

WFPS Outreach & Training Implementation Team Report

Scott Bowe, Gretchen Marshall, Don Peterson, Mark Rickenbach (chair), Steve Ring, Kris Tiles
(also facilitated), and Ken Zabel

The team was charged with developing implementation guidance for the Council on Forestry based on the three key education and training recommendations that emerged from the Wisconsin Forest Practices Study (WFPS):

1. Outreach programs to let landowners know the value of forest management to achieve wildlife, hunting, and forest health objectives. [Landowner Outreach]
2. Continue and expand statewide training of public, cooperating and consultant foresters on forestry economic issues. [Forester Economic Training]
3. Improve forester training, especially related to tree quality assessment, order of retention, and northern hardwood management principles. [Forester Northern Hardwood Training]

Landowner Outreach

The state has a multitude of programs and activities that seek to reach landowners. Our team created a non-exhaustive list including those sponsored by landowner organizations (e.g., WWOA conferences), industry (e.g., field days), government (e.g., Young Forest Initiative), universities (e.g., Coverts, Learn About Your Land), not-for-profits (Tree Farm) and others. Our examples also included efforts that span multiple groups and outreach techniques, such as the Driftless Forest Network. Most that we identified focus on or use wildlife and hunting as components, with few having forest health as a primarily driver. There is a range offerings and a range groups providing the offerings. We also noted that landowner outreach may be nearly the same as public outreach and that the full range of forestry outreach may have relevance (e.g., reaching parents via kids). There have been programs and entities in this space that ended (e.g., Woodland Leaders Institute). We noted that several WFPS recommendations relate to landowner outreach and might also benefit from our recommendations.

Recommendations

- Outreach is a challenge to fund. The elimination of WEEB grants and increasing budget constraints with public entities (e.g., WDNR, UWEX) have and will continue to limit landowner outreach capacity and programming innovation. What constitutes adequate funding is beyond the team's scope, but new resources will be needed to ensure impact, as will funding cycles that permit experimentation and risk-taking (i.e., > 1 year). Expanded partnerships with programs such as the SFI SI Committee's grant program, which includes a public outreach section, has potential.
- Coordination has long been sought, but never achieved because it is no one's job. Shared information might yield insights into geographic coverage, timing, and intended audiences toward gaps in program offerings, creation of a speakers' bureau, etc. Council should work to identify an entity or entities to investigate the feasibility of greater coordination¹.
- New funding should include expectations for program evaluation and current efforts should be encouraged to do this as well. Evaluation will allow us to identify what is working and how program offerings might be improved. For example, if program evaluation was coordinated across a large numbers of program sponsors, we could construct a robust understanding of the collective benefit of outreach programs and their interconnectedness.

¹ Team member Peterson expressed interest in working on this item.

Forester Economic Training

A focus of the WFPS was to generate data and findings related to the economic and operational aspects of Wisconsin's forestry sector. In yielding these, WFPS results can inform on-the-ground management as well as broader policy initiatives. One place these findings could be inserted is through forester training and professional development. Over the years, there have been occasional trainings and workshops to help foresters better understand the economics and operational aspects of forestry. Most recently, the DNR's Forest Products Team provided training to DNR foresters on these topics. Given the importance of economics to sustainable forestry, knowledge of this topic by foresters in all sectors is essential. In looking to recent and past trainings on this topic

Recommendations

- Continue and expand forest economics and operations training. Expansion should be to foresters in other sectors beyond the DNR. If the DNR Forest Products Team plans to continue, they should partner with other organizations (e.g., WI Consulting Foresters, Society of American Foresters [SAF], WI County Forest Assoc., Great Lakes Timber Professionals Assoc., Chequamegon-Nicolet NF) to maximize impacts and leverage partnerships. This topic is of potential interest to SAF-accredited university programs.
- In planning future events, engage WFPS investigators to ensure training content includes their findings, thus maximizing the translation of research into practice. It would be particularly useful to have investigators participate in trainings when possible.

Forester Northern Hardwood Training

The WFPS findings brought attention to how Northern Hardwood forests are managed and whether the current approach outlined in the DNR Silvicultural Handbook is overly constraining and potentially counterproductive to optimizing financial returns. For example, guidelines value size and volume without consideration of product specifications and increasing likelihood for cull on some sites. The WFPS suggested that an alternative approach might rely on "order of retention" toward fostering higher timber quality for landowners whose primary objectives may include economics. There is latitude within the silvicultural guidelines for a broad range of objectives, but these may not be consistently applied. While the WFPS findings may lead to changes in the silvicultural guidelines, study findings also indicated a need for greater communications and engagement in consistently applying current guidelines. Historically, applied research and outreach occurred on the Argonne Experimental Forest and a partnership model has been discussed that might be a model for future activities.

Recommendations

- Develop research-based tools and curriculum to give foresters (public and private) confidence to implement northern hardwood prescriptions across a full range of options targeted toward meeting landowner objectives. This would include fostering a nuanced understanding of the market and product implications of different sized and aged trees. Real and/or virtual demonstrations of varied management techniques that were within the silvicultural guidelines by timber type would be highly desirable in such trainings.
- Implement trainings that foster dialogue across forester "types" to include field- and mill-based components that move guidelines into practical demonstrations. The WDNR's Forest Products Team could be a strong partner along with expertise within UWEX. However, the team felt that DNR staff may not be the best facilitators given their oversight role.