The 2012 West Virginia Forest Stewardship Operating Plan

West Virginia Division of Forestry
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State Capitol
Charleston, WV 25302
4/27/12
# FOREST STEWARDSHIP OPERATING PLAN

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Is Forest Stewardship</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Is the West Virginia Forest Stewardship Program</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Does the Program Work?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Topics Are Contained In a Forest Stewardship Plan</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Ecosystem and Landscape Management Approaches</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquiring a Forest Stewardship Plan</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Appendices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Program Administration</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinating Committee</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subcommittees</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WVDOF Responsibilities</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WVDOF Regions and Offices Map</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Forest Stewardship Plan Application</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia Forest Stewardship Program Plan Application</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest Stewardship Program Plan Application Information</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landowner Assistance Foresters</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W-9</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vendor Registration and Disclosure Statement</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vendor Registration Instructions</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Technical Assistance Protocol</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligibility</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Enrollment</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewardship Plan Writer Certification</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultant Forest Involvement</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consulting Forester Involvement Flow Chart</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewardship Plan Completion Flow Chart</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
D. Consulting and Land Owner Assistance Forester Protocols.................................27
   Initial Reconnaissance ................................................................................................27
   Plan Preparation if Consultant is Not Involved ......................................................27
   Consultant Forester Prepared Plan .........................................................................28
   LOA Forester Prepared Plan ....................................................................................28
   Future Plan Revision or Addendums .........................................................................29
   Plan Revision and Addendum Procedures ...............................................................29
   Program Accomplishment Reporting .......................................................................30
   After the Plan is Completed .....................................................................................30
   Stewardship Plan Information Form .........................................................................31

E. Components of a Forest Stewardship Plan ............................................................32
   Plan Preparation Format and Contents ....................................................................32
   Cover Page ...............................................................................................................32
   Introduction Letter ..................................................................................................32
   Statement of Landowner Intent ................................................................................32
   Table of Contents .....................................................................................................32
   Landowner’s Objectives .........................................................................................32
   Location and Accessibility .......................................................................................33
   Boundary and Woodland Description ......................................................................33
   Summary of Forest Management Needs and Opportunities ....................................33
   Explanation of Site Class and Forest Types ..............................................................34
   Topography and Soils Description ............................................................................34
   Method of Reconnaissance and Cruise Data Collection ..........................................34
   General Cruise Information (Table 1) .....................................................................35
   Stand Management Descriptions and Recommendations ........................................35
   Stand Management Summary (Table 2) ...................................................................35
   Cruise Intensity Guide ..............................................................................................35
   10-Year Proposed Activity Schedule (Table 3) .........................................................35
   Soils Map ..................................................................................................................36
   Boundary Condition Map ........................................................................................36
   Forest Type Map .......................................................................................................36
Introduction

The Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) is a federal program with which the West Virginia Division of Forestry is pleased to cooperate. In existence since 1978, the program provides technical assistance to help private forestland owners turn their short and long term objectives for owning the land into step by step Forest Stewardship Management Plans (FMP) that can be used as the guides in managing their lands and ultimately recognizing their goals.

The program is thus a triad of varied interest: the landowner, the State Division of Forestry and the U.S. Forest Service - all working towards a common goal. The landowner is interested in applying professional forestry techniques to profitably maintain and enhance the health and ecological integrity of the forestland, the Division is interested in helping the landowner balance the economic needs that necessarily underlies management and supports the State’s economy with ecological health and societal values and the Service is interested in fulfilling its mandates detailed in the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1978.

This circular presents the format for developing Forest Stewardship Plans in West Virginia. It was developed with the advice of professional foresters serving as a subcommittee of the West Virginia Forest Stewardship Coordinating Committee (FSCC), an appointed committee of non-paid professional natural resource managers, environmental enthusiasts and cooperating agency employees that meet quarterly to advise the State Forester on administrative and technical matters. The stewardship plan that is produced meets or exceeds federal program requirements while providing for the integration of economic stability, ecological sensitivity and societal needs in the individual plans. In essence, the landowner has the property, the Division has professional foresters and contracts for additional professional expertise (licensed consulting foresters) and the Service has the appropriation. Each has a vital role in providing sustainable forestry across the State.

What is Forest Stewardship?

Forest Stewardship is the management of forest resources so as to maintain and enhance the value of the forest for current and future generations. Landowners who manage their forestlands for stated objectives in an economically viable and an ecologically and socially responsible way are Forest Stewards.

What is The West Virginia Forest Stewardship Program?

By providing funding for planning, the West Virginia Forest Stewardship Program is the government’s way of encouraging the state’s nonindustrial private forest landowners (NIPLs) to practice forest stewardship. This funding supports the belief that it is only through profitable, ecologically sensitive and socially acceptable integrated science-based management, which benefits those who own and use them, will forests be sustained as global assets for future generations.

The program is based on the tenet that West Virginia forests add value to all segments of society. These forests have long sustained our traditional rural economies through the employment opportunities provided by the harvest of timber and non-timber products. This has been a way of life all across the State. In fact, forestry is the only industry that is present in all 55 counties.
This educational and non-regulatory program, authorized under the Cooperative Forest Assistance Act of 1978 is managed by the West Virginia Division of Forestry through cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service, the agency through which the funds are channeled. In brief, the program provides technical assistance to private forestland owners develop science-based management plans that will result in the realization of the owner’s goals and objectives. A Forest Stewardship Coordinating Committee provides technical, procedural and logistical recommendations to the State Forester who is ultimately responsible for the administration of the program (see Appendix B.)

How Does the Program Work?

Eligible forestland owners, individuals, partnerships, groups, associations, non-profits, long term lease holders, corporations without publicly traded stock and municipal and county governments, owning between 10 and 2,000 acres may apply for assistance through the West Virginia Division of Forestry. Owners with less than 10 acres can receive technical assistance, but may not receive fiscal aid. Owners with more than 2,000 and less than 5,000 acres may be eligible for planning assistance through a special waiver provision.

The landowner, from a list provided by the DOF, engages a registered forester to develop a ten-year forest management plan that describes the forest and provided options and suggested management practices that will maintain the growth and development of timber and non-timber products while enhancing soil and water quality, wildlife, including fish, habitat and outdoor recreation. The environment is protected while desired economic and societal benefits are gained.

The completed stewardship plan is accepted by the landowner who signs a statement specifying intent to implement the plan. This triggers the funding provision which results in the landowners being reimbursed for 75 percent of the registered forester’s fee. There are additional cost share assistance programs that can help defray the cost of forest improvement practices suggested by the plan. As the stewardship plan is a legal agreement between the landowner and the DOF, notice of the plan is recorded in the land records of the County in which the land is located.

What Topics Are Contained in a Forest Stewardship Plan?

The following are major headings that categorize the forester’s observations and suggestions. The plans are prepared for individual properties and each differs according to the landowners goals and objectives and the type of woodland that is owned. Generally, however, each plan has an opening page that gives the landowners name, mailing address and telephone numbers followed by the name, address and telephone number of the preparing forester, plan completion date and revision date.

This is followed by a general property description giving the location, legal description, number of acres (forest & non-forest), type of ownership, and current land use. A topographic map on which the boundaries have been placed can be inserted at this point or mentioned and placed in an appendix. A tax map from the Assessor’s office in the Court House is also helpful, but is not an absolute requirement. The property boundaries should be coded on the topographic map as fenced, painted, non-existent, etc.

At this point, a colored soils map with legend is inserted or noted as being in an appendix.

The next item is a property map showing the locations of special features such as cemeteries, archeological sites, wetlands, streams, extensive rock outcrops, seeps, bear hibernacula, unique plant communities etc. It, too, can be noted and placed in an appendix.
Next should be a narrative assessment and description of the landowner’s goals and objectives and specific relationships to the property. Minimal considerations are access, timber production, non-timber products, wildlife habitat, T & E species, soil and water protection, forest health, unusual fire danger, aesthetics, special sites, invasive species, integrated pest management recreational possibilities and possible forest legacy easements. Optional considerations where present and relevant to the property, and consistent with landowner’s objectives include carbon, biomass, desired species, prescribed burning, wetlands and high conservation value forests.

The following are required more or less in the order of importance on the particular property:

- Stand by stand descriptions and special characteristics based on a reliable field inventory that can be replicated:
  - stand history
  - past land use practices
  - general stand age
  - cover type
  - stocking as trees per acre or basal area per acre or both
  - volume in board feet, cords, cubic feet or tons per acre according to product
  - growth rate
  - Topography
  - presence of roads.

Recommendations, including management practices, timber harvest discussion, protection, wildlife plots, if needed, and any reclamation plans including erosion and sedimentation control.

Schedule of management activities at the stand level including alternative strategies, based on a discussion of landowner objectives.

The final section, limited as much as possible, is the provision of supplemental materials. It is better to mention the availability of such in the appropriate textual discussions within the body of the plan.

**Modern Ecosystem and Landscape**

The first step towards a healthy productive woodland owned by a private non-industrial forestland owner (PNIF) is a Forest Stewardship Plan. Such planning is modeled after the silviculturally-based plans prepared by forest industry entities for their lands. These larger companies have their own foresters. Most PNIF owners have smaller tracts and it is often a question in the owner’s mind as to whether a plan will cost more than it produces. This is especially true when the landowner has very little knowledge of professional forestry. West Virginia’s Forest Stewardship Program is a landowner assistance program specially developed for PNIF owners by the Division of Forestry with oversight and funding provided by the U. S. Forest Service. The purpose of the program is to assist the landowner with management expertise and information that will assist the landowner in attaining his objectives for owning the property. This, in turn, helps the State by keeping the forest healthy, providing wildlife habitat, enhancing natural beauty and adding to the local economy. The result is profitable for both sides.

Modern forest planning is often referred to or said to be “ecosystem” planning. An ecosystem is the complex of living organisms that occupy an area of interest. An older term was “microcosm.” The same thing in Europe is called a “biogeocoenosis.” By whatever term, it is the plants, animals, fungi and microorganisms functioning together to circulate nutrients and create a flow of energy that
is turn creates biomass. Ecosystems do not have boundaries fixed in time and space since they change depending on prevailing environmental factors. The scale depends on the purpose. An ecosystem can be a log, pond, field, forest or even the earth’s biosphere. Simply put, it is the living and physical components of a specified area acting on and/or initiated by the component parts or more simply it’s all of nature and the natural interactions on an area.

**Acquiring a Forest Stewardship Plan**

The first step in acquiring a forest stewardship plan is for the landowner to complete a forest stewardship plan application (Appendix B) and submit it to the WV Division of Forestry. Blank questionnaires can be obtained from any Division of Forestry office, Land Owner Assistance (LOA) Forester or on line from the Division’s web site. Participation is open to any private landowner, individual or otherwise, with at least 10 acres of forestland and perhaps lesser acreages in the case of community forests. The application has a planning worksheet that records your goals and visions for the property and thereby assists your forester in considering everything that you wanted in your plan. This worksheet has several check off questions concerning the ownership, the land, who works on the property, your willingness to invest in management procedures, your goals and your signature. The technical assistance protocol, including discussions on eligibility, enrollment and costs is detailed in Appendix C.

The second step is to engage an eligible Consulting Forester to prepare the plan. Such a forester is selected from a list of certified forest stewardship consulting foresters that is maintained on line at the Division of Forestry web site (wvforestry.com) or is available at any Division office. The published list is updated once each calendar year. The electronic list is updated monthly. It is also possible to have the plan prepared by the local LOA forester, who when contacted, will set a firm date for preparing the plan. It is to be recognized that LOA foresters have many responsibilities. The protocol followed by each type of preparer is provided in Appendix D.

Examples of various parts of sample forest stewardship management plan are provided in Appendix E. The first is a plan overview that includes a property description and management goals. This is followed by comprehensive stand descriptions which are followed by detailed management practices for each stand that can include planting, thinning, boundary painting, timber harvesting, etc. Plan revisions, if cost sharing is involved, must follow the specific guidelines detailed in Appendix E. The sample also contains the formal signature sheet for the landowner, preparing forester, landowner assistance forester and state forester.

Appendix F provides forms needed for consulting forester registration and checklist of requirements for the payment of services.