



August, 2012

State Forest Action Plan Implementation Across the Northeast & Midwest:



Processes, Challenges, Opportunities, and Lessons Learned as of August 2012

Background: To foster continual learning and sharing for implementation and future updates of the State Forest Action Plans, the Northeastern Area Association of State Foresters, Forest Resource Planning Committee (FRPC) and USDA Forest Service, Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry (NA S&PF) compiled these implementation processes, challenges, opportunities, and lessons learned from state forest planners across the Northeast and Midwest. This started with a panel presentation and discussion on implementation of the Forest Action Plans at the FRPC annual meeting in June 2012 and was followed by a FRPC poll asking forest planners about implementation of the State Forest Action Plans. Responses were received from the following 17 states and are summarized below : CT, DE, MA, MD, ME, MI, MN, MO, NH, NJ, NY, OH, PA, RI, VT, WI, & WV.

Processes for Implementing the State Forest Action Plans

Formal Annual Processes—Implementing the Forest Action Plans is an important focus of annual work by state forestry agencies. Planners from 5 states responded that they have a more formal annual work plan process:

- The **Maryland** Department of Natural Resources, Forest Service has developed an annual work plan for implementing the Forest Action Plan. This process involved reorganization of their staff according to the three national S&PF priority areas and involved input from all levels of their staff.
- The **Minnesota** Department of Natural Resources, Division of Forestry and the Minnesota Forest Resources Council (MFRC) and its regional landscape committees are partnering on the Forest Action Plan implementation and monitoring. They were awarded funding through the NA S&PF Competitive Allocation to integrate implementation of the Forest Action Plan with landscape stewardship approaches. This will help the Division and the MFRC develop holistic planning and coordination systems needed to support implementation of the Forest Action Plan. Annual plans are being developed for two of the MFRC regions and then this process will be applied statewide.
- The **Rhode Island** Department of Environmental Management, Division of Forest Environment has structured their Forest Action Plan with detailed information for each strategy which is then used for annual work planning and accomplishments tracking.
- The **Wisconsin** Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) Division of Forestry developed a “Strategic Direction” that states what the Division’s niche and role will be over a five year period to address the major issues and priority topics in the Forest Action Plan. Then they went through a process to allocate resources based on priority work identified to develop the Division’s “Operations Plan for the Strategic Direction.” Some of the changes they are making based on the Forest Action Plan will take several years to implement and they are working on 5-year implementation plans. You can read more at: <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/ForestPlanning/strategyDirection.html>
- The **West Virginia** Division of Forestry has developed a detailed annual work plan. In addition to the Forest Action Plan, they have another planning document, “The Strategic Plan for the Sustainability of West Virginia Forests,” which was prepared at the direction of the Forest Management Review Commission (FMRC), a statutory body that serves in an oversight capacity. The annual work plan addresses priorities and strategies from both of these long-term plans. It also includes accomplishment tracking to measure successful implementation and track accountability.

A variety of methods—Across the Northeast and Midwest, states are implementing their Forest Action Plans in a variety of ways. Several states responded that implementation is accomplished through use of the Federal S&PF “core” funds and competitive grants and by working on projects with partners and stakeholders.

Some specific implementation process examples:

- *Program managers are working with staff and partners to implement the Forest Action Plan.*
- *Implementing the Forest Action Plan through a combination of core program work and targeted competitive grants. Core programs continue to address many state strategies identified in the Plan, and we are using the Plan to help identify and prioritize the competitive grant proposals, particularly for state strategies that fall outside of traditional core programs.*
- *We are refining the delineation of our priority areas and the service that will be offered to land owners outside of those priority areas.*
- *Working with partners to include goals of the Forest Action Plan in their work plans.*
- *The Forest Action Plan is implemented through core funding supporting cooperative forestry program work and through collaboration with partners via pass through grants from the NA S&PF Competitive Allocation and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. The Plan is also used to frame and justify new projects and the need for other funding sources.*
- *We are implementing with our partners using the competitive grants process but also using our own staff to focus on strategies that rely on the forestry division's expertise.*
- *We are using a combination of state and federal funds (including both core and competitive grants) to implement the Forest Action Plan.*
- *Our partners play a key role both in implementing Forest Action Plan strategies outside of our niche work, and in collaboration with us to implement many initiatives (e.g. expanding the reach and efficiency of our Urban Forestry program and collaborating to address various forest health issues).*
- *Regional landscape committees have prioritized the key resource issues established in the Forest Action Plan and identified which strategies they want to be engaged in. They have also identified specific projects in their regions that will help support implementation of the Plan.*
- *We plan to work through a more formal means to track implementation and needs on a yearly basis.*
- *We have integrated many of the action items from the State Forest Action Plan into the appropriate Employee Performance Plans... We also review progress during our quarterly staff meetings.*

Challenges to Implementing the State Forest Action Plans

In response to a question about challenges faced implementing the State Forest Action Plan, 12 of the 17 states cited **reduction of staff and lack of funding** as the most critical challenges.

Several states also agreed that **ongoing communications and marketing** about the Plan is very challenging. This includes internal communications about how the agency is or should be implementing the Plan and external communications and marketing to engage partners in implementation.

In addition, a few states noted that **lack of a forest planner** to keep the process moving was the most critical challenge to implementation.

Some additional, specific challenges cited include:

- *This is a new way of doing business that is challenging for many of our staff.*
- *Our state was supposed to form an implementation advisory committee, but has not yet, therefore work within the agency has not shifted focus to accommodate new or different needs identified.*
- *Partners outside the agency are not very engaged.*
- *With staff reductions over the past few years, we have been forced to take a hard look at the services we provide and to whom we are able to provide those services.*

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- *Lack of resources—particular concern over reductions in Federal funds for Cooperative Forestry Programs and the amount of staff time needed to invest in chasing competitive grants.*
- *We are moving from a first come-first served model of service to a proactive approach and staff are worried about telling someone “no.”*
- *Challenging to coordinate effective, rapid response to manage invasive species and disease threats.*
- *There is great uncertainty (but also great opportunity) right now regarding programs for non-industrial private forestland (NIPF) in the state. The uncertainty stems from enacted and potential transfers in responsibilities among state agencies for S&PF programs. Opportunities stem from a heightened awareness of the importance of and potential increased contribution of NIPF to forest products industry.*
- *Staff is focused on normal programmatic activities (rather than priorities outlines in the Plan).*
- *Lack of annual follow-up and documentation of implementation successes and issues.*
- *Difficulty integrating planning efforts, e.g., forest health is handled by the Department of Agriculture.*
- *Aligning our resources to the priorities identified in the Plan is a process that has been resource and time consuming. Some partners were critical about specific shifts in resources and program focus. Creating open lines of internal and external communication is our main avenue for addressing this.*

Opportunities Due to the State Forest Action Plans

In response to a question asking what opportunities have come up because of the Forest Action Plan being in place, two themes emerged from the responses from planning contacts in 17 states:

- **Grants**—planning contacts in seven states responded that grants are a main opportunity, in particular USFS S&PF competitive grants but also other grant opportunities. This also included reference to working with partners on grants and partner use of the Forest Action Plan to pursue grant opportunities. For example, one respondent noted, *“Several partners have commented how having a statewide priority forest data layer has helped them with their strategic planning and/or grant writing.”*
- **Partnerships**—planning contacts in six states responded that partnerships have been an opportunity from the Forest Action Plan effort. This included references to strengthening existing partnerships as well as working with new partners. Some of these responses were around partnering on grant proposals. For example, one comment explained, *“The process has provided us with ample opportunities to connect with our partners and engage them more deeply in our operations as we implement the Forest Action Plan. The Division has benefitted from the collaborative planning process: providing us with a clearer understanding of the forestry community’s priorities as a whole, helping us have a better sense of where we both excel and fall short in meeting the expectations of our partners and the public, and giving our partners a more in depth understanding of the trade-offs to meet the mission and address emerging issues with limited resources.”*

Some other opportunities cited include:

- *Increased awareness of agency goals for Division staff and partners which has also spread interest and implementation opportunities.*
- *Increased opportunities to leverage state funds including dollars through a constitutional amendment.*
- *The Plan has caused and allowed us to take a hard look at the most critical landscapes on which to focus work and the services we can provide with proficiency.*
- *Some actions from the Forest Action Plan were incorporated into the Department Annual Work Plan.*
- *Other State Planning documents recently developed tie –in for multiple benefits.*
- *The ability to keep our core funding.*

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- *Possibly it has helped with increasing the scoring of Forest Legacy applications.*
- *Led to new Timber Product Output surveys (this was a data gap).*
- *Multi-state grants have been available for securing much needed funding support.*
- *While opportunities may be realized for certain landscape priorities, a lack of capacity means that additional focus in these areas translates into reduced focus on other landscapes that have equal or greater need, but those needs are not trending with current national priorities.*

Lessons Learned for Future Updates to the State Forest Action Plans

There was a final question that asked what changes the planner would suggest for future updates to the Forest Action Plan, considering that they have had over one full year of implementation underway. Several planning contacts replied “no” or that it was too soon to know what changes are needed to the Plan.

Specific ideas for future updates to the Forest Action Plans include:

- *Develop the Wildlife Action Plan and Forest Action Plan collaboratively on the same schedule.*
- *Maybe less lofty goals and more on-the-ground tasks to see progress.*
- *Have a more formal process to see that the Plan is embraced, useful, and utilized.*
- *Need to modify to reflect the current administration’s priorities.*
- *More funding for some of the data necessary for the assessment.*
- *Make the Plan more specific and reflective of priorities and goals for stakeholders.*
- *Explore incorporation of an annual implementation plan to focus resources upon a few specific tasks or projects that would help to achieve a subset of program-specific goals.*
- *Better integrate the Forest Legacy Program (FLP) into the Forest Action Plan when the FLP Assessment of Need requires an update.*
- *Additional communications about the Plan.*
- *Formalize a plan for delivery that merges all forestry services.*
- *Add a mechanism internally for follow-up and implementation check-in.*
- *Try to be more represented in Department-level planning.*
- *As our implementation progresses we gain a better assessment of the time required to implement some action items. Future updates will ideally include more accurate timelines for our action items.*

Highlights, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

From Development of the State Forest Action Plans as of August 2010¹

The following highlights, challenges, and lessons learned from development of the State Forest Resource Assessments and Strategies were synthesized from an in-depth 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,

¹ These lessons learned were included in the “2010 Statewide Forest Resource Assessments and Strategies in the Northeast and Midwest: A Regional Summary”: <http://www.forestationplans.org/regions/northeastern-region>.

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.