

A Review of the Six-County Cooperative Forest Certification Project

**A Vital Forests / Vital Communities Report
to the
Blandin Foundation**

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Executive Summary

The Blandin Foundation has undertaken the Vital Forests / Vital Communities Initiative to strengthen and diversify Minnesota's forest-based economy and promote the long-term ecological health of the forest resource that supports it. One focal point of the Initiative is encouraging sustainable forestry by various means including increasing the amount of forested land being managed under third-party certification programs.

In one of its efforts to increase certification, the Foundation provided financial and operational support to six northern counties – Becker, Beltrami, Carlton, Clearwater, Crow Wing, and Koochiching – to cooperatively undertake the process of preparing themselves for certification under one or both of the major certification programs, SFI (Sustainable Forestry Initiative) and FSC (Forest Stewardship Council). A private consultant was retained to direct the pre-certification preparation process. The Foundation provided matching funds to help pay for the consultant, offered its facilities as the venue for the joint work sessions, and provided support to the Land Commissioners in their efforts to secure the go-ahead decision to participate in the process from their respective County Boards.

At the point in the pre-certification process where the initial preparation work was completed and before the initial assessment is conducted, the Foundation wanted to learn how the project went, did the counties consider it successful, was the Foundation's role in the process effective, and what might be required to follow through on the project. This paper presents the findings and conclusions of a project review, which was based on interviews with the six Land Commissioners and the project consultant.

Conclusions

Among the conclusions drawn from the review are:

Project was Successful

Without a doubt the six county certification project has been successful and will remain so even if the counties do not achieve certification.

All the Land Commissioners stated they benefited in many ways from the project including learning from the other commissioners, understanding the shortcomings of their procedures and administrative structures, and gaining insights and tools for becoming more effective managers in the future. The group aspect of the project was a vitally important feature of the process.

Blandin Foundation Involvement was Vital

Although the Foundation's involvement would not pass a strict application of the "but for" test, it is clear that without the Foundation's participation, none of these six counties would be in the positive position they are today. All Land Commissioners said given market forces and trends in management they would have ultimately pursued certification on their own regardless of the Foundation's support. However, all said that the Foundation's role was critical in getting the project off the ground and executed as well as it was.

The Land Commissioners all appreciated the Foundation's monetary support for the project. However, they noted that it was the Foundation's general support for the process that was most important. First, the Foundation helped inform County Boards of the value of certification. Second, the Foundation's encouragement of the more reluctant counties to join the process strengthened the resolve of the other counties. Third, the Foundation encouraged the counties to pursue cooperative action that engendered a wide variety of positive results that would not have occurred through six separate processes. Fourth, the Foundation helped secure the services of a knowledgeable consultant to run the process. And, finally, the Foundation's support during the process, such as providing a venue for the monthly sessions, greatly facilitated the process and eased the burden on individual counties.

Project Lessons

For these small agencies the group effort was essential to its success. The cooperative approach reduced the workload for any one individual and enhanced the process through the sharing of ideas, experiences, and suggestions.

The Land Commissioners recognized the value of having a good consultant run the project and provide the rigorous attention to detail and schedule that such a project demands. It would have been impossible for the small staffs achieve this on their own or, even within a group process, to make such demands on each other.

Keep Certification in the Forefront

Even though market forces have become the driving factor behind land managers seeking certification, there will remain an ongoing need to keep informing policy makers and the public about the need for and value of certification. This will be especially true as the cost of audits and the more rigorous requirements of certification become grist for coffee shop discussions.

Value of Group Effort for the Future

The project showed the value of small departments working together on a common project. This degree of sharing of experience and insights will be invaluable as the counties (and other land managers) proceed with actions to implement the requirements of certification.

Value of the Project Planning Database

Without a doubt a key to the value of the entire process is the project planning database tool developed by the consultant. Although this consultant has neither used nor evaluated the tool, every Land Commissioner mentioned it and its multi-faceted value to them – guiding administration, establishing ongoing documentation, defining project flow, providing basis for and record of monitoring, and generally keeping them focused on all aspects of management. Unfortunately, there were not enough funds in the initial project to debug the tool and make it fully operational. Getting this program to a full functioning status is critical to fully realizing the benefits of the certification project.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations made by this consultant to the Blandin Foundation in light of the findings and conclusions of this review.

Completing the Project Planning Database:

The Blandin Foundation is recommended to directly or indirectly support actions that make the project planning database a fully functional tool for the six counties and any other land manager that opts to use it.

Supporting Ongoing Cooperation

The Land Commissioners seem to desire irregularly scheduled sessions at which they can share ideas and experiences with each other and other land managers. One topic of concern would be the various aspects of implementing certification. As noted in the conclusions, organizing such sessions is difficult for staff-stretched land departments. The Foundation could assist in this regard by organizing the sessions, providing convening space, and perhaps bringing in experts and outside speakers.

Keeping Certification in the Forefront of Forest Management

At the point where nearly all significant forest landowners achieve certification the discussion will shift from becoming certified to maintaining certification. In this regard two major considerations arise. First, despite the success of certification, there will be a need to continually reeducate the public and policy makers regarding the value of certification (especially if increased cost of operations due to certification become an issue). Second, land commissioners will need help dealing with the likely changing certification landscape (e.g., keeping abreast of new standards and procedures) and other aspects of sustaining their certified status.