

## September Council on Forestry Meeting Explores Working Forest Conservation Easements

On September 17 and 18 the Wisconsin Council on Forestry held their fall meeting including a second day field tour. The first day's meeting was at the Division of Forestry Headquarters in Rhinelander. The meeting addressed Forest Tax Law updates, the State Forest Action Plan, the upcoming Wisconsin state biennial budget and updates from legislative Council members, the State Forester and the Chequamegon/Nicolet National Forest Supervisor. In addition to the previously listed topics, Council members learned more about working forest easements to prepare for the second day field tour at the Pelican River Forest Conservation Easement.

Ron Gropp, the Division of Forestry's Conservation Easement and Private Forestry Specialist, gave an overview of working forest easements and funding sources. The Wisconsin Forest Legacy Program sets the policy for easements as authorized by the 1990 Farm Bill. The program, administered by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) in partnership with the USDA Forest Service aims, in part, to protect forest lands from conversion to non-forest uses and divisions into smaller parcels, and protects unique and important natural ecosystems. Increased forest fragmentation and parcelization makes it harder to manage the forest land. Easements are perpetual and require some form of public access.

Bob Smail, The WDNR Forest Socio-Economic Researcher, summarized his research on working forest easements. He explained the local economic effects of timberland conservation easements. Easements have the potential to affect three economic areas, 1) the local municipal budget, 2) the forest industry, and 3) the tourism industry. For a local municipal budget, the tax base may show a neutral to negative effect. The forest products industry can expect a positive effect along with the tourism industry. Overall, one can expect a higher probability of a positive effect than a negative from a working forest easement.

Three more speakers gave their perspective about the Pelican River Conservation Easement:

1. Bob Mott, Chairman of the Town of Schoepke, explained that the local population had a highly favorable view of the easement during the planning process and were looking forward to increased access for recreational uses.
2. Eric Rempala, a member of Oneida County Clean Waters Action ([occwa.org](http://occwa.org)) expressed the organization's interest in protecting the Wolf River headwaters, the Pelican River and Pelican Lake. In addition to keeping the forest intact for cleaner water, it prevents potential mineral and metallic mining in the future. He expressed his appreciation for the management of the easement by the present owners, The Conservation Fund.
3. Henry Schienebeck, Director of the Great Lakes Timber Professional's Organization (GLTPA), expressed his organization's concern about the easement. Henry stated that conservation easement may not assure active management and forest sustainability and that more engagement with his group and others was needed early in the process. There was also concern expressed that the Wisconsin Private Forest Forestry Advisory Committee was not representative of the disbanded State Forest Stewardship Coordinating Committee as set forth in the Forest Legacy Program Implementation Guidelines.

On day two, the Council on Forestry and guests met at the Pelican Lake Fire Station to start the tour hosted by the Pelican River Conservation Easement owner, The Conservation Fund (TCF). Staff from TCF included Brian Schneider, Forest Operations Manager and Kevin Harnish, Director of Analysis and Carbon Development. Additionally, Nick Snyder, forestry consultant with Huber Resources Corp and contracted manager of the land, was there to explain forest management activities.

The Pelican River Forest Conservation Easement is roughly 70,000 acres of forest in Oneida, Forest and Langlade Counties. Located in the headwaters of the Wisconsin and Wolf rivers, it contains 68 miles of streams. The land was historically owned by Consolidated Paper and had been acquired by real estate investment trust (REIT) and timberland investment management (TIMO) owners prior to be purchased by TCF.

The first stop covered public access. The forest has approximately 70 miles of roads designated in the easements available for motorized access. In addition, an estimated 500 miles of unimproved trails that are open for the public to use, just not to motorized access. TCF works to have maps and signage correct and consistent with the easement requirements. Maps of open roads may change seasonally, and roads are occasionally closed when travel may be difficult or not safe. When active logging jobs use a road, it is closed to recreational use to keep both the log trucks and recreational users safe. Kiosks (figure 1) with forest information are located at major access points and contain QR codes to reach the current maps.



Figure 1. Kiosk at one entrance to the Pelican River Conservation Easement.

Beaver activity on the streams often close roads due to flooding. The easement requires opening those roads as quickly as possible. TCF relies on licensed trappers to remove beavers and when the trapping season ends, they will contract with the US Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service to remove the animals and their dams. If roads must be permanently closed, the easement requires more roads of a similar length be added for access.

The second stop was a two-year old aspen clearcut with a dense growth of young aspen where Nick explained the timber sale process (figure 2). TCF's goal is to balance land conservation with harvest levels while moving the current forest condition toward a desired future condition. Timber sale

income is vital to the management of the project and helps fund future conservation projects dedicated to advancing the mission. Ron Gropp and Liz Wood (WDNR Forester) explained more about the Managed Forest Law (MFL), which the Pelican River Forest is enrolled in. A written forest management plan is required and is approved by the regional WDNR tax law specialist for the state forester. The plan does not detail annual harvests but instead focuses on management philosophy and silviculture methods.



Figure 2. Group discussion about timber harvesting in a two-year old aspen stand.

The third stop was a northern hardwood forest that had a timber harvest within the past two years. The harvest was marked by individual tree selection to promote uneven-aged management. Nick explained their order of removal, 1) trees at high-risk of dying, 2) trees displaying defects that affect log grade, and 3) tree spacing to reach the target basal area (tree density). Trees providing specific wildlife habitat are also retained.

The Council then visited an active timber sale operation and members were able to inspect the log landing and watch the forwarder (figure 3) move timber out of the woods and onto the landing. The



Figure 3. Forwarder on active timber sale.

harvesting contractor uses two hand cutters and a forwarder using the “cut-to-length” process. This leaves logging slash in the woods to provide two benefits, 1) having a mat of vegetation for the forwarder to drive on, reducing soil disturbance, and 2) covering young tree seedlings to protect them from deer browsing damage.

The final stop on the tour was a red pine plantation that had its second thinning completed a few years earlier. The harvest method was “operator select.” In this method, Nick marked approximately one acre with paint to show the harvester operator how he wanted the forest thinned and the residual desired stocking. After thinning the sample acre, the operator made their own decisions on which trees to cut. The first thinning was done about 10 years earlier and trees were cut at a 45-degree angle from the rows to mask the look of a tree plantation.

The Council thanks the staff of The Conservation Fund, Huber Resources Corporation and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources for the interesting and informative tour of the Pelican River Forest Conservation Easement. The stunning September weather and lack of biting insects was a bonus!