



## MARATHON COUNTY FORESTRY/RECREATION COMMITTEE AGENDA

**Date and Time of Meeting:** Tuesday, January 5, 2021 at 1:30pm

**Meeting Location:** Conference Room #5, 212 River Drive, Wausau WI 54403

MEMBERS: Arnold Schlei (Chairman), Rick Seefeldt (Vice-Chairman), Tom Rosenberg

***Marathon County Mission Statement:*** *Marathon County Government serves people by leading, coordinating, and providing county, regional, and statewide initiatives. It directly or in cooperation with other public and private partners provides services and creates opportunities that make Marathon County and the surrounding area a preferred place to live, work, visit, and do business.*

***Parks, Recreation and Forestry Department Mission Statement:*** *Adaptively manage our park and forest lands for natural resource sustainability while providing healthy recreational opportunities and unique experiences making Marathon County the preferred place to live, work, and play.*

The meeting site identified above will be open to the public. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health directives, Marathon County encourages Committee members and the public to attend this meeting remotely. To this end, instead of attendance in person, Committee members and the public may attend this meeting by telephone conference. If Committee members or members of the public cannot attend remotely, Marathon County requests that appropriate safety measures, including adequate social distancing, be utilized by all in-person attendees.

Persons wishing to attend the meeting by phone may call into the telephone conference beginning five (5) minutes prior to the start time indicated above using the following number:

Phone Number: 1-408-418-9388

Access Code: 146 053 9395

If Required, the Password is 1234

Please Note: If you are prompted to provide an "Attendee Identification Number" enter the # sign. No other number is required to participate in the telephone conference.

**When you enter the telephone conference, PLEASE PUT YOUR PHONE ON MUTE!**

### **Agenda Items:**

- 1. Call to Order**
- 2. Public Comment – Not to Exceed 15 Minutes – Any Person Who Wishes to Address the Committee Must Provide, Name, Address and the Topic to the Chair of the Committee No Later than Five Minutes Before the Start of the Meeting.**
- 3. Approval of the Minutes of the Tuesday, December 1, 2020 Committee Meeting**
- 4. Operational Functions Required by Statute, Ordinance or Resolution:**
  - A. Discussion and Possible Action by Committee
    1. Consider Recommendation to Allow Class 1 and 3 Pedal Assist Electric Mountain Bikes (eMTB) on County Forest Lands
  - B. Discussion and Possible Action by Committee to Forward to the Environmental Resource Committee for its Consideration
    1. Proposed Amendments to Chapter 16 of the Marathon County Code of Ordinances
- 5. Policy Issues for Discussion and Committee Determination for Consideration by Environmental Resources Committee – None**
- 6. Educational Presentations/Outcome Monitoring Reports**
  - A. Wisconsin County Forests Association Issue Papers for the 2021-2023 State Budget
  - B. Cash Farm Lease Town of Easton
  - C. Winter Recreational – Program Update
  - D. Wisconsin Outdoor News Article on County Forests

7. **Next Meeting Date, Time, Location: Tuesday, February 2, 2021 at 1:30pm at 212 River Dr., Wausau, WI 54403, Room 5 or via Webex**  
A. Announcements/Requests/Correspondence  
B. Future Agenda Items: 2020 County Forest Division Annual Report, Forestry Division Expense/Revenue Report

8. **Adjournment**

**SIGNED /s/ Thomas Lovlien  
PRESIDING OFFICER OR DESIGNEE**

ANY PERSON PLANNING TO ATTEND THIS MEETING WHO NEEDS SOME TYPE OF SPECIAL ACCOMMODATION IN ORDER TO PARTICIPATE SHOULD CALL THE COUNTY CLERK'S OFFICE AT 261-1500 OR E-MAIL [INFOMARATHON@MAIL.CO.MARATHON.WI.US](mailto:INFOMARATHON@MAIL.CO.MARATHON.WI.US) ONE BUSINESS DAY BEFORE THE MEETING.

FAXED TO: Daily Herald and other News Media Groups  
FAXED BY: Jodi Luebbe  
FAX DATE/TIME: December 29, 2020 2:00 p.m.

NOTICE POSTED AT COURTHOUSE:  
By: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Time: \_\_\_\_\_ a.m/p.m.

Members present: Tom Rosenberg, Arnie Schlei(c)-(via webex), Rick Seefeldt-(via webex)  
Also present: Tom Lovlien-Forest Administrator, Jamie Polley-Director, Chad Keranen-DNR Liaison-(via phone),  
Brandon Stefanski-DNR Wildlife Biologist-(via phone)

1. Call Meeting to Order – The meeting was called to order by Chairman Schlei at 1:30pm, Rm. 5, 212 River Dr., Wausau. Official notice and the agenda for the meeting was posted publicly in accordance with State statutes.

2. Public Comment – none brought forward

3. Approve Minutes – **Motion** / second by Schlei / Rosenberg to approve the minutes from the November 2, 2020 regular Forestry/Recreation Committee meeting. Motion **carried** by voice vote, vote reflected as 3-0.

4. Operational Functions Required by Statute, Ordinance or Resolution

A. Discussion and Possible Action by Committee

1. 2021 Forestry/Recreation Committee Tentative Meeting Schedule – Committee agreed to keep the meetings on the same schedule that the Environmental Resource Committee follows which is the Tuesday before the first Thursday of every month. This meeting will continue to be held at 1:30pm.

2. Consider the Renewal of Private Road Access Permits 2021-2025 – Lovlien gave history about the road access permits. The County has offered them for many years and they are for private landowners that have no legal access through their own means. The fee for existing permits is \$150 for five years and for new permits is \$250. Lovlien discussed some of the permit requirements. He does not have any issues renewing the four permits that are expiring. Questions were answered. **Motion** / second by Seefeldt / Rosenberg to renew the four road access permits from 2021-2025. Motion **carried** by voice vote, vote reflected as 3-0.

B. Discussion and Possible Action by Committee to Forward to the Environmental Resource Committee for its Consideration

1. Review and Consider Approving the 2021 Wildlife Work Plan – Brandon Stefanski, DNR Wildlife Biologist – The work plan had been previously distributed. Stefanski reported on accomplishments from 2020. He discussed 2021 plans including flowage maintenance, dike maintenance, cattail management at the Bern flowage, wild rice seeding, alder and invasive species management, forest opening maintenance and the Nickel-An-Acre budget. Questions were answered.

2. Review and Consider Approving the 2021 County Forest Work Plan – Resolution to Approve – Lovlien reviewed the work plan. He gave highlights on upcoming work including timber management, road and trail maintenance, conservation aids projects, administration and GIS work and professional development. **Motion** / second by Schlei / Rosenberg to approve the 2021 County Forest Work Plan and forward the Resolution and work plan to the Environmental Resource Committee for their consideration. Motion **carried** by voice vote, vote reflected as 3-0.

3. Resolution: Application for County Forest Acreage Payment – Lovlien explained that this interest free loan is based upon the number of County forest acres at 50 cents for the purchase, development, preservation and maintenance of county forest lands. In the last several years, the loan has mainly been used to match the Knowles-Stewardship grants to purchase land. The loan is paid back through a 20% severance tax on timber. **Motion** / second by Seefeldt / Rosenberg to approve the application for County Forest Acreage Share Loan Payment Resolution and forward it to the Environmental Resource Committee. Motion **carried** by voice vote, vote reflected as 3-0.

5. Policy Issues for Discussion and Committee Determination for Consideration by Environmental Resources Committee – None

6. Educational Presentations/Outcome Monitoring Reports

A. Press Release – Wisconsin County Forest Program Exceeds Certification Standards – The Wisconsin County Forest Associations press release explains what the certification process is. Lovlien said twenty-seven counties are certified and Marathon County has been certified for seventeen years. The counties are exceeding certification standards. He pointed out that counties have 2.4 million acres of public forest land in Wisconsin and a lot of money comes off timber sale revenues, some of which is shared with the townships to reduce their tax burdens. Also, Wisconsin’s County Forests provide more than 9000 miles of snowmobile trails, 1800 miles of ATV/UTV trails, 1800 non-motorized trails (biking/hiking/cross-country skiing, snowshoe and horseback) and 330 campsites along with many hunting, fishing and nature viewing opportunities. Polley mentioned that according to a Google Community Mobility Report, usage of parks in Marathon County was up 136% in July and August of this year compared to an average year. Lovlien believed that because of COVID a lot of people are using and appreciating the forests and parks and staff looks forward to maintaining these resources into the future for the public to use.

B. McMillan Marsh Lease Amendment – Lovlien gave history that most County forest lands originated from tax delinquent property. There was an initial 22,000 acres entered in 1967 that wasn’t sold off. The State manages the McMillan-Mead Wildlife Area in the southwestern part of the County and Marathon County owns about 1,642 acres of mainly lowland marsh that abuts the State’s property. In 1966, the County leased the 1,642 acres to the State as part of their McMillan–Mead Wildlife Area. The County has a one-hundred year lease with the State which was revised in 1980 to increase payment from thirty cents to ninety cents per acre. It was amended in 1997 because the County acquired more land next to the wildlife area that was included in the lease. Lovlien discovered an oversight in that amendment left out about 240 acres so the lease needed to be amended to include that acreage. Lovlien also mentioned that he looked at other terms of the lease and ninety cents an acre is still the going rate for similar leases so there is no opportunity to increase the lease payment at this time. Lovlien wanted to update Committee on why the County is leasing land to the State and for what purposes.

C. Updated Fall 2020 Bid Summary – Keranen reported that he updated the bid summary after the last sale was sold. He said the values didn’t change too much. Overall they are down because of a combination of the Verso mill closure, frozen ground only sales, and markets. He felt the County was lucky to sell all of its sales and is hopeful things turn around with the spring sales.

7. Next Meeting Date, Time, Location: January 5, 2021, 1:30pm, Rm. 5, 212 River Dr., Wausau WI 54403

A. Announcements/Requests/Correspondence – none brought forward

B. Future Agenda Items: Nine Mile County Forest Event and Use Regulations, County Forest Ordinance Amendments, Cash Farm Lease Town of Easton

8. Adjourn – Motion / second by Seefeldt / Rosenberg to adjourn the meeting at 2:15pm. Motion **carried** by voice vote, vote reflected as 3-0.



## WISCONSIN'S E-BIKE LAW FOR THE ROAD

- » E-bikes are regulated like bicycles. The same rules of the road apply to both e-bikes and human-powered bicycles.
- » E-bikes are not subject to the registration, licensing or insurance requirements that apply to motor vehicles.
- » Wisconsin designates three classes of e-bikes:
  - Class 1: Bicycle equipped with a motor that provides assistance only when the rider is pedaling, and that ceases to provide assistance when the e-bike reaches 20 mph.
  - Class 2: Bicycle equipped with a throttle-actuated motor, that ceases to provide assistance when the e-bike reaches 20 mph.

- Class 3 : Bicycle equipped with a motor that provides assistance only when the rider is pedaling, and that ceases to provide assistance when the e-bike reaches 28 mph.
- » Persons under 16 years of age may not operate a Class 3 e-bike.
- » Local governments have the authority to restrict the use of e-bikes under motor power on bike paths. When in doubt, check with your town, city, or county for local rules and regulations.

\* The following Wisconsin laws are referenced: Wis. Stat. § 340.01; § 346.806

## eMTB GUIDELINES

- » On federal, state, county and local trails, e-mountain bike (eMTB) access varies significantly.
- » Generally, any natural surface trail that is designated as open to both motorized and non-motorized uses is also open to eMTBs.
- » eMTBs may not be allowed on trails managed for non-motorized activities.
- » Do not ride your eMTB in areas where the local rules are unclear. Ride legally and only on authorized trails to show that mountain bikers are responsible trail users.
- » When in doubt, ask your local land manager about access to specific trails. Local land rules change frequently.

## CHECK OUT

- » A map of great eMTB rides at [peopleforbikes.org/emtb](http://peopleforbikes.org/emtb)
- » eMTB "Adventures" at [peopleforbikes.org/e-bikes](http://peopleforbikes.org/e-bikes)

## WISCONSIN'S E-BIKE LAW FOR TRAILS

- » LOCAL: Consult your local land management agency.
- » STATE: The Wisconsin Bureau of Parks and Recreation states that e-bikes are allowed on touring trails but not mountain bike trails. E-bikes can go anywhere a bike is allowed if the motor is not turned on. Contact the bureau for the most up to date information.
- » FEDERAL: The majority of public lands managed for recreation in Wisconsin are under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service, where eMTBs are considered motorized and have access to motorized trails. Contact the US Forest Service Eastern Regional Office for more information.

## GREAT eMTB RIDES IN WISCONSIN

- » **Cheese Country Trail**  
Monroe | 47 miles
- » **Pecatonica Trail**  
Belmont | 10 miles

## With an e-bike, bicyclists can ride more often, farther, and for more trips.

Electric bicycles are designed to be as safe as traditional bicycles, do not compromise consumer safety, and benefit bicyclists who may be discouraged from riding a traditional bicycle due to limited physical fitness, age, disability or convenience.

In many states, e-bikes are regulated under antiquated laws primarily aimed at combustion engine vehicles such as mopeds or scooters. PeopleForBikes and the Bicycle Product Suppliers Association are clarifying state laws governing the use of e-bikes in the U.S. Every state's law is different, but the objective is to ensure that low-speed e-bikes are regulated similarly to traditional, human-powered bicycles.



## Learn more at [PeopleForBikes.org/e-bikes](http://PeopleForBikes.org/e-bikes)

- » Blogs and webinars
- » E-bike laws around the country
- » E-bike statistics and research
- » Buying guide
- » Retailer materials
- » eMTB management resources



1. Sustainable timber management (timber harvests) will continue following the approved County Forest Comprehensive Land Use Plan and the County Forest Law(28.11 Wis. Stats). Some trails may be periodically closed to allow harvesting due to the following:
  - It has become increasingly difficult to manage the timber resource with insect and disease restrictions that prohibit harvesting during specific time periods.
  - Cross country skiing has reduced harvesting in the winter within the core ski trail area.
  - In upland areas of Nine Mile harvesting may only occur between August 10 and November 15 in certain timber stands due to threatened and endangered species guidance. The Department of Natural Resources continues to draft new species guidance each year making timber harvesting from May 1-August 31 more challenging.
  - There are few areas that harvests may occur in year round.
  - Attempts will be made to minimize conflicts on recreational trail activities.
2. Dispersed recreation such as hunting, trapping, fishing, bird watching, hiking, backpacking and berry picking will continue to occur on all County Forest Lands according to the County Forest Law and Department of Natural Resources seasons and regulations.
3. Mountain biking and horseback riding season at Nine Mile County Forest begins May 1 to May 15, depending on trail conditions, to October 15 each year. If trail conditions allow opening during the first three weeks of May, mountain biking and horseback riding will be allowed after 12:00pm daily to accommodate spring turkey hunters.
4. County ordinance prohibits the use of bicycles or riding horses on any designated trail seasonally closed.
5. Snow biking is prohibited on cross country ski or snowshoe trails due to user conflicts and the biking season being closed. Exception: One winter triathlon event is approved utilizing fat tire bikes. (Approved by Forestry/Recreation Committee May 2019.)
6. Class 1 and 3 pedal assist electric mountain bikes (eMTB) are allowed on County Forest lands. Class 2 throttle actuated E-bikes fall under the definition of a self-propelled motor bicycle and are prohibited by ordinance.
7. Cross country skiing, snowshoeing and snowmobiling are allowed on designated trails when there is sufficient snow cover as determined by the Parks, Recreation and Forestry Department.
8. Cross country skiing and snowshoeing are allowed at any time off the designated trails according to County Forest Law.

9. Up to four high school cross country running races may be allowed at Nine Mile on or before October 15 each year. (Required Conference Cross Country Running Races are approved the 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday in October, if two Conference events are requested for the same Saturday, one will be held in the AM and one will be held in the PM (Approved by Forestry/Recreation Committee January 2020.)
10. Organizers may apply to hold a special event by completing a Facility Use Agreement form available at the Park office. All events or trail based activities will be considered if the Parks, Recreation and Forestry Department receives an application no more than one year prior(365 days) to the year of the event and will receive priority. Any applications received less than six months prior to the event will be considered but may be rejected. If some events or trail based activities are not approved, Parks, Recreation and Forestry staff will assist in finding a different venue appropriate to be held if possible.

Applications will be evaluated using the criteria below:

- Resource Protection
- Safety
- Potential for User Conflicts
- Number of Events Already Scheduled (cap on events)
- Benefits to the Community
- Revenue Generation
- Date of Requested Event
- Community Support
- Evaluation of Event Plan
- Necessity to close down portions of the facility to the public
- Previously held Events

A maximum of six(6) weekend trail based special events can be held from May through October 15<sup>th</sup>. And of those six(6), only two(2) will be allowed between September 1<sup>st</sup> and October 15<sup>th</sup> to accommodate fall hunting seasons. Exception: An Ironbull bike gravel race is approved located on the Snowmobile trail only may occur the Saturday following October 15 each year. (Approved by Forestry/Recreation Committee May 2019.)

11. Charging fees for vehicle parking or admission fees for spectators to any events is prohibited at all County Forest Units under any circumstances.
12. The Park Commission has jurisdiction over the event or program if there is a conflict of use or multiple applications for events on the same date.
13. The Forestry/Recreation Committee has jurisdiction over all land use on the County forest. Any future changes or additions to these regulations will be presented to the Forest Citizen's Advisory Subcommittee for a recommendation to the Forestry/Recreation Committee. The decision of the Forestry/Recreation Committee will be final.

pkdata/tom/policies/ninemileregsDec2020

**Proposed amendments to the Marathon County Code of Ordinances:  
Chapter 16, County Forests.**

~~Strikeout text is deleted.~~

Shaded text is added.

16.06(3) Tree stands, trail cameras and ground blinds.

(b) *Trail Cameras.* No person shall place or use any camera or other device commonly referred to as a trail camera on lands owned or under the control of the County that causes permanent or temporary damage to natural vegetation or other County property. The placement and use of trail cameras are permitted for hunting and wildlife scouting purposes, and are prohibited in designated areas of the County forest where such activity would interfere with other recreational activities and shall include parking areas and buildings. Trail cameras may be left in the woods provided they ~~have~~ bear the name, address, and phone number in the English language of the owner permanently affixed in a manner that is clearly visible and kept legible at all times without moving the camera. Trail cameras without such identifying information shall be subject to immediate removal by County officials. Trail cameras may be chained or locked to natural vegetation and must be removed from County forest lands as stipulated for tree stands in paragraph (a).

16.08 General Offenses.

(9) *Vehicular Traffic.*

(h) No person shall operate a motor vehicle for recreational use within Burma County Forest from October 1 through November 20 30.

(j) No other motorized vehicles other than an ATV or UTV shall be operated on a designated ATV/UTV trail on park property or County trail with the exception of authorized personnel in the performance of their duties.

(18) *Hiking, walking or running on ski trails.* No person shall hike, walk or run on cross-country ski trails during that period of the year when such trails are open for cross-country skiing in Nine Mile County Forest, except while hunting in accordance with applicable State statutes and applicable provisions of the Wisconsin Administrative Code setting forth regulations of the Department of Natural Resources.

16.09 Legal Action

(6) *Authority to issue a citation.* Citations for violations of this chapter may be issued by any law enforcement officer or by the Director and those administrative, supervisory or managerial Department personnel delegated by the Director and listed below:

Assistant Director - Operations;

Assistant Director - Community Services;



Forest Administrator;

County Forester;

~~Operations Superintendent — Customer Service;~~

~~Operations Superintendent — Maintenance and Development;~~

Facility Managers;

~~Chief Ranger/Motorized Recreation Administrator~~ **Coordinator**.



## **FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR WISCONSIN COUNTY FORESTRY PROGRAMS**

Sustainable forests, outdoor recreation and public land management are vitally important to our state's economic health. The 30 Wisconsin counties with lands enrolled under Wisconsin's County Forest Law (§ 28.10 & 28.11) are collectively the largest public land owner in the state. These counties are a major contributor to public land management and rural economic development. Citizens of Wisconsin value county forests because they provide a reliable source of raw materials for the forest products industry, as well as a tremendous amount of recreation opportunities on more than 2.4 million acres of land.

County forest lands are managed by individual counties for the benefit of all citizens and visitors of Wisconsin. Together, in fiscal year 2020, they generated over 753,000 cord equivalents of timber, valued at \$34,907,659, helping to fuel the state's \$24 billion forest products industry. In addition, the abundant recreational opportunities provided by our programs are an important part of the state's vibrant outdoor tourism industry. Wisconsin county forests are being utilized now more than ever as people seek relief and comfort outdoors during the time of a global pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 isolation has made it clear how valuable county forests and recreational areas are to the people of Wisconsin.

Forest product production is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest industry in Wisconsin, supporting more than 64,000 jobs. When Verso, one of the biggest mills in the state, announced they would be permanently idling their Duluth and Wisconsin Rapids mills due to negative market impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, it sent shockwaves through the industry and communities supported by the company. The two Verso mills consumed roughly 25% of the total raw material harvested in Wisconsin, much of which comes off of county forest land. Beyond the economic impact, losing this market also puts sustainable forest management, including the viability of our healthy forests, in jeopardy.

Wisconsin county forests bring revenue into county coffers to not only fund forestry programs, but to also supplement county wide budgets. Other county departments, services and tax levies could be significantly impacted if revenues from harvested timber fall considerably.

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In addition to economic setbacks, the citizens of Wisconsin will likely see additional negative environmental and socio-economic impacts as well. Active sustainable forest management provide healthy forest conditions, robust wildlife habitat, clean water resources and offer numerous outdoor recreation amenities, primarily from timber sale revenues.

**CURRENT STATUS:** Collectively, both Verso mills consumed roughly 20% of the Counties' annual harvested raw material, valued at close to \$4 million. It remains to be seen if a buyer will be found for either mill. In addition, many local business owners, especially logging companies and contractors are suffering because of this situation. A decline of timber revenue into the counties will likely mean fewer permanent or seasonal employees hired, the reduction of recreation amenities offered, less forest management activities performed, and certainly less funds contributed to county coffers to be used for other programs and departments.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The Wisconsin County Forests Association and the Wisconsin Counties Association together are requesting a onetime financial relief package in the amount of \$3 million. We are asking that this revenue be distributed to those affected counties to reduce the negative impacts they will experience in the short term due to the closure of the Verso mills.

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## **LEGISLATIVE AND BUDGET SUPPORT FOR WISCONSIN FORESTRY PROGRAMS**

Wisconsin counties hold significant acreage of lands enrolled under Wisconsin's County Forest Law (State Statutes 28.10 & 28.11). Citizens of Wisconsin value these County Forests because they provide reliable raw materials for the forest products industry, as well as public access and recreation opportunities on more than 2.4 million acres of forested lands. These county forests are a large part of what makes northern Wisconsin unique and collectively make up the largest public forested land holdings in the State.

Sustainable forestry and public land management are critically important to our state's economic health. County Forest lands are managed by individual counties for the benefit of all citizens of Wisconsin. County forests produced over 753,000 cord equivalents of wood products, valued at \$34,907,659 during fiscal year 2020, helping to fuel the \$24 billion forest products industry in Wisconsin. In addition, the abundant recreational opportunities provided by our programs are an important part of the State's vital tourism industry.

Wisconsin's Forestry Mill Tax was established in 1937 for the purpose of acquiring, preserving and developing the forests of the state. This account has supported forest management operations, including partial support for county forest programs, since its inception. The 2017 State Budget eliminated this funding source, forcing the DNR, specifically the Division of Forestry, to be funded from General Purpose Revenue funds.

In addition to sustainable funding, it is vital for the DNR, Division of Forestry to maintain their core budget. Through their funding, several entities receive critical assistance throughout the year. Specifically, for the county programs, the DNR supports staff funding and positions, such as time standard hours and administrator grants, which allow the counties to accomplish their annual goals and priorities.

WCFA continues to be concerned about the loss of a dedicated funding source for Wisconsin's productive forestry programs and respectfully requests the Legislature provide and maintain long term adequate financial support at the level of the Forestry Mill Tax, for all forestry programs in Wisconsin, including the County Forest program.

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**CURRENT STATUS:** The 2017 State Budget eliminated this funding source, forcing the DNR, specifically the Division of Forestry, to be funded from General Purpose Revenue funds.

**RECOMMENDATION:** WCA and WCFA continue to be concerned about the loss of a dedicated funding source for Wisconsin's productive forestry programs and respectfully requests the Legislature provide and maintain long term adequate financial support at the level of the Forestry Mill Tax, for all forestry programs in Wisconsin, including the County Forest program.

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## **KNOWLES-NELSON STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM REAUTHORIZATION**

Authorized in FY 2011, the County Forest Subprogram has been one of the most cost effective and efficient uses of Knowles-Nelson Stewardship funds. It is one of the few uses of the Stewardship funds which actually produces revenue and a positive rate of return on its investment, most of which goes back into local coffers to be invested elsewhere.

Wisconsin counties hold and manage significant acres enrolled under Wisconsin's County Forest Law (State Statutes §28.10 & §28.11). Citizens and visitors of Wisconsin value these County Forests because not only do they provide reliable raw materials for the State's \$24 billion forest products industry, they also ensure public access and recreation amenities on more than 2.4 million acres of forested lands in 30 Wisconsin counties. These county forests are a large part of what makes Wisconsin unique and collectively they make up the largest public forested land holdings in the State.

The State's investment in the County Forest Subprogram currently leverages 50% local match, and to date, this subprogram has resulted in the acquisition and enrollment of 26,942 acres of additional public lands, in 15 county forests, into §28.11, at a total cost of \$41.6 million, \$20.8 million being Stewardship funding. Besides being open for public recreational use into perpetuity and providing numerous environmental and socio-economic benefits, these lands have already generated over \$1.6 million in revenue to county governments from the sale of timber, reducing local tax burdens. These timber sales are estimated to have produced another \$2.85 million of economic benefits as additional jobs and businesses utilize these forest products.

County Forest land acquisitions are proven to be of great value for Wisconsin, both for citizens and visitors. According to the USDA-National Agricultural Statistics Survey, the average price per acre for forest land transactions in Wisconsin in 2018 was \$2,349/acre. The average price per acre for County Forest land acquisitions under the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program is approximately \$1,547/acre, with \$773/acre coming from the Stewardship Program, a 300% decrease from open market prices.

Stewardship funds have been critical to the recent growth of Wisconsin's County Forests, and many counties plan on utilizing the program in the next decade. It is doubtful many of the public land acquisitions would have taken place without the availability of these funds, and many counties would not have a land acquisition program without it. County funding is limited and often not readily available when willing sellers come forth. Lands to be purchased under the County Forest Subprogram are prioritized under a ranking system developed between the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and

Wisconsin County Forests Association. This ranking system only moves forward potential acquisitions which are sound, high quality investments, and that often provide many environmental and economic benefits to the counties and the general public. Lands to be purchased must be within established County Forest boundaries, often reducing costs and increasing efficiencies of future management activities in the area.

In addition, Wisconsin's County Forests are critical to the state's outdoor recreation opportunities providing 9,130 miles of managed snowmobile trails, 1,730 miles of ATV trails, 504 miles of designated hiking trails, 460 miles of ski trails, 396 miles of bike trails, 3,340 campsites, 280 boat landings, and many more. To keep pace with ever-expanding demand, investment in the development, restoration, and modernization of facilities is essential.

Developments such as parking lots, trailheads, restrooms, and other amenities are highly-valued by residents and tourists, but are currently not eligible uses of County Forest Subprogram allocations or carry-forward balances. Investments in nature-based recreational development on county land in counties with land enrolled under Wisconsin's Forest Law will further increase the State's return on investment in the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.

Wisconsin County Forests Association supports the reauthorization of the County Forest Subprogram of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program and maintaining the \$5 million annually set aside under 2015 Act 55 to provide land acquisition grants to counties. We also request statutory language be amended to allow nature-based recreational development grants under the County Forest Subprogram of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund at the 50% match level.

**CURRENT STATUS:** The State's investment in the County Forest Subprogram currently leverages 50% local match, and to date, this subprogram has resulted in the acquisition and enrollment of 26,942 acres of additional public lands, in 15 county forests, into §28.11, at a total cost of \$41.6 million, \$20.8 million being Stewardship funding.

**RECOMMENDATION:** WCA and WCFA request that the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship County Forest Subprogram be reauthorized and funded at FY2019-2020 levels, and be amended to allow nature-based recreational development grants under the County Forest Subprogram.

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## INCREASED ACREAGE SHARE PAYMENTS

Wisconsin counties hold significant acreage of lands enrolled under Wisconsin's County Forest Law (State Statutes §28.10 & 28.11). Citizens of Wisconsin value these County Forests because they provide reliable raw materials for the forest products industry as well as public access and recreation programs on more than 2.4 million acres of forested lands. These county forests are a large part of what makes northern Wisconsin unique and collectively make up the largest public forested land holdings in the State.

Currently, the Department of Natural Resources makes Acreage Share/PILT payments to towns for state forest, other state lands and county forests. Payment for county forest lands is currently at a rate of \$0.30/acre for every acre of land enrolled under Wisconsin's County Forest Law, a rate set back in the 1980's. In addition, counties are statutorily required to return 10% of gross timber revenue (an overall system average of \$1.25/acre) to towns containing county forest lands. Individual county board may elect to go beyond the 10% that is required, and some do.

The Department of Natural Resources makes payments to towns containing state forest lands at a rate of \$.88/acre for lands acquired prior to 1969; \$1.87/acre for lands acquired prior to 1992; and \$2.41/acre for lands acquired after 1992. Beginning in 2001, state lands purchased with Knowles-Nelson Stewardship funds receive PILT payments at the rate equivalent to taxes paid on the parcel prior to purchase by the state. Furthermore, there is no requirement to return any percentage of State Forest timber sale revenue to towns.

**CURRENT STATUS:** Under the current Acreage Share Payment/PILT system, towns are paid at a much higher rate for state forest lands than county forest lands. In general, the public and the towns do not make a distinction between the uses, benefits, and economic impacts of a state forest versus a county forest, and it would be appropriate to compensate the towns on a more equal basis for county forest lands. In light of changes to the shared revenue system, it is important to ensure public lands, including county forests, do not become an economic burden to local governments.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Increase the County Forest Acreage Share Payment to \$0.60/acre. An increase is long overdue and has not kept up with inflation. Coupled with the severance share payment from the counties, this would make the relationship between state PILT payments and County Forest Acreage Share Payments more equitable.

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# County forests offer

## 2.4 million acres of county forest land larger than state's national forests

By Dan Hansen  
Contributing Writer

Merrill, Wis. — In the early 1800s, forests covered 22 to 30 million acres of the state. Wisconsin today has 17 million acres of healthy forest ecosystems that provide recreation, scenery, and habitat, while also sustaining Wisconsin's \$24.3 billion forest-products sector.

Wisconsin forests provide more than 63,000 jobs for Wisconsin residents with a payroll of \$4.2 billion. Forestry is the No. 1 employer in seven counties; every forestry job supports 1.7 additional jobs in the state.

While the majority of forest land in Wisconsin is owned by nearly 400,000 individuals and families, public lands comprise 31% of the state's forests.

Most citizens are likely aware of the large tracts of national and state forests found primarily in northern Wisconsin. However, the largest publicly owned forests are the 2.4 million acres of the 30 county forests located throughout the state.

### County forests

To learn more about the state's county forests system, *Wisconsin Outdoor News* spoke with Wisconsin County Forests

Association Executive Director Rebekah Luedtke.

She explained that Wisconsin county forests are governed by the County Forest Law, state statute 28.10 and 28.11, which require they be managed for forestry purposes. Many also offer recreational opportunities, while providing wildlife habitat and watershed protection.

"Fulfilling that statutory directive is the task of forest administrators who are accountable to county residents through their county boards," said Luedtke.

These foresters have access to assistance from the DNR and the University of Wisconsin system.

"As a means of sharing insights, successes, common issues and opportunities, county board members and forest administrators have created their own forum, The Wisconsin County Forest Association, Inc. (WCFA)," Luedtke said.

### WCFA history

"The Wisconsin County Forests Association was established in 1968 as a not-for-profit group that acts as an umbrella organization for the 30 Wisconsin counties that have land enrolled in the county forest law," said Luedtke.

"Instead of each county having to deal with issues and other entities on its own, the association acts as a collaborative for those counties. We also deal with policies and agency issues that affect the county forests," she said.

### Multi-use lands

County forests vary in size, from Adams County (which entered the system in June) with 140 acres to Douglas County with more than 280,000 acres. By law, county forests must focus on producing timber for use in a variety of forest products.

"But a lot of our county forests are multi-purpose lands. Many offer a wide variety of recreation, including ATV and snowmobile use, along with biking, hiking and camping. Many of the county forest administrators take on roles of overseeing timber production and recreation."

Most county forests are open to hunting.

"There are some special-use areas, as on other public lands, that aren't necessarily open to hunting, but these are local restrictions, and specific information on areas that might be closed is available at the county level."

Any counties interested in establishing a county forest can get more information from the WCFA office in Merrill.

"Any acres entered into the program must be forest land – not a park – and must have a management plan," she said.

All contact and resource information related to Wisconsin's county forests is available at [wisconsincountyforests.com](http://wisconsincountyforests.com).

### County forest program exceeds standards

For the 17th consecutive year, 27 of Wisconsin's 30 county forests have exceeded the standards for certified forests as set by the Sustainable Forestry Initiative and Forest Stewardship Council. Certification means that these forests conform to strict environmental, social and economic standards.

"We were not surprised the 2020 certification audit findings showed that the hard work county forest staff put into properly managing these forests is paying off," said Luedtke. "The focus of Wisconsin county forests is to ensure the long-term health and sustainability of forest ecosystems while providing benefits to the public."

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# state's largest public land mass

## County forest acreage

According to Luedtke, the WFCFA solidified in its current form during the "treaty timber trials" in the 1980s (when Chippewa tribes sued for the right to run commercial timber sales on ceded lands in national, state and county forests).

"All the counties pulled together by providing money and other resources responding to the lawsuit. Then the association began formalizing by developing bylaws and creating a staff of one-and-a-half, with myself now as executive director and Gary Zimmer is the part-time assistant. Sadly, he told me he's retiring at the end of the year. We also have a number of internal committee that deal with specific issues," she said.

### Luedtke joins WFCFA

Luedtke became WCFA executive director in October 2019 after 14 years of forestry work and forestry management experience in neighboring Minnesota.

She earned a bachelor's degree in forestry from Iowa State University in 2005, then worked for the Minnesota DNR Forestry Division. She was a field forester for many years, then worked up to being the DNR's timber program coordinator for one of the state's three regions.

Before coming to Wisconsin, Luedtke was manager for the Minnesota Inter-Agency Fire Center based in Grand Rapids.

"I was dealing mainly with wild-fire management and mobilization of resources, including engines, fire crews and aircraft, in-state and out-of state. I moved to Wisconsin to get back to forestry, but I also wanted to be closer to my family members who live in southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois," she said.

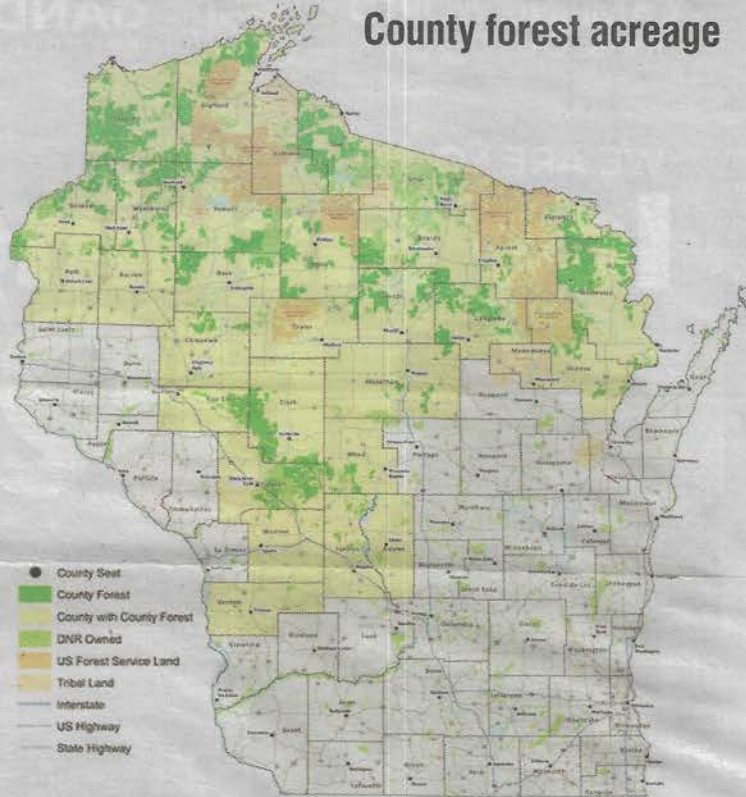
### WFCFA duties

Her year with the association has been challenging but good. She acknowledged that some of the challenges have been due to COVID-19.

"It's hard to adjust to normal when you're not really sure what normal is," she said.

Luedtke says the WFCFA is made up of a good group of people.

"They lean heavily on each other



Wisconsin's 30 county forests provide more than 2.4 million acres of public land access. County forests stretch from southwestern Wisconsin to most of the northern counties.

to provide help and answer questions; they really do a good job of working together," she said. "It's an interesting organization and has a lot of strengths."

An important part of her job is to be the liaison between the county forests and various other groups and agencies.

"We act as an advocate for the counties to make sure their interests are represented at the state and national levels. We're a clearinghouse for the counties in dealing with the DNR, the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, forest-based industries, and many private conservation and recreation groups on behalf of the counties," she said.

Luedtke is a registered lobbyist representing WFCFA before the state legislature. Governmental units, such as counties, are not permitted to lobby.

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