

## Illinois Forest Resource Center

### Dixon Springs Agricultural Center, Simpson, IL (Pope County)

#### A Position Statement by the Illinois Forestry Association

June 15, 2009

#### Position

The Illinois Forestry Association (IFA) strongly recommends that the University of Illinois provide permanent full-time staff and funding for the operation of the Illinois Forest Resource Center (IFRC). Contemporaneously, the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center Advisory Committee should also appoint a task group to develop a work plan for the IFRC. This plan should evaluate existing and historical programs; assess the regional and statewide needs for Extension forestry education, outreach and applied research; set objectives and prioritize initiatives to meet specified goals. In order to continue and enhance the mission of the Illinois Forest Resource Center, the Illinois Forestry Association strongly encourages the University of Illinois to begin this effort by hiring a permanent director **and** an extension forestry specialist (with PhD credentials strongly encouraged) at IFRC along with essential support staff.

#### Issue

The state of Illinois, despite its *Prairie State* nickname, is home to 4.8 million acres of forest land. More than 90 percent of this valuable, renewable natural resource is owned and controlled by private forest landowners. This is a critical element in developing any program or initiative needed to address forest resource concerns. However, statewide technical forestry assistance and education to landowners, communities, and citizens has decreased precipitously over the last two decades. Both the Illinois Department of Natural Resources-Division of Forest Resources and the University of Illinois-Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences (including University of Illinois Extension) are charged with providing statewide technical forestry assistance and education to Illinois citizens and forest landowners. Unfortunately, attrition and budgetary issues have hampered the mission and services of both these state agencies/institutions dramatically. Moreover, the Illinois Forest Resource Center's interim director – the Center's only full time employee – retired in December 2008 and the position remains vacant.

Trees and forest resources are essential as an offset to anthropogenic global warming and as a source of renewable biofuels. The continuing importance of forests to provide the myriad of traditional goods and services remains. Thus, it behooves the University of Illinois to increase its forestry and natural resources outreach and education efforts both on campus and across the state. According to University of Illinois employee records, UI currently employs just one full-time, visiting extension specialist in forestry. This equates to one visiting forestry specialist for

170,000 forest landowners who own and control over 4.0 million acres of forest land. In stark contrast to the University of Illinois, Purdue University, Illinois' peer Land Grant institution to the east employs thirteen (13) full-time forestry specialists. They provide technical forestry outreach and education to 150,000 Indiana forest landowners who own and manage 3.7 million acres of forest land.

Continuing education and professional development for forest resource professionals is severely lacking in-state. Consequently, it is exceedingly difficult for foresters to find appropriate training to meet continuing education requirements and maintain professional certifications. This is yet another opportunity that could be met at the IFRC given appropriate resources.

## **Background**

Dixon Springs Agricultural Center (DSAC) was established in 1934 to address growing concerns among southern Illinois citizens and landowners regarding agricultural, soil erosion, and natural resource issues. Dixon Springs Agricultural Center has been instrumental to the southern Illinois community as a major employer in Pope County and as an experimental research station pursuant to the Land Grant mission of the University of Illinois. The *former* Department of Forestry (now the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences) at the University of Illinois established the Illinois Forest Resource Center in 1990 at Dixon Springs. The mission and purpose was to provide forestry and natural resource outreach and education to a growing clientele of Illinois landowners, citizens, teachers, and students. The facility also conducted various studies on forestry practices and the impacts on water quality, forest health, growth and yield. These efforts were curtailed when the staffing levels were reduced from five positions to one – the Director position – and now that position lies vacant.

The IFRC is located in the heart of the oak-hickory forest type. This is the most common forest type in Illinois and occurs throughout the state. This positions the Illinois Forest Resource Center in an ideal setting to conduct applied research and provide outreach and education programs that serve both regional and statewide forestry interests. The general mission of the IFRC is to emphasize forestry and natural resource management on private lands, to encourage stewardship of these lands to sustainably supply timber as a raw material and provide ecosystem services for the benefit of both the landowner and all citizens of Illinois. Past IFRC strategies have also endeavored to meet the emerging needs of forestry agencies and organizations that could not be met due to existing staff and resource limitations. This has afforded great opportunities for stakeholder support and partnership building.

*Stewardship Week*, initiated and developed by the first director of IFRC, has been a huge success in educating grade school students and teachers. Approximately 55,000 individuals have participated since its inception over nineteen years ago. During *Stewardship Week*, students and teachers attend six to eight sessions per day on topics ranging from forestry, wildlife, fisheries, soil conservation, water quality, geology, archaeology, energy, and other environmental topics.

These sessions are staffed by over 110 natural resource professionals, who provide hands-on instruction to the students and teachers. *Stewardship Week* is just one example – albeit a fine one – of the kinds of educational programs that can be offered through the IFRC, with proper staffing.

### **Recommendations**

In order to maintain and enhance the mission of the Illinois Forest Resource Center, the Illinois Forestry Association strongly recommends that the University of Illinois appropriately staff the Center. Hiring a full-time IFRC director and a full-time IFRC extension forestry specialist (with PhD credentials strongly encouraged), along with essential secretarial and technical support staff, will be a good first step toward meeting this goal. IFA supports the development of new funding initiatives and/or the redirecting of existing funds to make this a priority.

The IFA also strongly encourages the University to establish an ad hoc committee for the purpose of developing a comprehensive plan for the IFRC. This will provide direction and focus that will help the IFRC reach its potential to help meet the challenges facing our forest lands and the landowners who are responsible for managing and caring for this important natural resource. Illinois' forest resources are much too important and much too valuable to the state's economic and environmental well-being to be ignored. IFA fully embraces the mission of the IFRC and stands ready to assist the University in achieving these recommendations.