

# News Release

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## **\$6 Million Fund Established to Ensure Sustainable Forestry, Protect Wildlife Habitat, Provide Public Access**

Minneapolis – The Blandin Foundation and The Nature Conservancy announced today the establishment of a \$6 million fund designed to ensure sustainable forestry, protect wildlife habitat and guarantee public access on forestland in the Itasca County region of northern Minnesota. The first-of-its kind agreement in Minnesota will leverage public and private funds to purchase conservation easements on up to 75,000 acres of private industrial forestland, helping to stem the recent trend of large-scale forestland sales and subdivisions in Minnesota.

“The foundation recognizes forests as a key Minnesota economic asset,” said Jim Hoolihan, President of Blandin Foundation. “By protecting large blocks of working forestland from fragmentation, this major investment will preserve the connection between Minnesota’s healthy forest-based industries, healthy forest ecosystems and healthy forest-based communities.”

Under the terms of the agreement, the fund, administered by The Nature Conservancy, will be used to purchase conservation easements on up to 75,000 acres of strategically selected parcels of private forest land from willing sellers. The easements will limit development and subdivision while ensuring sustainable forest practices and public access opportunities for a variety of recreational pursuits including hunting, fishing and hiking. Once purchased, the easements will be transferred to the state Department of Natural Resources, which will monitor the legally-binding agreements. Other partners in the project include the state Department of Natural Resources, The Conservation Fund, the Minnesota Forest Resources Council, state legislators and local governments.

“Minnesota stands at a crossroads,” said Ron Nargang, State Director for The Nature Conservancy. “Our industrial forestland owners are facing significant economic challenges that put timber-related jobs, wildlife habitat and public access at risk. The Blandin Foundation deserves a considerable amount of credit for taking this bold first step to protect our forestland.”

The rapidly changing economics of the forest products industry are forcing an unprecedented change in ownership across the Great Lakes states, and throughout the nation. Large forest holdings have been subdivided and sold and subdivided again. In December of 2004, Boise Cascade sold some 2.2 million acres in Minnesota, Louisiana, Alabama and the Pacific Northwest – 309,000 acres of which are located in Minnesota’s Itasca, Koochiching, Lake of the

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Woods and St. Louis Counties. In the state of Maine alone, some 7 million acres has changed hands since 1998, and similar large-scale land sales have taken place in Michigan, New York and New Hampshire. Institutional investors, including such entities as mutual funds, insurance companies, pension funds, bank trust departments and university endowment funds, have become major landowners, replacing the traditional forestland owners. Unlike many of these pioneering owners who managed their lands for up to 150 years, the new investors often have a far shorter horizon – often just 10 to 15 years. In such a timeframe, it is difficult for communities to plan for their future or for many to feel secure about the fate of wildlife and economic resources.

“Private foundations are a critical partner in the protection of large-scale forestlands. Blandin Foundation has taken a key first step,” said Brad Moore, Assistant Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources. “We look forward to build additional public and private partnerships to increase funding for forestland conservation.”

To help purchase the conservation easements, the partners will seek funding from state and federal sources. One of the key federal sources is the Forest Legacy program. A partnership between the United States Forest Service, state governments and private landowners, the Forest Legacy program identifies and protects ecologically important forest habitat which is threatened by possible development or unsustainable practices. Program objectives are met through land acquisition or the use of conservation easements, which protect working forests while meeting important conservation goals. Since its first appropriations in 1992, the Program has conserved over one million acres throughout the country.

"We are experiencing a sea change for conservation and forestry in America and in Minnesota," said Tom Duffus, the Conservation Fund's state director. "The Conservation Fund applauds Blandin Foundation for its extraordinary commitment to protecting northern Minnesota's forestlands. This balanced approach to conservation will safeguard wildlife habitat, working landscapes and recreation areas for future generations."

The fragmentation of forests is among the greatest threats faced by wildlife and it has further compromised timber harvesting. Itasca County, for instance, has the largest concentration of privately held industrial forest land in the state. Since 1999, over 400,000 acres of Minnesota's industrial forestland has been subdivided and sold. Moreover, in the last 15 years, 400,000 of Minnesota's roughly 13 million acres of forest land has been converted to other uses and removed from the production base.

"The Minnesota Forest Resources Council considers the issue of ecological, social and economic impacts of private forestland ownership changes to be the state's top priority forest policy issue," said Dave Zumeta, Executive Director of the Council, which advises the Governor and federal, state, county and local governments on sustainable forest resource policies and practices. "This landmark agreement between Blandin Foundation and The Nature Conservancy is an essential step toward securing remaining large parcels of private forest land via conservation easements."

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**The Nature Conservancy** is a leading international, nonprofit organization that preserves plants, animals and natural communities representing the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. To date, the Conservancy and its more than one million members have been responsible for the protection of more than 15 million acres in the United States and have helped preserve more than 100 million acres in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific. Visit us on the Web at [nature.org](http://nature.org).

**Blandin Foundation**, Minnesota's largest rural-based private foundation is located in Grand Rapids, MN. Its mission is to strengthen rural Minnesota communities, especially the Grand Rapids area, through grants, leadership development programs and public policy initiatives. The Foundation is focused on its Community Economic Advantage strategy, which aims to help build strong local economies where the burdens and benefits are widely shared.

**The Minnesota Forest Resources Council** is a 17-member body that works to promote long-term sustainable management of Minnesota's forests.

**The Conservation Fund** is forging partnerships to protect wildlife habitat and enhance public recreation opportunities. Since its establishment in 1985, the Fund has protected more than 4 million acres of America's most important outdoor heritage, including nearly one million acres of working forestland. For the fourth year in a row, the Fund was named the nation's top-rated environmental nonprofit by the American Institute of Philanthropy. With a 1 percent fundraising cost, the lowest of all environmental groups in the country, and a program allocation of 96 percent, the Fund is unmatched for its efficiency and effectiveness. [www.conservationfund.org](http://www.conservationfund.org)