

Sustainable Forest Management Policy & Statement of Operational Commitments

As the manager of public lands in the County, the Land Department operates on a commercial basis and is required to ensure that an optimal financial return is attained from the use of the forest lands managed by the Land Department. At the same time the Land Department also has a duty to the people of the county to maintain the recreational and other social values of the forest resource and to protect the long term sustainability of the resource. Sustainable forest management is about striking a balance between economic, social and environmental values in a manner that protects all of these values over time.

The Land Department is committed to the principles of sustainable forest management and will manage the lands in our care in accordance with those principles. We will establish a sustainable forest management system (SFMS) that will help us achieve and be environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial and economically viable. Through our SFMS we commit to:

[Protect the integrity and longevity of forest lands](#) under our management;

[Comply with all applicable laws, regulations and voluntary guidelines.](#)

[Acquire and maintain third party certification](#) to the Sustainable Forest Management principles;

Plan and conduct forest management activities in a manner that:

- [protects and maintains biodiversity](#) across the forest ecosystem;
- prevents damage and [protects forest health and productivity](#);
- [minimizes chemical use](#);
- [protects the integrity of riparian areas](#)
- [minimizes aesthetic impact](#);
- [protects threatened and endangered species](#) and their habitat;
- [conserves areas with special attributes](#) such as cultural, ecological, geological, economic or social attributes; and
- promotes [efficient utilization](#).

[Promote and incorporate applied research](#) and technology to improve sustainable forest management.

[Enhance public recreation values](#) by providing opportunities for dispersed recreation on County lands.

[Provide public education](#) on forest ecology, sustainable forest management and the economic value of forests.

[Solicit public input](#) on forest management plans, policies and county performance.

[Communicate our performance](#) to the county board, employees, the public and other stakeholders.

[Ensure the capability of our employees](#) and field operators to perform their responsibilities with the highest degree of professionalism.

[Continually improve performance](#) of the SFMS through regular reviews and audits.

Conservation and Protecting the Integrity and Longevity of Forest Lands

The Land Department is committed to maintaining a permanent forest resource that delivers the full range of benefits that forests can provide now and in the future. This entails protecting the integrity and longevity of forest lands. To protect the integrity and longevity of forests lands the Land Department will:

- Implement integrated management plans that link the long term strategies for the desired future condition of the forest with short term tactical plans through to site level operating plans. Plans will define operating objectives and requirements.
- Where possible consolidate lands through exchange, sale or acquisition.
- Prevent the encroachment of dissimilar land uses.

Compliance with Laws, Regulations and Other Requirements

The Land Department will comply with all applicable environmental and social laws, regulations and any other requirements to which the department makes a commitment to adhere. The Land Department will also comply with the Minnesota Voluntary Site-Level Forest Management Guidelines and other best management practices. To ensure compliance the Land Department will:

- Identify the legal and other requirements that apply to our operations.
- Track changes to legal and other requirements to ensure we have current information about our obligations and adjust our activities to meet changing requirements.
- Participate in and promote the development and adoption of policies and legislation that are balanced, scientifically, technically and fiscally sound, and provide a basis for improving environmental performance.
- Require all our employees and field operators who conduct field activities to be trained in best management practices and keep them informed of the legal and other requirements that apply to their work activities.
- Work with employees and operators to ensure consistent interpretation and application of all applicable requirements on our lands.
- Inspect all of our operations to ensure compliance.

Acquire and Maintain Third Party Certification

Forest certification is the voluntary, independent assessment of an organization's forest management activities and operations undertaken for a particular area of forest. Independent forest certification has been developing since the early 1990s, driven by market requirements for quality assurance, community concerns about sustainability issues and policy makers seeking to balance environmental, social and economic considerations in natural resource management. Once a forest has been awarded certification, its wood products can be identified as being sourced from a sustainably managed forest.

The Land Department is committed to the standards of sustainable forest management as defined in the objectives and performance measures of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) and/or the principles of Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). To this end the Department will seek and maintain independent third party certification to the FSC and/or SFI standards. To achieve our commitment to FSC and/or SFI we will design, implement and establish a sustainable forest management system (SFMS). Through our SFMS we will:

- Identify the environmental, social and economic impacts of our activities.
- Plan our activities to minimize or prevent unintended impacts to the ecological condition and values before we commence work.
- Establish operating procedures to ensure that activities are conducted in accordance with best management practices and defined operating criteria.
- Supervise and inspect all field activities to ensure that operating criteria and best management practices are met.

Protect and Maintain Biodiversity

The protection of the full range of forest ecosystems and other environmental values is fundamental to sustainable forest management. It entails the maintenance of the ecological processes that sustain forest ecosystems, the conservation of the biological diversity associated with forests (particularly endangered and vulnerable species and communities). Conserving biodiversity through forest management has at least three different components:

1. Maintaining sufficient amounts of all native habitats across the landscape so that no species becomes endangered. This is referred to as the "coarse filter" approach (Hunter 1990).
2. Addressing specific habitat and other needs of already endangered species—the "fine filter" approach (Hunter 1990).
3. Providing some form of reserve areas (e.g., National Parks, Wilderness Areas) for each forest type.

The Land Department will strive to maintain each of the three components outlined above by:

- Setting objectives and targets to maintain a forest cover across the landscape that is composed of diverse qualities, features, and elements.
- Setting objectives and targets to incorporate stand level wildlife habitat elements into project plans.
- Establishing procedures to identify and protect plant and animal species that are endangered or at risk.
- Establishing conservation areas.

The Land Department will also continue to work with the Regional Landscape Level Committees and adjoining landowners to research and develop strategies to protect biodiversity at a stand and landscape level.

Protect Forest Health and Productivity

Protecting the conservation and commercial values of forests necessitates protecting forest areas from the potentially harmful effects of diseases, weeds, pests (including feral animals), chemicals and wildfire. It also involves preserving the productive capacity of the forest through conservation of nutrients and protecting the soils. The Land Department gives high priority to the protection of public forests from damaging agents. We will protect the health of the forest by:

- Developing long term, short term and site level management plans that identify priorities and cover the range of actions to deal with threats to forests.
- Using integrated pest management.
- Being on constant look out for pest and disease outbreaks as part of regular site visits and inspections and cooperating with other agencies to ensure early detection and control.
- Working together with the Department of Natural Resources and other agencies and landowners to:
 - Develop and implement measures to protect adjacent public and private forested lands from harmful diseases, weeds and feral animals;
 - Minimize the risk of the introduction or movement of exotic plants, pests and diseases;
 - Minimize the risk of catastrophic wildfire through prevention and detection; and
 - Undertake timely timber salvage operations in the event of catastrophic wind or other related weather events, insect or disease outbreaks or from catastrophic fire events.

Simply put, healthy soils promote healthy ecosystems. We will protect soil productivity by:

- Scheduling activities to avoid damage to vulnerable soils.
- Matching operating practices to site conditions.
- Suspending operations when and where ground conditions may result in permanent damage resulting from rutting or compaction.
- Managing nutrients on sites through silvicultural prescriptions, vegetation management and slash distribution.

Healthy, better trees:

- Working with tree improvement cooperatives to ensure appropriate research, testing, evaluation and out-planting of genetically improved seeds/seedlings.

Minimize Chemical Use

For both environmental and commercial reasons the Land Department seeks to use the minimum quantities of chemicals in its operations. We will minimize the use of forest chemicals through:

- Integrated pest management practices.
- Silvicultural prescriptions that reduce the need for chemical application.
- Establishing procedures to carefully evaluate whether herbicide use is needed including assessing the necessity for use, choosing the correct herbicide and application rate.
- Using chemicals only where they are necessary and are the most effective option to achieve management objectives.
- Using the least toxic, narrowest spectrum product to achieve management objectives.
- Using the lowest quantities and concentrations of chemicals necessary for effective treatment.

When chemicals are used they will establish and follow procedures that ensure that:

- All laws and regulations governing chemical application are strictly adhered.
- Chemicals are stored, transported and applied in a responsible manner to protect the safety of the public, our employees and contractors and the environment.
- Any employee or contractor who applies or administer the application of chemicals will be trained and licensed.
- Adjoining landowners will be notified.

Protect the Integrity of Riparian Areas

A riparian area is the area of land and water forming a transition from aquatic to terrestrial ecosystems along streams, lakes and open water wetlands. Riparian areas are among the most important and diverse parts of forest ecosystems. They support high soil moisture and a diversity of associated vegetation and wildlife, and they perform important ecological functions that link aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. To protect the functions and values of riparian areas we will:

- Comply with all legal requirements and MN Voluntary Guideline Requirements for riparian areas.
- Incorporate specific directions to protect riparian areas into project plans and ensure that they are communicated and understood by field operators.
- Ensure that all employees and field operators who conduct operations on our lands are aware of and understand what is required to protect riparian areas.
- Regularly inspect operations to ensure compliance with project plans and legal requirements and MN Voluntary Guidelines.

Minimize Aesthetic Impact of Our Operations

Visual quality is an important aspect of managing the multiple values of our forest resource. By limiting the aesthetic impacts of forest management activities wherever practicable we can enhance the value of forested lands for recreational users which results in a healthy tourism economy. We can also retain public acceptance of forest management and timber harvesting thereby helping to sustain a healthy forest products industry. To limit the aesthetic impacts of our activities we will plan and conduct our operations so that we:

- Comply with the visual quality standards in the Minnesota Voluntary Forest Management Guidelines.
- Limit the size of clear-cuts to not more than 120 acres unless larger cuts are necessary to respond to forest health emergencies or other natural catastrophes or to achieve wildlife objectives.
- Avoid cutting adjacent stands on Land Department managed lands unless:
 - Stands are three years old or five feet high at the desired level of stocking;
 - It is necessary to respond to forest health emergencies or other natural catastrophes; or
 - There is a good operational, timing or silvicultural rationale.
- Visual sensitivity of the site has been assessed and visual quality guidelines appropriate to the visual sensitivity of the site are incorporated into the Harvest Project Plan and are followed.

Protect Threatened and Endangered Species and Conserve Areas with Special Attributes

We are committed to reserving or establishing special management regimes for those areas of our forest lands that have special conservation value. We call these values “special attributes” and they encompass: **(1)** threatened and endangered species, **(2)** cultural sites, **(3)** unique geological features; **(4)** unique ecological features such as old growth stands; and **(5)** social and economic values such as recreation areas or community watersheds. Different types of special attributes require different levels of protection. In some cases, we can simply establish a small buffer area and prohibit operating activities within the area. In others such as old growth stands more active management protocols are required. However, in all cases we will ensure that the “special attribute” is protected by:

- Establishing conservation areas for all areas where special attributes are verified.
- Ensuring that all employees and field operators are trained on threatened and endangered species and other special attributes and are able to identify and report them if they are found.
- Mapping conservation areas in our GIS system.
- Ensuring sites are protected during forest management activities by identifying them in project plans and supervising activities to ensure they are protected.
- Cooperating with other agencies and landowners to identify, plan, and manage areas with special attributes.

Efficient Utilization

Efficient utilization is about ensuring that we realize the full value of the resource, do not create waste and maximize the use of the trees that we harvest. We will promote efficient utilization by:

- Using appropriate technology and methods during harvesting operations and on-site manufacturing processes to:
 - Promote efficient utilization of forest resources;
 - Minimize waste; and
 - Minimize residual stand damage.
- Establish timber scaling procedures to encourage purchasers of timber sales to utilize the trees they harvest.
- Actively inspect operations for utilization.

Enhance Public Recreation Values

Northern Minnesota is renowned for its outdoor recreation opportunities, vast tracts of wilderness and extensive freshwater resources. The most popular recreational pursuits include hunting, camping, snowmobiling, hiking, fishing, ATV riding, wildlife watching, off-road bicycling, cross-country skiing, and berry picking. Enhancing recreation value is both a social and economic benefit to the people of the county by providing a source of tourism as well as local recreation.

Proper forest recreation management should enhance the recreation experience, while at the same time, complementing and protecting the forest resource. Uncontrolled, poorly designed or overused recreational development can threaten the very resource that provides the recreational value. The Land Department will:

- Provide recreation opportunities by ensuring lands under our care are open to the public for dispersed recreation.
- Work with government agencies and others to create and maintain recreational areas and trails.
- Control recreational access where there is risk to public safety or a risk of damage to the environment or to other cultural or economic resources.

Promote and Incorporate Applied Research and Technology

An enhanced, better coordinated and better focused research and development effort is essential if we are to achieve sustainability. Further research is needed in a number of broad subject areas: forest ecosystems and biological diversity; resource evaluation and inventory; the ecological and environmental impact of forest disturbance and management regimes; forest protection, covering disease, pests and fire; silvicultural techniques; forest productivity; and other non-wood aspects of forests, such as wildfire management, recreation, and cultural and heritage values.

We will incorporate research and technology into our planning processes and operations by:

- Maintaining a forest management information system that incorporates geographic information to manage data related to forest inventory, forest cover, soils, water, transportation and management activities.
- Using information from the forest management information system to develop site level project plans, and short term and long term forest management plans.
- Assessing existing technology for possible incorporation into our operations.
- Keeping current with technology trends by:
 - Attending seminars, conferences and training sessions; and
 - Maintaining subscriptions to trade and research publications.
- Identifying and evaluating research opportunities that will contribute to information to help us improve our management practices.
- Supporting research in the following areas:
 - Forest health, productivity and silvicultural techniques in the management of the forest; and
 - Geography, wildlife, water/air and the biophysical environment.

Provide Public Education

We are committed to fostering understanding of and support for ecologically sustainable forest management, by providing greater opportunities for the public to obtain information about forest ecology, the management of forests, and the diverse social and economic values of our forests. This will enable the people of the County to make a more considered contribution to forest management issues.

The Land Department will, individually or in cooperation with other private and public organizations in the State, engage in efforts to promote public education. The Land Department will:

- Make information about forests and forest management available on its website.
- Conduct public field tours and information sessions.
- Support development of demonstration forests.
- Make presentations to schools and civic groups.
- Participate in professional associations and initiatives.
- Participate in school education programs and the development of educational materials about forests and sustainable forest management and uses, in consultation with relevant educational bodies.

Solicit Public Input

It is important that the Land Department be accountable for the stewardship of public lands and to be responsive to public input and concerns in the management of those lands. We take all input seriously and will consider any input we receive. It is the intent of the Land Department to:

- Establish and/or participate in a Public Advisory Committee to provide recommendations to the County Board on forest management plans and policies.
- Periodically conduct open houses or other events within the County to provide opportunity to review forest management plans and performance.
- Establish procedures to provide prompt feedback to anyone providing input or raising concerns including descriptions of actions taken or reasons for not taking any action.

Communicate Our Performance

We are committed to being open and transparent about our performance. We will provide clear and complete information to the public by:

- Reporting performance results to the County Board and the Public Advisory Committee in the following areas:
 - Summary results of inspections, internal and external audits and corrective actions taken;
 - Performance against objectives and targets and key performance indicators; and
 - The change in land management strategies as a result of monitoring activities.
- Maintaining a web-site that provides the public with a summary of forest management plans and information on land management activities and performance.
- Responding in a timely manner to requests for information.

Contact with Local Tribes

Some Land Department managed lands are located within or adjacent to native reservations. In addition our resource management activities may be conducted in areas where there may be resources of cultural, historical or religious significance to local native communities. As a result the Land Department will:

- Notify local tribal authorities of any forest management activities that will occur within or immediately adjacent to reservation lands.
- Consult with local tribal authorities at least annually to solicit their input on areas that there may be resources of cultural, historical or religious significance to local tribes.

Ensure the Capability of our Employees and Field Operators

The success of our performance depends on our employees and the many independent Field Operators who operate on our Lands. We will:

- Ensure that all employees have the skills, education, training and competence to perform their responsibilities with the highest degree of professionalism.
- Identify training requirements and establish training plans for all Land Department employees and ensure these requirements are achieved.
- Provide employees with access to all procedures, self-assessment activities and monitoring results.
- Establish qualification and evaluation procedures to ensure that we use qualified Field Operators to conduct our land management activities.
- Train employees and operators on sustainable management principles and best management practices.
- Promote the professionalism of forestry employees and field operators by contributing to training and education programs and providing personnel to assist in the state logger education programs.

Continually Improve Performance

Sustainability is about learning and adapting. The Land Department will improve performance by implementing processes that help us assess how well we are doing and take action to change our practices when they do not meet the performance measures we have set. We will:

- Establish objectives and targets for environmental performance.
- Set challenging performance measures for objectives and targets, management practices, and operational activities.
- Monitor our performance through inspections of all land management operating activities and other monitoring activities.
- Conduct rigorous internal audits focused on assessing the effectiveness and adequacy of what we do.
- Report, track, and trend problems and the actions taken to respond and prevent problems from recurring.
- Use information gathered from the different self-assessment activities and from research, changing public expectations, regulatory requirements and government policy to adapt and improve forest management practices and systems.