

Forests recovering, but threats loom

Acreage, preservation up, but so are sales, use conflicts, study says

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Wisconsin's forests, covering 16 million acres and 46% of the state, are slowly mending from lumberjack days. But a new analysis highlights disturbing trends for one of the state's most important natural resources.

In a report to be presented today to the state Natural Resources Board in Sturgeon Bay, public and private forestry experts said they were heartened by some things:

Forest acreage increased during much of the 1980s and 1990s. Forests are slowly growing older, laying the groundwork for richer, more diverse forests in the future. Also, organizations that buy land for conservation purposes are growing.

But the experts also identified an array of problems affecting both the North Woods and the urban forests of southeastern Wisconsin.

Those problems include the shrinking of big blocks of forests, an influx of new forest owners with smaller parcels, new threats from invasive pests and growing competition over recreational uses of land.

State forester Paul DeLong said the problems are not something Wisconsin can throw government programs at, or solve overnight.

Fifty-seven percent of Wisconsin forests are owned by private, non-industrial landowners. Despite big national and state forests here, only 30% of Wisconsin's forests are owned by the public sector, state figures show.

Taking a long view

Forestry planning takes years because it takes decades to re-grow forests, he said. Before 1880, 90% of the hemlock and hardwood forests were 120 years or older. Today, most of Wisconsin's forests range from 20 to 80 years.

Compared with the devastation of forests in the early 1900s from farming and logging, "we've recovered in great and amazing ways," said DeLong, administrator of the DNR's division of forests. "But we're not out of the woods yet."

The Wisconsin statewide forest plan identifies 52 trends affecting forestland. The plan is the centerpiece for a meeting Nov. 9 and 10 in Madison, the Governor's Conference on Forestry, which aims at coming up with strategies to manage public and private forests for generations to come.

The goal is to find ways to balance competing uses, since forests are integral to the state's ecosystem while the forest products industry is responsible for about 100,000 jobs, according to the DNR.

One bit of a surprise in the report: Forest acreage increased in the 1980s and 1990s. Even with growing demand for paper and wood products, Wisconsin forestland increased by 640,000 acres between 1983 and 1996 because marginal farmland has reverted to forests. The trend is believed to have leveled off in this decade.

Some of the major issues affecting forests are:

Forests are becoming more fragmented.

State officials say that figures are hard to come by, but that large blocks of forestland increasingly are turning over to urban development, road building and, sometimes, agriculture. The result is long-term habitat loss - a threat to species such as pine martens and pileated woodpeckers that rely on big blocks of forests.

"It's not sustainable in the long term," said Lisa MacKinnon, policy director for 1000 Friends of Wisconsin, a Madison-based environmental organization.

In turn, large blocks of industrial forestland are changing hands rapidly.

Between 1997 and 2002, about 1 million acres of forestland was sold.

Paper giant Stora Enso, which acquired Consolidated Papers Inc., was one of the largest owners of forestland in Wisconsin. In 2002, Stora Enso sold 309,000 acres in northern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula to Seattle-based Plum Creek Timber Co. and now owns virtually no timberland here.

Some forestland is going from timberland to private developers, according to experts, but another concern is the uncertainty when so much land changes hands.

More people are purchasing forestland.

The seemingly democratization of the forest is shaping up to be a big concern as more people with little expertise are coming to own smaller parcels of land.

In 1953, there were 177,000 people in Wisconsin who owned forestland. The average parcel was 54 acres, DNR figures show. By 1997, the number of people owning forestland blossomed to 262,000. The average parcel size had shriveled to 37 acres.

Demographics are changing, too. Farmers in 1956 owned 6.4 million acres of forest. That fell to 1.5 million acres in 1997, DNR figures show.

"Most of the people want to be a good steward," said John G. DuPlissis, forestry outreach specialist at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. "What you have is an education gap about how they fit into the natural landscape."

After building their dream home in the country, DuPlissis said, many owners start clearing brush, building trails and planting large plots of grass and trees that are not native to their woods. "All of these things are altering the woodlands," he said. "All of the normal things that are occurring in our forests are slowly going away."

Invasive species are an increasing threat.

The gypsy moth, Asian long-horned beetle, Dutch elm disease, garlic mustard and Japanese honeysuckle are some of the exotic pests that experts say pose a threat to forestland. This can be especially harmful in urban forests, where urban dwellers unwittingly are allowing their interest in exotic plant species to spread to nearby woods.

The next threat: Emerald ash borer. This Asian insect has infested trees in Michigan and northern Indiana and Ohio and has the ability to infest Wisconsin trees, merely by a landowner bringing in firewood carrying the beetle from those states.

There is growing conflict over the recreational uses of forestland.

Paper industry land has long supplied the large blocks of connected forestland that some species require, and because of favorable tax treatment, the land is open for other uses.

But when paper companies sell land, recreational opportunities on those lands diminish. Besides concerns about habitat loss, "there's less land to hunt and fish," said Matt Dallman, the northern Wisconsin director for The Nature Conservancy, who participated in the study.

On the Web: www.dnr.wi.gov/org/land/forestry/look/assessment/