

FORESTRY ASSISTANCE FOR ILLINOIS FOREST LANDOWNERS AND COMMUNITIES

A Position Statement by the Illinois Forestry Association Revised: March 1, 2010

Position

The Illinois Forestry Association (IFA) supports and strongly urges the restoration of and addition to forestry staff in the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to at least FY 2000 levels. IDNR forestry staff is critical in order to provide the expertise and technical assistance needed to protect, perpetuate, restore, conserve, and manage the forest resources of Illinois in both rural and urban landscapes.

Issue

Early retirements in 2002 and subsequent budget cuts in IDNR over the past several years have reduced the Division's professional, technical, and clerical staff by 43%, 67%, and 71% respectively. Continued vacancies created by retirements, outside employment opportunities, the unwillingness of IDNR to consider geographical reassignments and setting the filling of forestry vacancies as a top priority have inhibited any progress in bringing staffing levels to the appropriate levels. The critical shortage of personnel in the Division of Forest Resources continues to seriously compromise the ability of the IDNR to achieve an essential part of its mission. The people, communities, and forests that benefit from the services and the programs provided by professional foresters have been seriously diminished or eliminated. The lack of personnel and commitment of financial resources, have resulted in inadequate response times to requests by the public. Forest landowners, frustrated by the lack of timely forestry assistance, often lose interest or act without professional advice during the waiting period. This can lead to poor forest management decisions that negatively impact the forest for generations. Some examples of these poor management decisions are selling timber without the advice of a professional forester, converting forest land to other uses or subdividing their forest land for development. In addition to the potential economic loss to forest landowners, wildlife habitat and aesthetics are often sacrificed.

Ironically, while forestry staffing is at its lowest level ever, demand for forestry services by the public is at its highest. A 2007 analysis of pending requests revealed nearly 1,000 landowners were waiting for first time contact and forestry assistance. Inadequate staffing in the Division of Forest Resources of IDNR has been a continuing and ongoing problem for years. Head count increases in the past have produced field staff increases in Wildlife Resources (105%), Natural Heritage (44%), and Fisheries (81%) while Forestry has added only one (1) District position. The situation, as it now exists, is dangerously close to falling below the critical mass necessary to sustain a viable forestry assistance program. To further compound the problem, new and expanding programs such as the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, the Landowner Incentive Program, and the Environmental Quality Incentive Program have been enacted and requires involvement by IDNR District Foresters. The Division also has existing commitments through federal memorandums of understanding with the US Forest Service and Natural Resource Conservation Service to provide forest resource planning and technical assistance. The diminished staff capacity has impaired the ability to deliver existing programs as well as taking on new federal or state program initiatives. This can result in lost federal dollars and forest habitat development opportunities.

Forty three (43) counties are without adequate forestry assistance because of District Forester vacancies. Admirably, the Division of Forest Resources is attempting to continue statewide services by stretching their diminished personnel. However, reassignments and increased responsibilities have resulted in increased workloads from 25% to nearly double. That means foresters are faced with seemingly impossible situations where the number of landowners and communities in need of and requesting assistance greatly exceeds the ability of the forestry staff to adequately meet these demands. This has resulted in an increase in responding to landowner requests for assistance to up to two (2) years. Assistance to communities has been relegated to the lowest of priorities effectively eliminating any kind of meaningful assistance.

Poorly managed forests produce less income and a lower return on investment for the landowner, further increasing the likelihood of turnover and increased fragmentation of lands that provide a range of ecological benefits to Illinois taxpayers. Increased administrative procedures and regulations required by government funded forestry incentive programs have impacted IDNR foresters' field time. This has reduced the services and the number of requests for assistance they are able to handle. Private consulting foresters have faced increased demands for their services as a result. These consultants often find themselves over extended in attempting to fill the gap and meet these needs. In addition, forestry assistance in the private sector is sporadic or non-existent in some parts of the state. Despite foresters in the private sector stepping up to provide some of these services, IDNR District Foresters still need to approve forest stewardship plans written in the private sector, administer incentive state and federal (cost share) forestry programs, and must work with landowners and community leaders who are unwilling or unable to engage the fee based services of a forestry consultant. District Foresters are overwhelmed with their workloads, lack of support staff, and regulatory restrictions to support travel and general operations. Illinois has only one (1) Urban Forester to work with an ever expanding urban population dependant upon trees. Help does not appear to be on the way while morale and job satisfaction are at all time lows.

Funding IDNR Division of Forest Resources operations has become problematic due to a heavy reliance on General Revenue funding [GRF]. Current economic conditions and competition for these diminished funds put the Division at a severe disadvantage when it comes to GRF funding. The Forestry Development Fund [FDF] is available to support forestry operations. Federal and state revenues that support this fund are used to deliver programs. Current revenue streams into this fund would not be able to sustain the personnel levels called for without additional sources of revenue. However, since the Forestry Development Fund is subject to administrative and legislative sweeps, initiating additional revenue streams into this operational fund would not accomplish the desired result without further protection against sweeps. Shifting the Division of Forest Resources personnel to a more protected and thus stable, funding source is needed.

Background

The primary responsibility for assisting landowners who desire to manage their forest land falls upon the Division of Forest Resources within the IDNR. These foresters are charged with providing the expertise and technical assistance needed to protect, perpetuate, restore, conserve, and manage the forest resources of Illinois in both rural and urban landscapes. Investment in these valuable but limited forest lands now will help provide future generations the greatest economic, scientific, and social benefits that can only be provided through well cared for forest ecological system.

Illinois' forests provide a wealth of benefits that extend well beyond the property owner's boundaries. Ecological services such as fresh air, clean water, wildlife habitat, and natural beauty are there for all citizens to enjoy. However, it is the 206,000 forest landowners in Illinois that own over 82% of the 4.5 million acres of forest land in Illinois that are in need of the expertise, encouragement, and motivation to manage their land in a way that protects, sustains and expands the forest so it will continue to benefit both present and future generations.

Managing the trees of Illinois cities and communities requires as much professional and technical skills as managing rural forest lands. The IDNR Urban and Community Forestry program is designed to provide assistance and incentives to municipalities and civic groups. This program seeks to promote street and shade tree inventories, planting the correct tree species and provides advice on insect and disease problems, Tree City USA recognition and tree maintenance programs. Our state has never provided more than token assistance to urban communities and their residents who gain so many benefits from the trees in their communities.

Reforestation projects and streamside vegetation restoration efforts require the production and distribution of high quality, native plant material. State nurseries operate to provide landowners with these plant materials, often at no-cost, to meet the wide variety of land management objectives. However, unfilled vacancies at IDNR's two tree nurseries have greatly affected the production and distribution of tree seedlings, native plants and grasses.

Recommendations

Forest ownership requires a personal investment of time and money that does not realize an annual return or cash flow. Economic, social, and environmental dividends are produced slowly and steadily over time. The incentive to make this kind of commitment and investment often hinges on the accessibility of the landowner to technical assistance and financial incentives. Field personnel in the IDNR Division of Forest Resources possess the education, training and experience necessary to motivate and guide landowners to properly manage this ecologically complex resource. To achieve this goal, the IFA recommends that:

- The Division of Forest Resources be restored to at least FY 2000 staffing levels by increasing headcount and funding to fill the following vacant positions: (10) District Foresters; (6) Forestry Technicians; (2) statewide Program Managers; (6) Nursery Technicians; (1) Nursery clerical position; and (14) clerical positions to support field and statewide program staff.
- IDNR make filling the above forestry positions an Office of Resource Conservation priority by establishing headcount needed to restore and expand positions
- At least four (4) additional IDNR urban forester positions be added and located in regions or areas to best meet the demand for tree assistance on the streets and in the parks of Illinois' communities
- A strategy to strengthen and expand the professional consulting forester industry be developed in order to increase the technical forestry capacity needed in the state to help meet increasing service demands by the public

- IDNR take measures to protect the Forestry Development Fund [905] from any further sweeps, fund transfers or uses not consistent with the purpose of the IL Forestry Development Act as defined and amended (P.A. 96-217)
- IDNR fund forestry personnel and operations from funds whose purposes support habitat establishment and management and that are protected or exempted from administrative sweeps or transfers (e.g. Fish and Wildlife Fund (041). Unused matching state funds from the Division of Forestry can be used to support federal revenue streams into the F&WF for IDNR with this strategy
- IDNR seek and pursue opportunities to fund forestry positions through grant and pass through funding programs from federal, state and private sources
- As the demand for both rural and urban forestry services continues to increase, IFA will work with other forestry partners, the IDNR and other government agencies and individuals to help address the need for additional professional and technical forestry personnel
- The Illinois Forestry Association will work with other forestry organizations, groups, and individuals to urge the Governor, the Illinois General Assembly, and the IDNR to increase and fund staffing levels in the Division that will meet the current demands for forestry service required by forest landowners, communities, and the public. This should be accomplished before the next session of the General Assembly.

References

There have been studies, the latest being in late State Fiscal Year 1998 (FY98), that recommended additional forestry staff to adequately address the needs of the State beyond the staffing levels of FY98. These recommendations are listed in the Illinois Forestry Development Council's publication entitled, "Realizing the Forests' Full Potential: Assessment and Long-Range Action Plan for Forest Resources in Illinois," published in July, 1999.

The Illinois Forestry Development Council also commissioned a survey entitled "Critical Issues Facing Illinois Forests and Forestry" by Dr. Jean Mangun from the Department of Forestry at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. See "Critical Issue: The Need to Increase Numbers of State Forestry Professionals and Technical Staff (in Particular, Those Working with the Public)" by Dr. Mangun and Tami Newman, June, 2005.

In addition to these recent findings, this situation has been recognized repeatedly over the years through various governors' task forces and Conservation Congresses, a workload analysis by the US Forest Service, IDNR's Critical Trends Assessment, and most recently by IDNR's Illinois Wildlife Action Plan. This most recent plan identifies and acknowledges the significant role forest habitat plays for plant and animal species of concern.