

# **A Review of the Six-County Cooperative Forest Certification Project**

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

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**Prepared by  
John W. Powers  
of  
Applied Insights<sup>north</sup>**



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**BLANDIN FOUNDATION™**  
PUBLIC POLICY & ENGAGEMENT

# A Review of the Six-County Forest Certification Project

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to the Blandin Foundation  
May 23, 2007**

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## Executive Summary

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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.

## Purpose

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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 managed under third-party certification programs.

In one effort 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.

## Methodology

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The consultant retained to conduct the review interviewed all but one of the Land Commissioners and the project consultant, Joanne Petrini, by telephone. One commissioner was interviewed in person.

A prepared list of questions (see Appendix) formed the basis for the interviews. Depending upon the responses additional ad hoc follow-up questions were asked to obtain more details or opinions.

## Findings

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The following presents the responses of the Land Commissioners to the base interview questions. Although none of the commissioners required anonymity, with only a couple unavoidable exceptions, there is no attribution of answers to a specific person or county.

### **Current status of progress towards certification.**

1. Why did you originally pursue certification? That is, what is the value of certification to your county?
  - The market place is demanding more and more certified timber and fiber. We must be able to position ourselves to be able to provide materials for these markets. Certain local industries encouraged us to pursue certification. Certification is the present and future of forest management.
  - Certification will make us better managers. It helps us define our procedures and its rigor will improve our administration and overall management. The bottom line is that it made good business sense for the Department.
  - The procedures and outcomes provide guidance for current staff and are the mechanism for insuring continuity of goals, objectives, and procedures for future staff.
2. Does that purpose still hold true?
  - In all cases the answer was yes.
3. What is the current status of your progress towards certification?

- The pre-audit assessment is set for late July and early August. A date for the initial audit has not yet been set but could be in September although several commissioners would prefer to wait until the prime harvest season has begun.
- Two of the counties – Becker and Beltrami – have tentatively opted out of the process to seek group certification and, instead, are considering obtaining individual certificates. These decisions are not final.

4. Why did you originally opt for a group certification process?

- The cost of cooperating as a group was significantly lower than undertaking separate efforts.
- The group effort shared the workload and reduced the burden on any one staff. Since small counties do not have large staffs to undertake this type of process by themselves this was an important consideration. In addition, a group process provided ability to learn from the other commissioners.
- Undertaking a group process greatly aided in selling the whole consideration of certification with several of the county boards.

5. [Beltrami and Becker] Why did your county opt out of the group certification process?

- For Beltrami the issue is will the county pursue its own certification and be responsible for gaining and maintaining it, or join in a group certification in which the actions of the other counties may impact the individual county's certification status.
- The Becker County Attorney does not like the nature of the group certification agreement and the County Board concurs with his assessment.
- Both Becker and Beltrami Counties intend to formally or informally work with the other counties on certification issues and implementation. That is, despite issues with the group certification agreement, the original benefits of the group process still hold true.

[Carlton, Clearwater, Crow Wing, Koochiching] Do the original benefits of group certification still hold true?

- In all cases the answer was yes.

6. Having gone this far through the process, has it been worth it? Knowing what you know now, would you have pursued certification?

- Yes, we'd do it again. Yes, we've learned things. Most definitely worth it; happy with the route they took; we're looking forward to certification.
- We recognize it would be a challenge and a change, but it is a needed change.
- We realize they are not going to see a dollar premium for their product, as had been one of the earliest arguments in favor of certification, but that is immaterial at this point.
- We realize it will take time to implement.
- Several noted they liked the idea of the counties working together; sharing the workload and helping create similar approaches to issues.

**Obstacles to achieving and maintaining certification.**

7. What has been your experience with the certification process to date – pluses and minuses?

- Pluses:
  - Rigor of a monthly meeting helped him work through the process. The work assignments helped force action. The consultant helped push them.
  - Group effort reduced the workload on any given individual and provided support to each participant.
  - Helped develop higher level of consistency between counties.
  - Lots of experience around the table.
  - Foundation support was nice.

- Made us take a hard look at what we are doing.
  - Minuses:
    - Commissioners were not picking up the information right away and at first the consultant overwhelmed them with information. And there was lots of paperwork involved.
    - Monthly intervals sometimes meant loss of momentum.
    - Counties are very independent – there's value in independence but it can be cumbersome in a group process.
    - Often told what they had to do but were not offered guidance on how to do it, especially in regards to things (e.g., logger contracts) that the counties should be doing in an identical manner.
8. Have you received feedback or commentary from loggers, forest products industry, environmental interests, and others regarding your certification process? What has been the nature of this commentary?
- Loggers:
    - Mixed bag. Generally supportive but there is grumbling about the additional requirements and paperwork. Some were and remain uncomfortable with the entire concept. But most are already dealing with a certified mill or landowner that pose similar requirements; guys into logging for the long haul recognize that the changes are needed.
    - Many of his loggers are true independents and challenge the need for the additional requirements such as training and insurance.
    - His logger pool is smaller than it used to be since some have not returned their new bidding application forms; on the other hand, he has gained some new loggers.
    - We are now holding all loggers to the same standard, which we should have been doing in the past.
    - Our more formal and rigorous process levels the playing field between loggers (e.g., insurance, training of crews, etc.), but no one is really jumping up and down.
  - Industry:
    - Nothing formal or direct, but indirect comments have been positive.
    - More supportive of SFI, not so keen on FSC dual certification.
    - No real comment but assumes they are happy to see his county certified.
    - Several local industry representatives directly helped him move the process forward, which helped with his county board; another local industry has already approached him seeking certified wood.
    - It was local industry that brought the subject of certification to his attention.
  - Others:
    - Not a whole lot of feedback on the process. No negatives heard to date.
    - As a whole, all County Boards are supportive. One commissioner noted that his County Board is supportive but probably unaware of the details and full implication of certification.
    - Other interests, such as environmental groups, have been quiet.
    - In one county a local landowner/lakeshore group has complained about the county's ATV policy, which, in their minds, should keep him from being certified (but the group is in favor certification).
9. What have been the biggest or most important changes in your management (administrative and resource) activities resulting from the certification process to date?
- Use of project planning database will be a huge improvement – insures that foresters review all pertinent issues, guidelines are built into it, and generally keeps them on track. Project planning database – helps reduce infrastructure need and cost; using vegetative matrix to reduce chemical use. Helped set in place means of accounting for their activity. The program still has some bugs but once complete will greatly help their management.

- The various procedures got their administrative details in place. Have to follow the prescribed audit trail on actions and transactions. Their record keeping and documentation has been greatly enhanced (primarily via the project planning database).
  - All counties have adopted a logger contracting application form. In one county this has allowed them to drop its previous requirement for performance bonds on loggers.
  - Although all counties said the process has not impacted their on-the-ground management, they have instituted new field procedures. One county has installed a new pre-harvest in-the-field meeting with loggers, which will greatly help to clarify exactly what is to be done. Another has revamped its regeneration inspection from a more casual “drive by” review to a far more rigorous and detailed process.
  - Other changes to date include: changes on how stand appraisal plots are marked; a new standardized inquiry / complaint procedure; development of a plantation activity and cost module to track all actions and costs; initiation of first-ever management plan; and development of a website to provide more information to the public.
10. What are the biggest or most important changes you will have to make in the near future as a result of certification? [Some areas for change: staffing, staff training, planning, inventory and databases, communication with other forest managers, interaction with public, specific forest management.] Will you be able to undertake these changes? If not, why not?
- One commissioner summarized the future by saying there are 200 pages of procedures – there’ll be lots of changes.
  - But all respondents indicated they are not sure they have the staff to do all the required work.
  - Several mentioned the need to secure full acceptance of certification and its implications by the current staff. One commissioner said his staff may be able to go through the motions but he wants them to fully integrate the intent of the system into their management..
  - Several noted they are eager for the project planning database to get debugged so they can use it.
  - Other upcoming actions noted include: upgrading the procedure for contracting for services such as forest road maintenance; undertaking a forest management plan; upgrading inventory; and addressing issues with plantations.
11. Besides gaining certification, what other benefits have you gained from the certification process?
- We will become better managers. Within our county this process helps us understand what we are doing and why. Helps us recognize our shortcomings. Helps identify things that are most important regarding management. The process has caused us to do some things we should have been doing all along.
  - The process has provided a vehicle for identifying things that are getting done and those that aren’t (e.g., training, staffing) and identifying means to correct deficiencies. The process and the database tool provide checks and balances on our work – especially regarding monitoring. The project planning database holds our feet to the fire on committing and following through on key actions.
  - We have streamlined activities, especially administrative ones. We are now doing a better job of documenting activity. We are much better organized. We have better accountability and documentation. We have enhanced our performance, monitoring, and overall resource management.
  - Data and procedures help them be prepared in case of disputes.
  - Will get them back on track with regular forest inventory work.
  - Should help us gain some support from forest products industry and environmental interests.
12. What types of activities might help you: (1) to maintain certification, and, (2) generally improve management? [Some areas where actions might occur: staffing, staff training, planning,

inventory and databases, communication with other forest managers, interaction with public, specific forest management.]

- Need for more clerical interaction between agencies. Clerks play an important role in the day-to-day management process including contacts with loggers.
- Communication between agencies currently is project oriented; sees no overriding need for constant contact.
- Getting the project planning database fully operational.
- Training for staff and logging community.
- Getting inventories into better condition.
- Need for updated management plans.
- More attention to ecological / environmental aspects of management than before.
- Assistance to staff in working with computers (his field staff just received them a month earlier).
- More communication (it was greatly aided by the certification planning process).
- More staffing although he will not use certification as a lever to increase staff.

**Possible activities that Blandin Foundation could undertake to support counties to achieve and maintain certification.**

13. Would you have gone through the certification process if not for the Blandin Foundation supported group effort? Do you think the group process has saved you money versus going it alone?
- Yes, they would have proceeded anyway. Had money set aside but the group process reduced cost.
  - Probably would have proceeded but Foundation really helped. Money was important but support was equally so. The Foundation sponsored a certification workshop attended by several of his County Board members; it helped educate them about the need for and merits of certification.
  - Probably would have done certification at any rate, but Foundation's support was major help. It helped sell the process with his county board (e.g., group effort, financial support, and general moral support). It was a good thing the Foundation did and it is much appreciated.
  - Probably would have proceeded any way if a consultant had come forward to help them. Foundation monetary support was helpful. Having a consultant to run the process was critical. Foundation's offer was a good offer at the right time – icing on the cake.
  - Probably would have done so anyway. But some of the counties needed the Foundation's involvement to get into the process and as a consequence counties like his benefited from these counties joining the process (because broader participation helped sell the process with reluctant County Boards). Foundation's support was much appreciated.
  - We would have gone through some sort of process, but without the Foundation and the consultant we wouldn't have done what did nor be in as good of shape before the first audit. Foundation was key piece to get us into this better position. Appreciated the funding support and the meeting site for group sessions.
14. Recognizing that the Blandin Foundation is making no pre-determined commitments and is unlikely to be able to provide additional direct grant funding to support your certification efforts, are there actions the Foundation could take to reinforce your certification process (including maintenance of certification)?
- Annual symposium on certification. Bring in DNR folks and others to share their insights into certification. Share "how-to" information and experiences.
  - Money isn't really the issue as most departments generate sufficient revenues.

- Indirect support to educate and inform County Boards and others about certification.
  - Marketing of certified products.
  - Social/education aspect (to help sell the concept to the average person on the street).
  - Provide meeting space and support for continued group (of six counties and maybe others) sessions for work on implementation of certification procedures and actions.
  - Sustain the VFVC effort and general support for forestry issues.
  - Timber productivity.
  - Better research into key issues such as what is going on with the forests relative to global warming (impacts on drought, invasive species, changing vegetation mix on given NPC, deer over population, etc.); birch regeneration; natural regeneration.
  - He's preparing to do ECS based management process – huge undertaking, it's important to forest management, important for productivity – all land managers could use assistance regarding this.
15. Are there actions the Foundation could take to support desired forest management practices in Minnesota? [Some areas where actions could be considered: staff training, planning, updating and integrating inventory and databases, enhancing communication between forest management agencies and between practicing foresters, training regarding interaction with public, etc.]
- [Note: responses to questions 12, 14 and 15 tended to blur and the three questions were generally seen as being the same.]
  - General thanks to Foundation for its support to date.
  - Additional training for clerical staff.

Joanne Petrini of Ecologico, Inc. (that firm is currently inactive and she is employed by Gartner Lee, Limited) was retained to run the pre-certification planning process. The following highlights her responses to questions regarding the process.

- Her general assessment of the process was that it was productive and that even if the group doesn't achieve certification the counties will have gained from the process. In particular, the counties learned the value of working together as a group to help devise a common way forward.
- Among the key shortcomings of the process and the upcoming implementation period, Petrini felt that most critical is the counties' limited resources. Clearly, the counties needed support during the planning process and that need will continue as they move forward. This need includes key infrastructure such as computers and computer systems and staff. She noted that the counties manage an extensive natural resource with limited human and technological resources. Further, she said they work within the constraints of the county political and budget systems, which often are short-term in view especially regarding the revenue generation capacity of Land Departments.
- Petrini said she enjoyed this project and would do it again. A key value of the process was the bringing together of the county staffs which made for efficient use of resources and enhanced learning. But, she noted in the future the process could be improved by providing more up front planning so that as they enter the process the participants have a much better understanding of the scope of the effort, what is expected of them, and type of resources they will need.
- She identified three major future actions for the counties as they proceed with certification. First, they must actually use the systems they have defined. Second, they must insure they have the staff to handle implementation. Third, they must continually communicate the goals and values of certification and the associated procedures to their County Boards and the public.

- Petrini believes the value of the group effort in the pre-certification phase strongly suggests a need to continue group efforts in the future. She said that forestry management organizations seem capable of coming together to discuss policy and landscape issues but, especially among the counties, have not done so to conduct group actions that leverage resources. She thinks this is vitally important considering that so many departments have limited resources and reality is pushing them all in the same direction under the same set of constraints. She bemoans the facts there is no framework for this in Minnesota and that county independence and political perspectives often frustrate such cooperation.
- When asked, she suggested that the Foundation could consider efforts to increase awareness about certification among the general public and policy makers.
- Petrini said that without the Foundation's participation the group certification effort would not have proceeded as well as it did. She added that she enjoyed working with the Land Commissioners.
- Looking ahead Petrini stated that the overall process requires a second phase in which the counties are assisted in implementing the various recommendations. One aspect of this is the lack of adequate staff resources in most county land departments to fully execute the needed actions. Another aspect is the project planning database which Petrini's team designed but lacked the resources to bring it to full operation. She said the database is worth completing and that the counties see the value of the tool.

## Conclusions

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A number of conclusions can be drawn from this review of the six-county certification planning project. The following highlights those specifically related to the Blandin Foundation's involvement in the project, the success of the project, and follow through actions to implement aspects of certification.

### **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.
- As noted earlier, some of the “little” things the Foundation did during the project greatly facilitated the effort. These included providing excellent meeting facilities and general support. Relatively minor actions such as these eased the burden on the counties so they could focus their limited resources on the project itself, not its mechanics.

## **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.
- Perhaps the six-county certification project was not widely heralded within the region, but it is still surprising given the keen interest in forest management that so few entities offered encouragement or thanks to the counties for seeking certification. This may change once the initial audit has been completed.

## **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. While the Minnesota County Land Commissioners organization provides a structure for such cooperative undertaking, it is likely that a third party can greatly assist by removing the burden of organization and planning from the shoulders of any one, small staff, land department.
- The previous conclusion underscores the limited human resources available to most Minnesota land departments. For the most part, these departments are dominated by field staff with a minimum of administrative personnel – generally a Land Commissioner, who quite often does field work, and clerical workers who also spend much time dealing with field issues (e.g., tracking logger activity on harvest sites). Special projects, such as seeking certification, seriously stretch the capacity of the departments and, as a consequence, many worthy projects are not undertaken or take longer than desired to complete.

## **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. It is doubtful that any one county will be able to finance the necessary work to get the program fully functional although it is possible that the group may establish a joint project to do so. Getting this program to a full functioning status is critical to fully realizing the benefits of the certification project.
- A secondary but not unimportant value of the project planning database and certification in general is that they provide an objective, third-party lever that Land Commissioners can discretely utilize to undertake certain management actions that they otherwise may not be able to convince county boards to support. County Boards, like corporate shareholders, can be exceptionally short-term oriented and reluctant to divert badly needed timber sale-generated revenues away from county and local government coffers. Although no Land Commissioner expressly stated

they would use certification as the means to secure more staff or undertake more ambitious projects, certain of their responses suggested that the rigor of certification and the project planning database tool is seen as a potential argument supporting such actions.

## Recommendations to Blandin Foundation

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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 regional or state land manager that opts to use it. [See Appendix B for details on this recommendation.]

### 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.
- Associated with the general nature of the “sharing” sessions is a need for specific projects to assist the land departments to implement certification. Topics of likely interest include inventory maintenance (guidance and support not underwriting of the actual work) and clerical training (and sharing of ideas and experiences). The Foundation could consider working with the Association of Land Commissioners to develop and conduct the sessions.

### 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.

## Appendix A. Interview Questions

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The following are the set of questions posed to the Land Commissioners and project consultant.

### Land Commissioners

#### Current status of progress towards certification.

1. Why did you originally pursue certification? That is, what is the value of certification to your county?
2. Does that purpose still hold true?
3. What is the current status of your progress towards certification?
4. Why did you originally opt for a group certification process?
5. [Beltrami and Becker] Why did your county opt out of the group certification process?  
[Carlton, Clearwater, Crow Wing, Koochiching] Do the original benefits of group certification still hold true?
6. Having gone this far through the process, has it been worth it? Knowing what you know now, would you have pursued certification?

**Obstacles to achieving and maintaining certification.**

7. What has been your experience with the certification process to date – pluses and minuses?
8. Have you received feedback or commentary from loggers, forest products industry, environmental interests, and others regarding your certification process? What has been the nature of this commentary?
9. What have been the biggest or most important changes in your management (administrative and resource) activities resulting from the certification process to date?
10. What are the biggest or most important changes you will have to make in the near future as a result of certification? [Some areas for change: staffing, staff training, planning, inventory and databases, communication with other forest managers, interaction with public, specific forest management.]

Will you be able to undertake these changes? If not, why not?

11. Besides gaining certification, what other benefits have you gained from the certification process?
12. What types of activities might help you: (1) to maintain certification, and, (2) generally improve management? [Some areas where actions might occur: staffing, staff training, planning, inventory and databases, communication with other forest managers, interaction with public, specific forest management.]

**Possible activities that Blandin Foundation could undertake to support counties to achieve and maintain certification.**

13. Would you have gone through the certification process if not for the Blandin Foundation supported group effort? Do you think the group process has saved you money versus going it alone?
14. Recognizing that the Blandin Foundation is making no pre-determined commitments and is unlikely to be able to provide additional direct grant funding to support your certification efforts, are there actions the Foundation could take to reinforce your certification process (including maintenance of certification)?
15. Are there actions the Foundation could take to support desired forest management practices in Minnesota? [Some areas where actions could be considered: staff training, planning, updating and integrating inventory and databases, enhancing communication between forest management agencies and between practicing foresters, training regarding interaction with public, etc.]

**Project Consultant**

What is your general assessment of the multi-county certification project in Minnesota?

What do you consider to be particular successes of the project?

And, what would she consider to be shortcomings or failures of the project?

In short, what lessons have you learned from this effort? What would you do differently if there were another similar effort?

**Looking forward toward the process of the counties to attain and maintain certification:**

What are the key actions the counties must be focusing on?

What about ongoing coordination, cooperation, and information sharing between counties (and between all state forest managers)? Are there needs or specific actions there that need attention, especially related to maintaining and, shall we say, enhancing certification?

Are there activities the Foundation should consider undertaking to support the counties (and other forest managers) regarding certification?

## **Appendix B. Project Planning Database**

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The project planning database was cited by the Land Commissioners as perhaps the most critical tool to help them improve management of their forest resources. However, the tool is incomplete and requires both completing and upgrading in order to be fully functional. The Blandin Foundation is recommended to encourage and support this action.

The following provides additional information on the database and its current status:

- The database was created by Ecologico over the course of the certification planning process in response to the perceived need by the counties for such a tool.
- Ecologico basically adopted one of its own existing proprietary software for this purpose. The work was done “on the fly” and the cost of much of Ecologico’s effort was not charged to the certification planning contract. Ecologico admits that the software was not completed and is essentially a Beta version. The cost to finalize and upgrade the software has not been estimated.
- Ecologico owns the software. There is no formal agreement governing use of the software by the counties beyond a simple unwritten agreement to not distribute the software to other users. Once the software is brought up to full operational status, such an agreement must be signed.
- Joanne Petrini, an Ecologico principal, stated that the counties must work together as a team to get the software up to fully operational status. This teamwork is needed in order to insure consistency between the counties in terms of data and applications. It should be noted that this is the preferred situation; there is nothing to prevent the counties from acting separately or in smaller consortiums to acquire and adapt the software to their specific needs.
- One issue is that the counties have different versions of Microsoft’s Access© program, which is the foundation for the project planning software. In order for the software to be fully consistent, all counties need the same version of Access©.
- The counties also need to execute an ongoing service and maintenance contract to keep the database software up to date, trouble shoot problems, and provide training as may be needed.