

URGENT NEED FOR ADDITIONAL PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL STAFF WITHIN THE DIVISION OF FORESTRY IN THE ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

A Position Statement by the Illinois Forestry Association
Revised: May 15, 2007

Position

The Illinois Forestry Association (IFA) supports and strongly urges the restoration of staff to at least FY 2000 levels and/or additional staff in the Division of Forest Resources of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR). 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 39%, 67%, and 86% respectively. The IDNR should be commended for reestablishing the Division of Forest Resources from a Section under the Division of Habitat Resources. Also commendable is the Agency's effort in filling two (2) District Forester and one (1) Program Manager vacant positions. Nevertheless, continued vacancies created by retirements and employment opportunities outside the IDNR have negated any significant progress in bringing staffing levels to 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 of professional foresters are seriously jeopardized. The lack of personnel and commitment of financial resources, have resulted in inadequate response times to requests by the public and put the health, productivity, and sheer existence of these forests at risk.

Ironically, while forestry staffing is at its lowest level ever, demand for forestry services by the public is at its highest. A recent analysis of pending requests revealed nearly 1,000 landowners are waiting for first time 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 programs such as the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, the Landowner Incentive Program, and the Forest Land Enhancement Program were enacted, all requiring involvement by 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 take on new federal program initiatives. This can result in lost federal dollar and forest habitat development opportunities.

Thirty-seven (37) counties are essentially without forestry assistance because of District Forester vacancies. Admirably, the Division of Forest Resources is attempting to continue statewide services by stretching their diminished human resources. However, reassignments and increased responsibilities have resulted in increased workloads from 25% to 189%. 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 from what used to take eighteen (18) months to two (2) years for interested landowners and communities to receive requested forestry assistance to now take three (3) to four (4) years.

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. Private consulting foresters cannot fill the void because they are few in number. State District Foresters still need to approve forest stewardship plans, administer incentive (cost share) programs, and work with key landowners and community leaders who are not willing or are unable to engage the 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.

Enter the woodland property tax assessment issue. Over the past year, the IDNR has been bombarded by requests from forest landowners who want to establish a forest management plan to benefit from reduced property assessment through the Illinois Forestry Development Act. A recent survey indicates that there are over 1,000 landowners on the IDNR waiting list to receive assistance for developing such plans. The incentive to sell land for development or to clear forested land for other uses may begin to outweigh landowner willingness to risk paying higher taxes while waiting several years to do the right thing. Despite a two (2) year moratorium on the forest land tax assessment while the State Legislature examines this issue, forest landowners who cannot afford their investment in their forest land cannot be expected to practice good forest stewardship in order to leave their forest land in good condition for the next generation. This gross lack of assistance to landowners may cause irreversible loss and/or damage to the woodland resources of Illinois.

Forest landowners, frustrated by the lack of timely forestry assistance, often lose interest or act without professional advice during the interim period. This can lead to poor forest management decisions that negatively impact the forest for generations. For example, harvesting timber improperly results in highly degraded residual forest land. In addition to the potential economic loss to the current and future forest landowners, wildlife habitat and aesthetics are often sacrificed resulting in a general reduction of the quality of life for Illinois residents.

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. Ecological services such as fresh air, clean water, wildlife habitat, and natural beauty are there for all citizens to enjoy. However, it is the 114,000+ forest landowners in Illinois that own over 90% of the 4.26 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 trees.

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 efficient production of seedlings and native plants and grasses, and the delivery of seedlings and plant material between nurseries.

Recommendations

Forest ownership is a personal investment that pays economic, social, and environmental dividends. The value of the investment and its rate of return are directly dependent on the availability of sound advice and careful planning. Field personnel in the IDNR Division of Forest Resources possess the advanced education and training, the resources to produce plant material, plus the practical experience necessary to properly manage this ecologically complex resource. To achieve this goal, the IFA recommends:

- Restore the Division of Forest Resources to at least FY 2000 staffing levels by increasing headcount and funding to fill the following vacant positions: (8) 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.
- 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.

- Add at least four (4) additional IDNR urban forester positions located at critical need urban centers to address a void that becomes more apparent each year.
- At least every two years IDNR should meet with rural and urban forestry groups to evaluate program and staffing needs and prepare a report for the Governor and the General Assembly.
- 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 determine the need for additional professional and technical forestry personnel
- Support efforts to develop a strategy to strengthen and expand the professional consulting forester industry in order to increase the technical forestry capacity needed in the state to help meet increasing service demands by the public
- The IFA will explore alternative sources of funding to help supplement current state funds used to fund forestry programs and services in Illinois.

References

There has 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 governor's task forces, a workload analysis by the US Forest Service, IDNR's Critical Trends Assessment, and very recently by IDNR's Illinois Wildlife Action Plan, which recognizes the significant role forest habitat plays for plant and animal species of concern.