

North Dakota Forest Action Plan Summary

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Background:

State Forest Action Plans (FAP) are intended to ensure that federal and state resources are being focused on important landscape areas with the greatest opportunity to address shared management priorities and achieve measurable outcomes. A 5 year review is required for each state's FAP. North Dakota's Forest Action Plan was completed in 2010 and the North Dakota Forest Service facilitated the FAP review in 2015 through coordination with stakeholders. Each State FAP must contain the following national priorities identified by congress in the 2008 Farm Bill:

Conserve Working Forest Lands: conserving and managing working forest landscapes for multiple values and uses

Protect Forests from Harm: protect forests from threats, including catastrophic storms, flooding, insect or disease outbreak, and invasive species

Enhance Public Benefits from Trees and Forests: including air and water quality, soil conservation, biological diversity, carbon storage, forest products, forestry-related jobs, production of renewable energy and wildlife

Additionally the North Dakota identified the following state level priorities that align within the national priorities:

Mitigating invasive tree pests

Reducing forest overmaturity and promoting natural regeneration

Increasing species diversity and reducing vulnerability to damaging agents

Strengthening educational outreach

Maintaining historic vegetation type

Preventing and responding to wildland fires

Enhancing wood utilization opportunities

Adapting to climate changes

The FAP Review Approach

The North Dakota Forest Service conducted a formal review of the FAP including coordination with partners and appropriate regional US Forest Service staff. Specifically, the NDFS solicited feedback from partners, stakeholders, and the general public through outreach, distribution of materials and an online questionnaire. The agency produced and distributed a 2-page executive summary to communicate to partners 1) what type of feedback is being sought for the review, and 2) how can input be submitted. The open comment period to submit comments began on June 1, 2015 and closed on August 1, 2015.

Additionally, the NDFS hosted a joint State Stewardship Conservation Committee and Community Forestry Council meeting on June 10, 2015. NDFS used this opportunity to engage these key partners in the FAP review. The agency was also able to 'check in' with regional USFS staff that was present at the meeting.

An on-line questionnaire was established to serve as the primary mechanisms to allow partners and stakeholders to provide input. The online questionnaire dovetailed with the suggestions provided in the USFS Guidelines. Specifically respondents were asked to: review priority issues, identify implementation

challenges, determine new data needs, provide a framework for the next 5 years and, identify existing programs that align with the FAP.

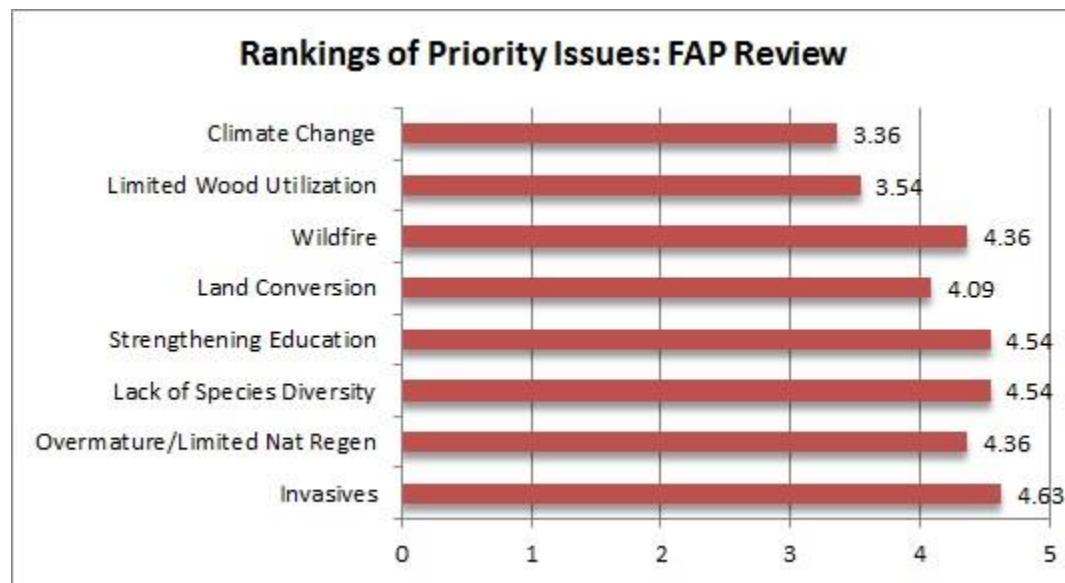
Results of the review

The open comment period opened on June 1, 2015 and closed on August 1, 2015. Over two dozen citizens, municipal staff, state agency representatives, and federal agency representatives provided feedback during this period.

Generally the comments from the online questionnaire were positive and reinforced the original priorities established in the 2010 plan.

The questionnaire asked respondents to rate the existing North Dakota priorities on a scale of 0 (not important) to 5 (very important). Forest health / invasive species ranked highest by respondents.

Enhancing species diversity and strengthening educational outreach were additional high priorities. All 8 of North Dakota's identified priorities were rated above 3 suggesting that all issues remain at least moderately important to stakeholders.



Emerging Priorities and Implementation Focus for the Next 5 Years

Feedback from stakeholders revealed emerging priorities that have materialized since the launch of the forest action plan in 2010. These priorities will be integrated into the Forest Action Plan update scheduled for 2020. These emerging issues align with national priorities and state priorities and will serve as an implementation focus for the next 5 years. The following summaries highlight these issues.

Restoration of riparian forests – Nearly one fifth of North Dakota's forests occur within 200 meters of a stream or lake. The majority of these forests are comprised of ash, elm, and cottonwood. The health and sustainability of these plant communities have important implications for water quality, flood control, wildlife habitat, and recreation opportunities.

Loss of windbreaks - New farming technology, grain markets, and larger equipment has prompted many farmers to remove windbreaks. The loss of these resources has serious consequences for soil conservation and wildlife habitat.

Education of decision makers regarding the importance of green infrastructure – Educating decision makers about the importance of trees, the ecological and social services they provide, and the benefits to communities remains an important issue to ensure policies incorporate the best available science.

Oil Field Reclamation / ‘Boom town’ urban forestry needs – Population growth in western North Dakota associated with oil and gas extraction has created community forestry needs for western North Dakota. Additionally North Dakota has experienced some direct loss of forests due to oil and gas impacts (roads, well pads, pipelines etc...).

Drought tolerant species for western North Dakota - Western North Dakota receives less moisture than the eastern half of the state. The evaluation of hardy drought tolerant trees species is still a priority for western North Dakota.

Existing Programs that Align

Outdoor Heritage Fund - North Dakota's Outdoor Heritage Fund was established in 2013 as a multi-million dollar program to provide grants to state agencies, tribal governments, political subdivisions, and nonprofit organizations, with higher priority given to projects that enhance conservation practices in this state by: Providing access to private and public lands for sportsmen, including projects that create fish and wildlife habitat and provide access for sportsmen; Improving, maintaining and restoring water quality, soil conditions, plant diversity, animal systems, and by supporting other practices of stewardship to enhance farming and ranching; Developing, enhancing, conserving and restoring wildlife and fish habitat on private and public lands; and Conserving natural areas and creating other areas for recreation through the establishment and development of parks and other recreation areas. The Outdoor heritage Fund will receive up to \$40 million per biennium from oil and gas production tax revenue.

Reforest the red (River Keepers) – A Fargo Moorhead based project aimed at replanting trees and shrubs along the Red River of the North. The project is organized by River Keepers; a non-profit organization established in 1990 to protect and preserve the integrity and natural environment of the Red River of the North in the Fargo, ND - Moorhead, MN area.

EPA 319 – A subsection of the Clean Water Act for the implementation of nonpoint source management programs. Riparian projects funded under this grant generally focus on bioengineering practices (slope stabilization, installation of riprap, revegetation)

State Wildlife Action Plan – a document facilitated and developed by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department representing a strategy to guide the process of preserving the state’s fish and wildlife resources for the foreseeable future. North Dakota’s SWAP is intended to identify species of greatest conservation need, provide fundamental background information, strategic guidance, and most importantly, a framework for developing and coordinated conservation actions involving partners to safeguard all fish and wildlife resources.

New Data Needs

Risk Assessments – Data driven assessments that highlight emerging issues include forest health risk maps, overmature forests, and areas prone to wildfire. These assessments would provide useful planning data for natural resource professionals, municipalities, and decision makers.

Riparian forest restoration – Riparian forest restoration remains a high priority for the states. Data on the health and condition of these forests in addition to information on where restoration efforts are most needed would prove useful.

Economic data on the value of windbreaks – Agricultural field windbreaks are being removed at an alarming rate. These resources provide benefits in the form of soil erosion prevention and improved crop yields. A comprehensive assessment of the economic benefits of these resources would prove useful in educating producers of their value.

Oil and Gas development – Western North Dakota has experienced accelerated population growth and simultaneous pressures on natural resources. Data on these inter-related trends would be of value in determining where resources for mitigation and community forestry would be best invested.

Implementation Challenges

Anecdotal feedback of stakeholders suggests that numerous factors may directly or indirectly affect the implementation of the Forest Action Plan. Such factors include but are not limited to: interagency stakeholder coordination, data gaps which limit prioritization of data driven approaches, uncertainty of funding sources and leveraging of nonfederal sources.

Summary

The North Dakota Forest Service facilitated the 5 year Forest Action Plan update in 2015. The process involved coordination with key stakeholders, information sharing, and solicitation of input. The results of the review suggest that the national priorities and state level priorities remain relevant to partners, stakeholders, and the general public. New priorities identified include: riparian forestry, the loss of windbreaks, oil and gas mitigation, education of decision makers, and drought tolerant species.

Collaboration areas identified include: the outdoor heritage fund, strengthening EPA 319 partnerships, the Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy, and Reforest the Red.

This feedback will be addressed and included in the 10 year forest action plan updated scheduled for 2020. The North Dakota Forest Service would like to thank our partners, stakeholders, and citizens for taking time to offer insight as part of the review process.