



Wisconsin County Forest Program

2021 SFI Forest Management Public Summary Audit Report

Introduction

Wisconsin County Forest Program has demonstrated conformance to SFI® 2015-2019 Standard and Rules, Section 2 – Forest Management Standard in accordance with the NSF certification process.

Wisconsin County Forest Program includes over 2.2 million acres of forestland managed by 25 counties in the central and northern areas of Wisconsin. The scope of certification includes the following counties: Ashland, Barron, Bayfield, Burnett, Douglas, Eau Claire, Florence, Forest, Iron, Jackson, Juneau, Langlade, Lincoln, Marathon, Marinette, Oconto, Oneida, Polk, Price, Rusk, Sawyer, Taylor, Vilas, Washburn and Wood. Responsibility for management of these forests rests with elected county boards, with management activities implemented by county-employed foresters supported by DNR personnel. The forests are managed to provide revenue, habitat, recreational opportunities, and to protect biodiversity values and special sites. The lands abound with a variety of game and non-game wildlife species, and attract a variety of recreationists from hunters to trail users to nature enthusiasts. The most common tree species in order are aspen, sugar maple, red maple, red oak, red pine, basswood, and white birch. The Wisconsin County Forest's SFI Program is managed by the Wisconsin DNR County Forest Specialist. A County Forest Certification Committee with representatives of the counties, the Wisconsin County Forests Association (WCFA), and DNR staff help implement the SFI program, reviewing progress and making suggestions for improvements or changes as needed. The Wisconsin County Forests Association (WCFA) represents the forestry interests of 30 counties in Wisconsin with lands enrolled under Wisconsin's County Forest Law. WCFA provides considerable support for certification-related activities and is a key support mechanism for the program. The 25 participating Wisconsin County Forests have been certified to the Sustainable Forestry Initiative® Standard since December 10, 2004

The audit was performed by NSF on August 2-6, 2021 by an audit team headed by Michelle Matteo, Lead Auditor and Tucker Watts, Team Auditor. Audit team members fulfill the qualification criteria for conducting audits contained in SFI 2015-2019 Standards and Rules, Section 9 - Procedures and Auditor Qualifications and Accreditation.

The objective of the audit was to assess conformance of the firm's SFI Program to the requirements of the SFI 2015-2019 Standard and Rules, Section 2 – Forest Management.

The scope of the audit included forest management operations. Forest practices that were the focus of field inspections included those that have been under active management over the planning period of the past 3 years. In addition, practices conducted earlier were also reviewed as appropriate (regeneration and BMP issues, for example), SFI obligations to promote sustainable forestry practices, to seek legal compliance, and to incorporate continual improvement systems were also within the scope of the audit.

Several of the SFI Section 2 requirements were outside of the scope of Wisconsin County Forest Program's SFI program and were excluded from the scope of the audit as follows:

- Indicator 2.1.3 – No planting of exotic trees
- Indicator 2.1.5 – No afforestation program
- Performance Measure 8.3 – There is no private land involved in the program
- Indicator 10.1.2 – No research on genetically engineered trees

The next audit will be a surveillance audit and is scheduled for August 1-5, 2022.

Audit Process

The audit was governed by a detailed audit plan designed to enable the audit team to efficiently determine conformance with the applicable SFI requirements. The plan provided for the assembly and review of audit evidence consisting of documents, interviews, and on-site inspections of ongoing or completed forest practices.

The 2021 audit was a Surveillance Audit for this multi-site certificate that covers 25 county forests (sites). Two county forests were included in the sample: Polk County Forest, and Eau Claire County Forest. This sample size was determined using the guidelines set forth in IAF-MD1. These counties were selected based on a date rotation of the population of 25 participating counties.

Within the two selected participating county forests NSF's lead auditor selected field sites for inspection based upon the risk of environmental impact, likelihood of occurrence, special features, and other criteria outlined in the NSF protocols. During the 3 ½ day audit 26 field sites were visited, including 21 completed timber harvests, 1 marked or planned harvests, 2 road, 2 recreational trails and recreation areas, 4 area of oak-wilt treatment, 1 special sites of historic or ecological interest, and 8 sites with significant wildlife features (all harvest sites were also sites where wildlife management issues were considered), several sites fit into more than one



category. Auditors also observed numerous sections of county forest access roads and extensive portions of the county forests while traveling between field stops, but it is not possible to quantify this portion of the sample into discrete field sites.

During the audit NSF also reviewed a sample of the written documentation assembled to provide objective evidence of conformance. NSF also selected and interviewed stakeholders such as recreational stakeholders, adjacent landowners and other interested parties, and interviewed employees within the organization to confirm that the SFI Standard was understood and actively implemented. There were no non-conformances identified in the 2021 audit, and one Opportunity for Improvement.

The possible findings of the audit included Full Conformance, Major Non-conformance, Minor Non-conformance, Opportunities for Improvement, and Practices that exceeded the Basic Requirements of the standard.

Overview of Audit Findings

The Wisconsin County Forest Program was found to be in conformance with the SFI standard.

NSF determined that there were no non-conformances, and one identified Opportunity For Improvement (OFI):

- SFI FM 3.1.3: There is an opportunity to improve the delivery of the results of Wisconsin's Forestry Best Management Practices (BMPs) For Water Quality 2018 BMP Monitoring Report.

OFIs do not indicate a current deficiency, but serve to alert the WI-County to areas that could be strengthened or which could merit future attention.

NSF identified the following areas where forestry practices and operations of Wisconsin County Forest Program exceed the basic requirements of the SFI Standard, Indicator 13.1.1: "Involvement in *public land* planning and management activities with appropriate governmental entities and the public":

- The Wisconsin County Forest Program engages in extensive involvement with a wide range of Federal, State, County, and public entities in their land planning and management activities. This work is done by multiple entities, including county foresters, forest administrators, and county board members, with the WCFA providing leadership, guidance, support and coordination.

General Description of Evidence of Conformity

NSF's audit team used a variety of evidence to determine conformance. A general description of this evidence is provided below, organized by SFI Objective.

Objective 1 Forest Management Planning

To ensure forest management plans include long-term sustainable harvest levels and measures to avoid forest conversion.

Summary of Evidence: *Not Audited in 2021, evidence noted from previous years - The county forest management plans of selected Counties and Wood Timber Sale Notice and Cutting Reports for selected timber sales, supporting documents including DNR manuals and handbooks, and the county forest inventory reports produced from the WisFIRS system were the key evidence of conformance.*

Objective 2 Forest Health and Productivity

To ensure long-term forest productivity, carbon storage and conservation of forest resources through prompt reforestation, afforestation, minimized chemical use, soil conservation, and protecting forests from damaging agents.

Summary of Evidence: *Field observations and associated records were used to confirm practices. There are on-going programs for reforestation, for protection against insects and diseases and wildfire, and for careful management of activities which could potentially impact soil and long-term productivity. Efforts to deal with the oak wilt were discussed and observed. Deer management efforts were also considered, along with documentation and observations of intensive efforts to slow the spread of undesirable invasive, exotics reviewed.*

Objective 3 Protection and Maintenance of Water Resources

To protect the water quality of rivers, streams, lakes, wetlands and other water bodies through meeting or exceeding best management practices.

Summary of Evidence: *Field observations across a range of sites were the key evidence. Auditors visited portions of selected field sites that contained water resources, pesticide applications, reforestation, recreational uses and HCV's. Auditors reviewed maps, harvest plans and committee agendas. Protection of water quality is a high priority and is detailed within many of the organization's practices and procedures. One OFI was issued against clause 3.1.3.*



Objective 4 Conservation of Biological Diversity

To manage the quality and distribution of wildlife habitats and contribute to the conservation of biological diversity by developing and implementing stand- and landscape-level measures that promote a diversity of types of habitat and successional stages, and the conservation of forest plants and animals, including aquatic species, as well as threatened and endangered species, Forests with Exceptional Conservation Value, old-growth forests and ecologically important sites.

Summary of Evidence: Not Audited in 2021, evidence noted from previous years - Field observations, written plans and policies, and interviews of Wisconsin DNR field biologists who support the program were the evidence used to assess the requirements that involved biodiversity conservation.

Objective 5 Management of Visual Quality and Recreational Benefits

To manage the visual impact of forest operations and provide recreational opportunities for the public.

Summary of Evidence: Field observations of completed operations and policies/procedures for visual quality were assessed during the evaluation. Clearcut blocks were observed to be modest in size and dispersed in ways that support visual quality. Maps of recreation sites as well as field visits to several recreational areas and trails helped confirm a very strong commitment to recreation programs and facilities.

Objective 6 Protection of Special Sites

To manage lands that are geologically or culturally important in a manner that takes into account their unique qualities.

Summary of Evidence: Not Audited in 2021, evidence noted from previous years – Auditors’ review of detailed procedures within policies, GIS mapping technology, archaeological and ecological contacts and observation during field sites confirmed protection of Special Sites is a high priority within program.

Objective 7 Efficient Use of Fiber Resources

To minimize waste and ensure the efficient use of fiber resources.

Summary of Evidence: Field observations of completed operations, contract clauses, inspection reports, and discussions with supervising foresters and with loggers provided the key evidence.

Objective 8 Recognize and Respect Indigenous Peoples’ Rights

To recognize and respect Indigenous Peoples’ rights and traditional knowledge.

Summary of Evidence: Review of policies, interviews with staff, and documentation of systems for communication and cooperation were used to confirm the requirements.

Objective 9 Legal and Regulatory Compliance

To comply with applicable federal, provincial, state and local laws and regulations.

Summary of Evidence: Not Audited in 2021, evidence noted from previous years – Auditors’ review of policies, handbooks, contracts and observations of regulatory postings were the main evidence confirming compliance. Interviews with personnel, review of web and observations were also conducted.

Objective 10 Forestry Research, Science and Technology

To invest in forestry research, science and technology, upon which sustainable forest management decisions are based and broaden the awareness of climate change impacts on forests, wildlife and biological diversity.

Summary of Evidence: Not Audited in 2021, evidence noted from previous years - Financial records and awareness of predicted climate change impacts were confirmed.

Objective 11 Training and Education

To improve the implementation of sustainable forestry practices through appropriate training and education programs.

Summary of Evidence: Training records of selected personnel in the county forests and from WDNR, records associated with harvest sites audited, and stakeholder interviews were the key evidence for this objective.



Objective 12 Community Involvement and Landowner Outreach

To broaden the practice of sustainable forestry through public outreach, education, and involvement, and to support the efforts of SFI Implementation Committees.

Summary of Evidence: *The Wisconsin County Forests Association (WCFA) provided written evidence regarding its extensive and long-term outreach activities. Interviews, agendas for meetings, and participation in the Wisconsin SFI Implementation Committee were sufficient to assess the requirements.*

Objective 13 Public Land Management Responsibilities

To participate and implement sustainable forest management on public lands.

Summary of Evidence: *The Wisconsin County Forests Association (WCFA) provided written evidence regarding the counties' outreach activities related to public land management. Support and involvement in various organizations confirm support of active public management role of county forests. Interviews and review of policies were used to confirm the requirements.*

Objective 14 Communications and Public Reporting

To increase transparency and to annually report progress on conformance with the SFI Forest Management Standard.

Summary of Evidence: *Reports filed with SFI Inc. and the SFI website were the key evidence.*

Objective 15 Management Review and Continual Improvement

To promote continual improvement in the practice of sustainable forestry by conducting a management review and monitoring performance.

Summary of Evidence: *Records of program reviews including annual "Partnership Meetings", periodic internal audits, and agendas and notes from management review meetings, and interviews with personnel from all involved levels in the organization were assessed.*

Relevance of Forestry Certification

Third-party certification provides assurance that forests are being managed under the principles of sustainable forestry, which are described in the Sustainable Forestry Initiative Standard as:

1. Sustainable Forestry

To practice *sustainable forestry* to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs by practicing a land stewardship ethic that integrates *reforestation* and the managing, growing, nurturing and harvesting of trees for useful products and *ecosystem services* such as the *conservation* of soil, air and water quality, carbon, *biological diversity*, *wildlife* and *aquatic habitats*, recreation and aesthetics.

2. Forest Productivity and Health

To provide for regeneration after harvest and maintain the productive capacity of the forest land base, and to protect and maintain *long-term* forest and soil *productivity*. In addition, to protect forests from economically or environmentally undesirable levels of wildfire, pests, diseases, *invasive exotic plants and animals* and other damaging agents and thus maintain and improve *long-term forest health* and *productivity*.

3. Protection of Water Resources

To protect water bodies and *riparian areas* and to conform with forestry *best management practices* to protect water quality.

4. Protection of Biological Diversity

To manage forests in ways that protect and promote *biological diversity*, including animal and plant species, *wildlife habitats*, and ecological or natural community types.

5. Aesthetics and Recreation

To manage the visual impacts of forest operations, and to provide recreational opportunities for the public.

6. Protection of Special Sites

To manage lands that are ecologically, geologically or *culturally important* in a manner that takes into account their unique qualities.

7. Responsible Fiber Sourcing Practices in North America

To use and promote among other forest landowners *sustainable forestry* practices that are both scientifically credible and economically, environmentally and socially responsible.



8. Legal Compliance

To comply with applicable federal, provincial, state, and local *forestry* and related environmental laws, statutes, and regulations.

9. Research

To support advances in sustainable forest management through *forestry* research, science and technology.

10. Training and Education

To improve the practice of *sustainable forestry* through training and education *programs*.

11. Community Involvement and Social Responsibility

To broaden the practice of *sustainable forestry* on all lands through community involvement, socially responsible practices, and through recognition and respect of *Indigenous Peoples’* rights and *traditional forest-related knowledge*.

12. Transparency

To broaden the understanding of forest certification to the *Fiber Sourcing* Standard by documenting certification audits and making the findings publicly available.

13. Continual Improvement

To continually improve the practice of forest management, and to monitor, measure and report performance in achieving the commitment to *sustainable forestry*.

14. Avoidance of Controversial Sources including Illegal Logging in Offshore Fiber Sourcing

Applies only to the SFI 2015-2019 Fiber Sourcing Standard

To avoid wood fiber from illegally logged forests when procuring fiber outside of North America, and to avoid sourcing fiber from countries without effective social laws.

Source: Sustainable Forestry Initiative® (SFI) Standard, 2015–2019 Edition

For Additional Information Contact

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