

Lessons Learned

The following highlights, challenges, and lessons learned from development of the State Forest Resource Assessments and Strategies were synthesized from an indepth discussion on this topic with the lead planners and GIS contacts in the Northeast and Midwest that took place in August 2010.

The Statewide Forest Resource Assessments and Strategies are valuable! From the national and regional perspective, it is extraordinary that all U.S. States and territories have taken a fresh look at the state of forest resources and developed related resource priorities and strategies. For some States, this was the first statewide forest resource strategy in decades. At the State level, the results are being used to elevate the importance of forest resources and to advocate for trees, forests, and forestry in the midst of State budget cuts. The assessments provide State agencies, partners, and stakeholders with a variety of important information in one place, while the strategies are valuable tools for collaborating with partners and making informed, strategic decisions.

Lack of time and funding was a major challenge. The 2-year timeframe given to States to develop their assessment and strategy was very tight. For example, States would ideally complete the assessment at least a year before the strategy was due. However, as a result of the limited timeline, some States felt there was not enough time to get adequate feedback on the assessment before shifting to the strategy, and other States ran out of time to adequately engage partners in developing the strategy. In addition, due to challenging economic times, it was difficult for many States to obtain adequate funding and staff time to develop their assessment and strategy. Some States reassigned job duties to produce the document(s) and forfeited other forestry services due to that reassignment. In some States that do not have a planner on staff, it was difficult to find staff with statewide assessment and planning expertise to handle this task.

Collaboratively developed and flexible guidance was important. In the Northeast and Midwest, NAASF and NA S&PF staff collaborated to develop regional guidance documents for both the assessment and strategy. This collaboration took time, but was recognized as extremely valuable. To allow States a full 2 years for developing their documents, the U.S. Forest Service guidance should be available at least 2 years before the documents are due. There is no “one size fits all” approach, and States appreciated that the national guidance provided ample flexibility; however, future guidance should consider how to balance the need for flexibility and the desire to summarize or roll-up the State results regionally and nationally.

U.S. Forest Service support was appreciated. States greatly appreciated the assistance and support received from NA S&PF staff. States needed different types and extent of support, so it would be helpful in the future for the U.S. Forest Service to provide different levels of support and followup. For example, some States wanted feedback from the U.S. Forest Service on the substance of the documents, while others preferred to focus primarily on the requirements, primarily due to time constraints. Some States expressed interest in receiving more input from NA S&PF staff now that the documents are complete. In addition, NA S&PF could help by partnering up States that have more planning and GIS experience with States that need help building that capacity. In addition, the national meeting was very valuable, but held rather late in the process. In the future, a similar national meeting should be held at the beginning of the assessment and strategy process to increase information sharing and networking, and to minimize confusion regarding the requirements. There was also concern about how the U.S. Forest Service might use the State Forest Assessments and Strategies; therefore, States would appreciate clarity on that front. Some States would like the U.S. Forest Service to outline a list of publications and data available for future updates to assist with analysis of the information.

State Forester support was a critical factor for success. State planners that received a high level of State Forester support saw that as a highlight and critical factor for success that lead to higher quality products, whereas planners lacking this support found it to be a major challenge. Supportive leaders dedicated planning, GIS resources, and funding to the effort and promoted involvement by all staff.

Agency staff involvement and program integration were difficult. State agency program staff involvement was critical for the strategy to adequately address issues related to each program. Planning leads in many States found it difficult to engage program staff, and program integration was seen as a challenge by many State program staff. In addition, incorporating S&PF program-specific plans, e.g., Stewardship and Urban and Community Forestry, was problematic for some States. In a State where the program staff was fully engaged, they felt the resulting Strategy is more inclusive than other past planning efforts.

Stakeholder and partner engagement was worth the effort. Some States found it challenging to obtain meaningful input from stakeholders, especially with limited time and funding, while others successfully engaged stakeholders and partners, and felt that was one of the greatest benefits of the process. Re-engaging existing stakeholders and partners and, in some cases, engaging new partners led to support from constituent groups, synergy between partners and programs, re-alignment of priorities, and more willingness to share data. Clear communication to manage the expectations of partners and stakeholders was important. For example, in some States, partners assumed that the State agency had already decided on the priorities and actions, when the State agency was really sharing a draft for genuine input. Now that the documents are complete, several States look forward to engaging partners in implementation of the strategies. NA S&PF can assist by providing training and guidance on how to engage partners and stakeholders.

Overall organization and managing multiple planning processes present both opportunities and challenges. The workload overall was overwhelming for some. They worried that key points or partners may have been missed in the process of synthesizing large amounts of information and managing input from multiple authors and contributors. Many struggled with how to best lump or split complex issues so they could be presented in a concise way. For some States, this effort provided consistency with other State planning processes; this was an opportunity to consolidate multiple forestry initiatives or required planning into one. For other States, it was a challenge to manage this along with other planning efforts; the timelines did not always coincide and made the processes more complicated.

Criteria and Indicators (C&I) were a useful framework for the assessment. The C&I framework was valuable for organizing assessment information. Since the C&I are supported at national and regional levels, and now that States have baseline data, many intend to keep using the framework. Some found it challenging to address issues that fit under multiple criteria. A few noted that the C&I framework is missing an indicator to assess trends in wildfire suppression and property protection.

Data development and GIS analysis take time, skill, and a proactive approach. Compiling and developing the assessment information takes time. Using GIS technologies to spatially identify and prioritize forest landscapes requires a well-thought-out process. GIS capacity was lacking in some States. Data gaps and outdated or poor-quality data also presented a challenge during this process. GIS data and related analyses are a foundation for future work. If we want to continue relying on this type of data to inform decisions and priorities, we need to be proactive and have a data strategy for more consistent development, updating, and maintenance of the needed datasets. In addition, datasets and analysis tools were continually being discovered as part of this process, in some cases too late in the process for States to use. Sharing data, GIS methods, and analysis information was important to States. It would be helpful to compile a list of pertinent GIS datasets for answering common resource questions and provide example analysis and information about how to use and interpret the data. The U.S. Forest Service should continue to facilitate training via Webinars on using Forest Service-developed and other GIS datasets.