional Landscape Stewardship Approach.** Work in each of these areas during the next few years will further the Forest Stewardship Program's contribution to forest conservation in America and increase the program's visibility and credibility.

### **Communication and Partnerships**

Background: The success of the Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) depends upon partnerships. While strong partnerships now exist, maintaining close contact with all partners and leveraging additional diverse partnerships is a constant challenge. Program staff at the federal and state levels must continue to capitalize on existing partner relationships and create new ones as new challenges are identified.

**Issue: The visibility of the FSP to the American public is inconsistent across the country. Many forest owners do not realize that their Forest Stewardship Plan is provided to them through a national state and federal partnership. Building and maintaining support for the FSP in Congress is made difficult by this lack of awareness. A common national outreach message is needed to improve visibility and inform landowners and non-landowners of the many benefits of the program.**

### **Actions**

1. In materials produced by and for state forestry agencies, clearly acknowledge the Forest Service's role. Ensure that each Forest Stewardship Plan recipient understands how the Forest Service supports state forestry agencies in assisting private forest landowners.
2. Coordinate all communications efforts with NASF Communications Committee and staff to develop a common set of messages and actions.
3. Use new theme artwork to brand the FSP with a consistent image, and to highlight the partnership between NASF and the Forest Service.

4. Increase awareness of the important role private forests play in society through existing web presences. Internally, work with Forests on the Edge, the Forest Service Climate Change Office, National Partnerships Office, and staffs. Improve FSP web presence through future releases of Forest Service headquarters web design.
5. Use existing relationship with Forest Service Office of Communications to gain attention on Twitter and the USDA blog.
6. Use traditional and new media to reach more audiences: radio, billboards, television, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube channels, Google+, mobile apps, QR (quick response) codes, and/or blogs. Message and advertise through media frequented by potential owner clients including absentee landowners.
7. Create concise factoids associated with the FSP brand that lead people to web media.
8. Utilize focus group data from various regional entities and non-profit partners to identify effective messages. Where necessary, conduct additional focus groups.
9. Reestablish a national landowner recognition program for Forest Stewardship Plan holders. Write press release templates for customization by state forest agencies when landowner recognition events are held.
10. Develop a higher level of understanding that markets for forest-based products are a critical aspect of promoting improved stewardship of forest resources. Collect and share information about marketing wood and other forest products.
11. Support sub-grants to elevate FSP in the minds of non-profit partners at the state and local level. While national Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) do much to bolster program outcomes, local relationships can create outcomes on the land while increasing program visibility.

**Issue: Overall USDA knowledge of the Forest Stewardship Program is poor. This is a particularly troublesome fact when applied to other branches of the Forest Service. Increasing communication and coordination through the Cooperative Forestry Staff and NASF with other with other USDA entities, National Forest System (NFS) units, and Forest Service Research and Development (R&D) units could enhance program impacts on the ground.**

#### **Actions**

1. Increase Forest Stewardship Program knowledge among other USDA, NFS, and R&D staff by frequently inviting appropriate staff to state meetings, field trips, etc. Improve relationships by attending other staff's meetings and sharing FSP-related information.
  - a. When state forestry agency meetings can be held in federal facilities, take advantage of being collocated to provide information to federal personnel about the FSP. Invite District Rangers, Forest Supervisors, and other local staff to the meetings.
  - b. Arrange meetings to introduce the state FSP coordinators to forest supervisors and research station staff.
  - c. Improve communication across State and Private Forestry (S&PF) by inviting managers of other programs to attend FSP meetings and reviews.

2. Establish and utilize new partnerships among USDA, NFS, R&D, and S&PF personnel to strengthen the coordinated delivery of forestry-related technical assistance to private landowners and land managers at local and state levels.
  - a. Where possible, program managers should provide contact information for non-federal forest resource managers (state forestry agency personnel, non-profit organizations, peer leaders, etc.) to US Forest Service personnel when the opportunity for an interactive project arises.
  - b. Utilize existing NFS and R&D knowledge of Forest Health Protection and Fire and Aviation issues to provide context for FSP activities.
  - c. Utilize national level agreements, such as that with NRCS.

### **Performance Measures and Data Quality**

Background: Forest Stewardship Program performance measures rely on the ability of state partners to maintain a current, spatial record of cumulative and annual program accomplishments with respect to priority areas and issues that are identified in State Forest Action Plans. Program performance is currently measured primarily in terms of Forest Stewardship Management Plans and acres.

Good information pertaining to Forest Stewardship Program potential and accomplishments is critical to effectively describing the values and opportunities associated with the program, sustaining support for the program, and appropriately allocating limited program funding. Given the importance of this information, it is necessary that underlying data be credible, of high quality, and consistent.

**Issue: Information that conveys state agency program delivery success effectively depicts resource conditions, illustrates that the program is achieving on-the-ground improvements to those conditions, and is critical to maintaining budgetary support and allocating scarce budget resources. The Forest Service and states must continue to work together to efficiently produce meaningful and useful program performance and accomplishment information based on credible and reasonably consistent data.**

### **Actions**

1. FSP staff and the NASF Forest Resource Management Committee will conduct a comprehensive review of program information requirements with the intent of recommending overall systems and processes that will deliver the most useful data in terms of program need, reach, and effectiveness over time.
2. Using existing data sources, as well as collaboratively-developed new measurement tools, the Forest Service and state agency partners will evaluate the effectiveness and

reach of FSP education and technical assistance activities. Existing data sources and potential new tools could include:

- a. Quantitative survey instruments such as the National Woodland Owner Survey
  - b. Qualitative methods such as landowner focus groups
3. To ensure the best available data are used, the Forest Service program managers will work with state agencies, the Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program, and other partners to:
- a. Regularly review data sources for measures related to program potential to ensure the best and most up-to-date data and sources are being used.
  - b. Develop processes and tools for efficiently assessing the quality of data used to describe program accomplishments. These processes and tools may include:
    - i. Analysis tools useful for identifying questionable numbers in accomplishment data that may indicate errors or widely differing assumptions or methods.
    - ii. Guidelines for data quality assurance checks to be incorporated into national, regional, and state-level program reviews.
  - c. Formalize critical data standards and quality control measures in national guidance, clearly indicating where data consistency is critical and where flexibility in measures is necessary and appropriate.
  - d. Collect, store and manage all program performance data using the Stewardship Mapping and Reporting Tool (SMART). Provide training and continue to enhance SMART in response to state user evaluation of the tool.

### **State Forest Action Plans and the Optional Landscape Stewardship Approach**

Background: Landscape-based program delivery approaches, integral to most State Forest Action Plans, are being developed and adopted by all important program partners including states, land trusts, and many private forest landowner organizations. Several pilot projects are showing that these approaches provide a useful context for planning and program delivery because they consider the broader interaction of multiple resources, market conditions, social factors, and management actions. Considering and using these interactions can be critical to achieving desired resource conditions. Advantages offered by a landscape-based approach to Forest Stewardship Program delivery include:

- Public benefits identified in State Forest Action Plans as priorities, such as watershed health, wildlife habitat, and wood energy supply can be effectively assessed and planned for only at landscape scales.
- Landscape perspectives can be more easily managed and presented now, through the use of GIS technology.

Successful voluntary adoption of this approach depends on the ability of state and local program delivery partners to leverage new partnerships and existing local structures, as well as the ability to secure sufficient financial and technical capacity. Landscape-level planning work cannot simply be added to the load of resource-constrained agencies at the expense of service to individual landowners. In addition, states must be able to apply this approach in a manner consistent with their own statutory and/or administrative policies.

If successful, this approach could enhance program effectiveness with respect to resource outcomes while assisting more landowners, including historically underserved landowners, in targeted landscapes.

**Issue: The first-come-first-served approach to program delivery can be augmented with more focused approaches that address multiple resource concerns and opportunities in targeted landscapes. Priorities identified in State Forest Action Plans present opportunities for focusing innovative multi-landowner and community-based approaches. To be successful, multi-landowner approaches to planning and program delivery must continue to address individual ownership objectives. It is important to also recognize that the landscape scale approach will not serve all interests, but should be viewed as an additional service delivery option.**

### **Actions**

1. The Forest Service will work with states and partners to develop and promote an option for landscape-based Forest Stewardship Program delivery that:
  - a. Crosses multiple ownerships to address issues and opportunities identified by State Forest Action Plans;
  - b. Brings together stakeholders in a community of place or interest to address compelling forest resource management issues;
  - c. Recognizes the role of markets for forest-based products in promoting appropriate forest stewardship;
  - d. Makes efficient use of limited resources by incorporating interagency, state, university extension, and non-profit partners;
  - e. Ties individual ownership objectives to landscape-scale resource management objectives;
  - f. Helps landowners understand how their actions contribute to broader landscape management efforts;
  - g. Augments landowner efforts to market wood and other forest products; and
  - h. Enhances the quality and scope of individual Forest Stewardship Plans.

2. In implementing this optional approach, the Forest Service, States, and their partners will:
  - a. Focus on geographic areas where planning and program delivery approaches will achieve long-term shared priority resource management objectives.
  - b. Clearly relate these program focus areas to priority areas identified in State Forest Action Plans.
  - c. Enhance national guidance on identifying and delineating program focus areas to provide a more consistent basis for landscape approaches.
    - i. Define program focus areas using GIS and other appropriate tools and information to address pressing resource management issues and opportunities at various scales.
    - ii. Represent program focus areas spatially, as a base layer in SMART (Stewardship Mapping and Reporting Tool) and in a manner consistent with National Standards and Guidelines and supportive of program reporting requirements.
  - d. Develop and implement landscape-scale and community-based planning approaches where State Forest Action Plans suggest that opportunities exist by:
    - i. Engaging multiple owners of interconnected forest properties to achieve one or more forest resource management objectives.
    - ii. Adopting national guidelines for the development of landscape-scale Forest Stewardship Plans as a program delivery option where appropriate.
    - iii. Emphasizing the value of landscape approaches for improving program performance using current measures tied to accomplishments within program focus areas. Landscape approaches may enhance this performance by:
      1. Improving states' ability to focus program delivery on priority areas.
      2. Pulling landscape resource information and management practice guidelines into individual Forest Stewardship Plans, gaining efficiency and aggregate management impacts.
      3. Focusing resources of many partners on common accomplishment goals.
      4. Enhancing landowner awareness, engagement, and demand through concentrated messaging and peer to peer communication.
  - e. Engage with county and municipal government organizations and planning boards to better inform land-use planning decisions and ordinances.

- f. Develop and deliver innovative educational and technical assistance activities in targeted landscapes.
  - i. Identify successful examples and develop tools for communicating landscape context to forest landowners.
  - ii. Incorporate the landscape perspective into Forest Stewardship Plans.
  - iii. Engage and educate landowners and their communities through:
    - 1. Community meetings and workshops;
    - 2. Social marketing campaigns;
    - 3. Existing social structures including clubs, community associations and landowner associations; and
    - 4. Peer-to-peer networks.

# FSP 20twenty: a new theme art

The Forest Stewardship Program theme art represents some of the many goals program participants work toward as they steward their land. In the upper left quadrant, stacked logs represent the economic value of private forestry. Timber, mushrooms, ginseng, silvopasture and many other products and activities make private forests critical to the American economy.



In the upper right quadrant stretches an aerial view of a forest landscape representing the many environmental benefits forests provide. Drinking water, clean air, recreation, scenic views, carbon sequestration and many other forest benefits add value to our lives and lifestyles.

In the lower left quadrant, a woodpecker feeding her young represents the importance of private forestry to wildlife. Whether hunting deer, fishing for trout or admiring songbirds, private forests are critical to the survival of many species and add to the recreational, economic and intrinsic value of private forest land.

In the lower right quadrant, a community, or part of one, walks through a private forest, learning, teaching and stewarding the land together. Intergenerational experiences, community sustainability and sharing a land ethic are central to long-term forest stewardship and the mission of the Forest Stewardship Program.