

ANNUAL REPORT

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WISCONSIN COUNTY FORESTS ASSOCIATION

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Wisconsin County Forests Association, Inc. (abbreviated WCFA) was established in 1968 to provide a forum for the consideration of issues, programs, and policies of the county forests. WCFA works with and represents the interests of those committees of County Boards responsible for forestry programs in each of its 30 member counties.

MISSION

The Wisconsin County Forests Association provides leadership uniting the interests of the nation's largest county forest program while ensuring long-term forest health and sustainability.

VALUES - OUR "WHY"

We stand together for thriving forests, thriving counties and communities, and work we can be proud of.

BOARD MEMBERS

Joe Waichulis, Clark County (President)
Phil Schneider, Rusk County (Vice President)
Bill Bialecki, Lincoln County (Treasurer)
Lolita Olson, Washburn County
Rick Seefeldt, Marathon County
Hank Novak, Marinette County
Chris Sybers, Burnett County
Henry Sullivan, Florence County
Bill Schradle, Barron County
Joe Muehlbach, Vilas County
Mike Beyer, Oconto County
Jeff Olsen, Bayfield County
Jeff Barkley, Director-at-Large
Michael Luedeke, Director-at-Large
Henry Schienebeck, Director-at-Large

"Wise forest management is the art of using the
forest without using it up."

Adapted from Aldo Leopold's land ethic

MESSAGE FROM WCFA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

What a year! As I reflect on 2025, I am filled with gratitude and pride for what we have accomplished together. Last year was one of growth, hard work, and continued commitment to our mission, not to mention experiencing many successes on multiple fronts. In an ever-changing world, our organization remained focused on what matters most: serving our members and the forestry community of Wisconsin with integrity and purpose. That work is the foundation of every success highlighted in the following pages.

Thanks to the dedication of our members, staff, board of directors and lobbyist, we strengthened our programs and expanded our reach during the state budget process. Several people spent many hours and countless miles going to and from Madison promoting and advocating for increased financial support of the county forest program. And with great success! It is evident we've increased the recognition of the Association and deepened the awareness of Wisconsin's county forest system in the capitol.

Financially, we remained strong and responsible stewards of the resources entrusted to us. I do not take this responsibility lightly, and will remain committed to transparency and accountability in all that we do. A significant bright spot for me was when we launched a new special license plate in January through the Department of Transportation, and I'm thrilled with the response! As of this writing over 1,300 WCFA license plates are on the road. This new revenue will only help WCFA continue to grow and support our members and our industry.

The year certainly had its challenges but we were able to tackle them as a collective, developing effective solutions and navigating issues together with creativity and resolve, and we will use them as opportunities to learn and improve.

I am deeply grateful to our members whose continued support made our work possible. The work you all put in not only sustains our work – it empowers innovation, stability, and long-term impact. I am also thankful for our Board of Directors, whose leadership and guidance continue to strengthen our organization. Their strategic insight and unwavering support help ensure that we remain mission-driven and future-focused.

As we look ahead, we will remain focused on our mission and capture the opportunities before us. As we continue to experience turnover at every level – at WCFA and at the counties – it's important to engage in succession planning and make sure the existing wealth of knowledge and experience doesn't leave when a person does. The coming year will bring new challenges, but also new possibilities to deepen our impact and extend our reach. I am committed to building on last year's momentum while continuing to learn, adapt, and grow. 2026 will also be a time for all of us to reflect and think about where we should direct the Association as we develop the next Strategic Plan.

Thank you for being part of this journey, your belief and support in our collective mission makes our work possible. Together, we are creating meaningful and lasting change – and I look forward to all that we will accomplish in the year ahead.

Rebekah Luedtke



MESSAGE FROM WCFA ASST. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

This past year was full of challenges and 2026 is full of hope.

As I look back at a personal level, 2025 was my year of cancer treatment. My strength did not match my desire for involvement in the association's activities. For the first time that I can remember I wasn't able to attend any of our main meetings; not the spring administrator's meeting, summer tour, or the annual fall meeting. I was able to limp out in the woods for the annual certification audit week, but a stress fracture of my foot kept me near the truck. And of course, this year, the lead auditor decided that walking timber sales was necessary for the audit. But I was able to take some pictures of local biodiversity while I waited.

Clark, Langlade, Lincoln, and Taylor County forests showed off exemplary management in both field application and documentation of conformance to both the SFI and FSC standards. Another clean surveillance audit...congratulations!

Thankfully, technology made it possible for me to participate in a variety of meetings where I might have previously attended in person. I was able to effectively participate with the Wisconsin SIC, our Leg/Cert Committee, a variety of webinars and training, FSC consultations and the new FSC standard and with Dave and Rebekah. Prior to my fractured foot and radiation therapy, my wife and I were able to travel to Monterey California to attend my oldest son's graduation from the Naval Graduate School. We were also able to see the sights around the Monterey Bay and Big Sur. We also were able to spend time taking our grandkids fishing at a local Waukesha County Park near home. Life is good if the fish are biting no matter what the size. I was happy when we finally ran out of worms. If only I had the unlimited energy three grandchildren out fishing. Then this fall I had to cancel bird hunting with Doug Brown and for the first time in about 45 years, I couldn't go deer hunting...too much fatigue. But the crew did a great job of protecting baby trees by shooting two bucks and four does.

What's ahead in 2026? The WCFA is co-sponsoring a "Year of Safety" with the Wisconsin SIC (Sustainable Forestry Implementation Committee) with the support of the Great Lakes Timber Professionals. We'll work together to implement the new FSC National Forestry Stewardship Standard (NFSS) with significant changes that reflect forest conservation on an international basis. We'll build on our successes working with the legislature as we advance proposals to strengthen county forest management. We'll work together to revise the WCFA's strategic plan and continue to share information and discuss important matters through the various committees. We'll also work to strengthen our relationship with the DNR Division of Forestry.

The strength of WCFA is our willingness to work together to achieve shared goals. It is something that every audit team has noted, whether working with contractors, DNR liaisons and specialists, recreation partners, county boards and forestry committees, or each other, we are committed to implementing the best forest management for today and the future. I'm blessed to be a part of the work and I'm hopeful. Foresters are by nature hopeful. No one who plants a tree (or thousands of trees) can be without hope of growth and a bright future.

Mark Heyde



(Mark with his wife, Pam)

Message from WCFA Technical Advisor

Much of 2025 was spent working on waterway and wetland permitting issues with DNR. While our request to create a new county forest general permit was met with resistance, DNR was open to listening to our permit process issues/barriers. Through many meetings and conference calls, we were able to communicate the issues and categorize the concerns.

An important step forward was a decision to have a few field days where DNR waterway/wetland staff, along with county forest staff, would visit common forest activities requiring permits or applicable exemptions to permits. This plan stalled due to DNR implementing travel restrictions. Ultimately, we were able to hold 1 field day with DNR staff across the northern region in November. This field day was hosted by Washburn County Forest, where we visited a wetland fill project, a proposed clear span bridge replacement and a proposed ford replacing plugged culverts project. Post field day comments were positive from both sides. Some frank observations were shared with DNR and acknowledged. Both parties felt additional field days would be valuable in other geographic areas.

Follow-up video conferences with DNR felt that having dedicated visits with County Forest Administrator's at their offices would be valuable. DNR asked that these meetings include zoning and LWCD staff, and any proposed projects be reviewed; forestry specific and motorized recreational projects would be the main focus of these sit-down meetings. So far, over 20 county forests have responded positively to having these sit-down meetings and the ball is in DNR's lap to have these meetings.

Many thanks to Iron County Forest Administrator, Eric Peterson, for his continued participation in these discussions with DNR waterway/wetland administrators. Having his perspective as an administrator is valuable in making progress on these permitting issues.



In 2025, I started attending the Wetland Study Council meetings (remotely). This governor's council was created by 2017 Wisconsin Act 183. This council reviews current rules, proposed rules, and suggests policy mainly related to wetland regulations and minorly waterway rules associated with wetlands. I continue to represent county forests on the Wild Turkey Advisory Committee. 2025 was very active as the DNR is revising the turkey management plan and have actively surveyed turkey hunters for their perspective and opinions. I continue to be involved in regulatory projects involving county forests. Many of these are related to regulatory interpretation, especially exemption policy or requests for additional information on permit applications. Some field visits are intended to provide guidance on application direction and where exemptions are in order, instead of permit applications.

I participated in forest auditing in August. We conducted a pre-audit field visit in Taylor County to determine if any sites may raise concern to auditors. Then I attended the actual audit on Taylor County Forest. No issues were noted by the auditor. Continue to sit through Governor's ORV Council meetings, and infrequently the Snowmobile Council meetings, mainly to see what obstacles grant requests are running into.

Dave Kafura

Message from WCFA Lobbyist

Clear and Consistent Advocacy: Bipartisan Path Forward for Wisconsin's County Forests

Wisconsin's county forests are one of our quiet success stories. Spanning millions of acres, they provide wildlife habitat, timber resources, recreation opportunities, and economic benefits for local communities. Behind this success is steady, pragmatic leadership - none more consistent than the Wisconsin County Forests Association's (WCFA) advocacy efforts in the state Capitol, which continue to prove that conservation and cooperation can, and must, go hand in hand.

During the 2025-27 biennial state budget, WCFA was actively engaged with bipartisan lawmakers and Governor Tony Evers to advance priorities that sustain county forests and the communities that rely on them. These efforts were not about politics; they were about stewardship, access, and long-term returns for Wisconsin residents.

Among the top priorities for WCFA was continued funding for the county forests wildlife incentives program. WCFA's advocacy efforts led to \$130,000 in increased funding for each year of the biennium for this important program. County forests are essential to maintaining diverse and healthy ecosystems, from early successional habitat to mature forest cover. These investments support biodiversity and sustainability while enhancing hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation—cornerstones of Wisconsin's heritage and rural economy.

Equally important are sustainable forestry grants, which help counties manage forests responsibly while balancing environmental and economic goals. WCFA worked hard to increase funding for these grants by \$1,000,000 over the biennium. These grants support practices that improve forest health, address invasive species, and ensure sustainable timber harvests. In doing so, they help keep Wisconsin's forest products industry strong while protecting the land for future generations.

WCFA is also advocating for funding that recognizes the critical role county roads play in forest management. Well-maintained roads are essential for timber access, emergency response, recreation, and local commerce. For many rural counties, road funding is not just an infrastructure issue, it is a forest management necessity.

Beyond the budget, WCFA worked diligently on policy improvements, including passage of 2025 Wisconsin Act 65. This legislation addresses eligibility requirements for counties seeking forest administration grants, ensuring that well-managed county forests are not inadvertently excluded from essential support. The act reflects a common-sense update to state law and underscores the value of listening to those closest to on-the-ground forest management.

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(Lobbyist message continued)

The WCFA's approach is refreshingly straightforward and simple: collaborate early, engage respectfully, and focus on shared goals. By working across party lines and with the governor's office, the association has helped elevate county forests as a unifying issue—one where conservation, economic development, and local control align.

As the budget and policy debate will continue in the state Capitol, the message from Wisconsin's county forests, led by WCFA, is clear and consistent. Thoughtful investments today will yield healthier forests, stronger communities, and lasting benefits for generations to come. That is a goal worth bipartisan support.

Shawn Pfaff is the President of Pfaff Public Affairs and represents the Wisconsin County Forests Association (WCFA) in the state Capitol.



County Forest Administrators - June 2025

Top row L to R: Jon Harris (Douglas), Mike Peterson (Washburn), Fritz Schubert (Wood), Tom Lovlien (Marathon), Matt Hansen (Chippewa), Chad Ziegler (Monroe), Eric Peterson (Iron), Brent Sisko (Polk), Jill Nemec (Oneida), Jake Nichols (Burnett);
Bottom row L to R: Pat Smith (Florence), Curtiss Lindner (Clark), Jim Zahasky (Jackson), Chad Keranen (Vilas), Josh Pedersen (Eau Claire), Ryan Bourassa (Marinette), Dean Bowe (Lincoln - retired)

Legislative Recap

2025 was a very busy year legislatively. Several people spent a lot of time down in Madison, at the Capitol, promoting and advocating for the county forests.

The year began with work on the State budget. Because the county forests receive financial support from the DNR, it's vital that WCFA is engaged in the budget process. We had a lot of great discussions with several lawmakers and were fortunate to have some allies in our requests in the budget. At the end, the primary county forest grants including the county forest administration grant, the sustainable forestry grant and the wildlife habitat grant all received budget increases. This will allow our members to continue their great work and help complete much needed projects on the ground. As we continue to foster the relationships with legislators, we're doing the same with the Counties Association and others. We were fortunate to have the support and backing of WCA during the budget process.



During the summer, Shawn and Rebekah took some time to evaluate the effectiveness of WCFA's lobbying efforts and review our process. Both feel WCFA is in a very good spot with the group's current approach to lobbying. Luckily, Shawn has stated he would like to continue on being WCFA's lobbyist. We are very grateful for his work and guidance.

In December, we finally crossed the finish line expanding the requirements of the county forest administration grant. After the better part of 15 years, several people traveled to Madison and were in attendance to witness Governor Evers sign Act 65, making the legislation law. Way to go team!

We also continue to monitor other legislation being proposed, and engage when we feel it's appropriate and advantageous, including on the reauthorization of the Knowles Nelson Stewardship Program, the Forestry Revitalization Act and motorized recreation issues. Looking ahead, in 2026 we will look for more opportunities to improve policy and bring additional funding to the county forests, including preparing for the next state budget.

Representatives from Burnett County, WCFA and staffers from Rep. Green and Sen. Quinn's offices gather to witness Governor Evers sign Act 65 (Dec. 2025)



Counties Crush Certification Check

By Mark Heyde

Does it get any better than this? The Clark, Langlade, Lincoln, and Taylor County forestry programs were in full conformance to the FSC™ and SFI® standards for sustainability and excellence for forestry management.

Jake Walcisak, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Certification Coordinator, said “The final reports from the 2025 County Forests certification audit [show] zero findings. That’s an outstanding outcome, and it didn’t happen by accident. Your prep, your professionalism in the field, and your steady handling of the auditors’ questions made this a clean, confident showing. This is exactly what strong, consistent work across the board looks like. Take a minute to appreciate what you pulled off... Thanks for bringing your best. It shows!”

An audit team of Sterling Griffin, lead SFI auditor, and Christian Zinkhan, lead FSC auditor spent the week of August 4-8, 2025, visiting each county office and a selection of field sites including active timber sales to review records, interview county staff, partners and logging contractors to confirm evidence of conformance. Since this was a surveillance audit of the 2010 FSC Forest Management Standard and the 2022 SFI Forest Stewardship Standard only a sample of indicators and performance measures were reviewed.

County forest administrators and their staff showed exceptional knowledge of the forests, 15-year plans, systems and processes that are the cornerstone of county forest management:¹

In Lincoln County auditors visited four sites including northern hardwood thinning, an Oak shelterwood, an HCV drive by of a protected bog site, an active NH and Oak harvest, and a Red Pine salvage with forest health improvement objectives. A fantastic lunch of pulled pork, cowboy beans, coleslaw, and venison sausage was top-notch!

Taylor County Forest Highlights (auditor Christian Zinkhan): A completed timber sale in northern hardwood and red oak, featuring major road work and RMZ protections. An active harvest with excellent logger performance and recreation trails weaving throughout (Ice Age and cross-country ski trails). A horse trail-friendly timber sale highlighting the integration of silent sports and working forests. A scenic lunch stop at Wood Lake County Park, with a review of the educational interpretive trail. A demonstration timber sale site established in partnership with UWSP’s Mike Demchik and his forestry students – a living classroom!

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Right: Dean Bowe, Lincoln County Forest Administrator (now retired) chats with certification auditor Sterling Griffin





Great Job!

*Above: Auditors visit a timber sale with
Langlade County staff
Right: Clark County staff sit down with auditors*

Langlade County Forest Highlights (auditor Sterling Griffin): Four diverse timber sales with a variety of forest types and silvicultural practices. One active sale included a contractor interview by auditors. A visit to the historic Thornberry Cemetery. Veterans Memorial Park for lunch and discussions with NHC Ecologist Carly Lapin (State Natural Areas), DNR Fisheries Biologist Taylor Curran (Fish Sticks Project), DNR Wildlife Biologist Carissa Knab, representatives of Jack Lake Silent Sports Association and Langlade County Snowmobile Council.



Clark County Director of Forestry and Parks Curtiss Lindner, Forest Administrator John Wendorski, and the entire crew showcased their exceptional knowledge of their 134,000-acre forest. Clark County Forest Highlights: A thorough overview of the Forestry and Parks programs followed by an engaging discussion on progressive silvicultural practices of bigtooth aspen. A behind-the-scenes look at the forestry shop. A partially completed timber sale featuring aspen coppice and red oak thinning. A completed oak shelterwood with pre-sale scarification. Lunch at Rock Dam County Park, featuring conversations on the Blue Swamp SNA (HCVF and FECV), Karner Blue Butterfly HCP (HCVF and FECV), the Stream Gorge (SFI Special Site), and the CCC Camp (HCV6 and SFI Special Site) and an incredible meal including Luke Nigon's homegrown sweet corn. A definite highlight!



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Sterling Griffin and Christian Zinkhan shared a long list of commendations and, as with each day of the audit, the collaboration between County Forest staff and DNR continues to shine as a model of partnership and shared responsibility in sustainable forest management.

Auditors were supported by DNR staff led by Jake Walcisak and Doug Brown, County Forest Specialist, along with other DNR wildlife and Natural Heritage Conservation Bureau biologists, and Forestry Bureau hydrologist, Nolan Kriegel. Wisconsin County Forests Association staff included Rebekah Luedtke, Dave Kafura, and Mark Heyde. Luedtke, WCFA Executive Director, provided a report of activities that support county forest conformance particularly in the areas of public outreach, research, and partner efforts with the broader forestry community in Wisconsin. WCFA staff also supported the counties being audited by attending each audit day.

The 2026 audit is planned for August 3-7 in Ashland, Bayfield, Douglas, and Iron County Forests and will be a surveillance audit of the 2022 SFI Forest Sustainability Standards and the new 2026 FSC National Forest Sustainability Standards (NFSS) for the United States.

¹*Internal audit daily summaries from Jake Walcisak.*

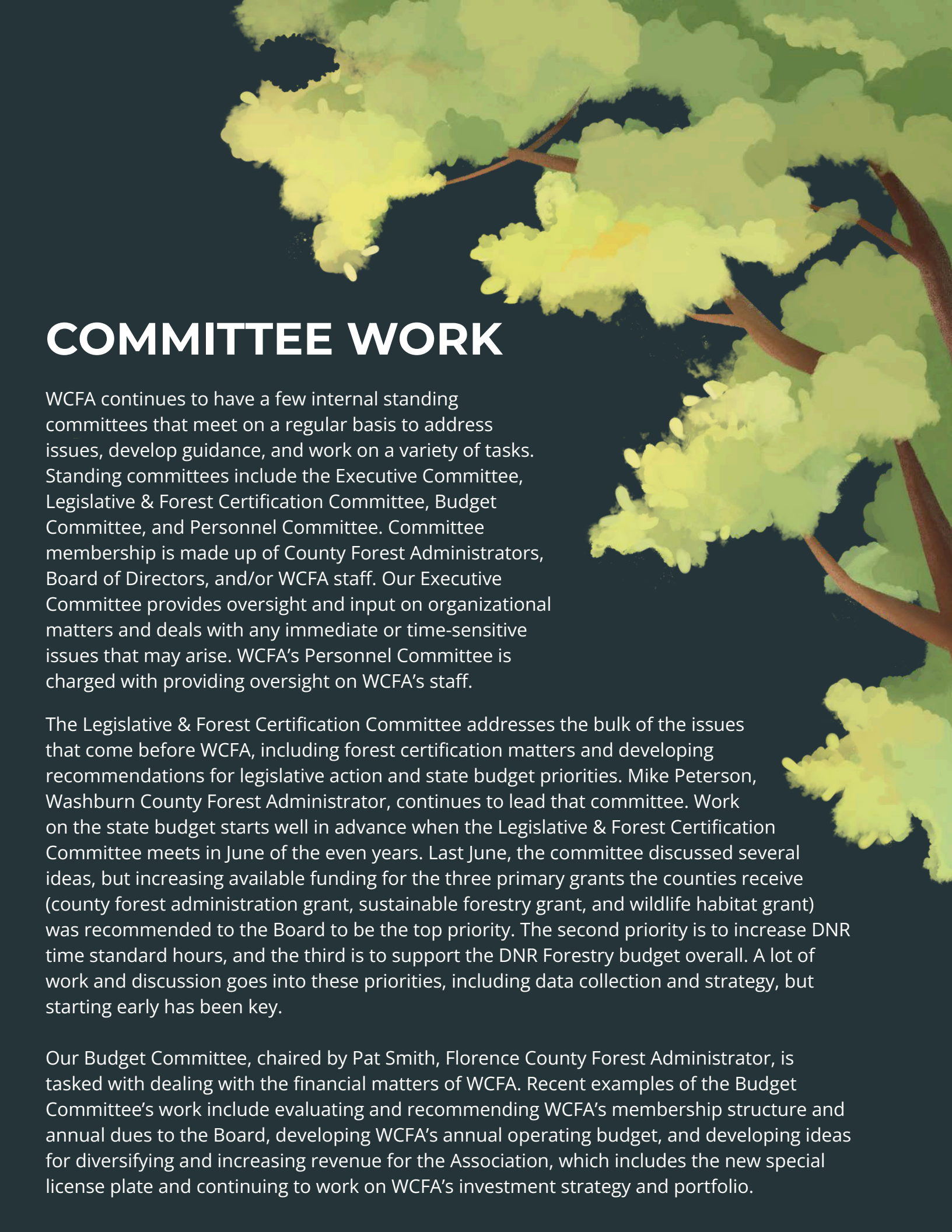


Summer Tour

In June, Mike Peterson, Washburn County Forest Administrator, and his staff welcomed the WCFA group to the Spooner/Hayward area for a couple of great days exploring and learning about Washburn County. These tours give the host county a chance to showcase their forest, their program, and staff, and talk about what makes their county unique.

We lucked out with very pleasant weather, which allowed the group to visit multiple sites, including a recreational trail bridge, a rifle and trap range, a jack pine management area, and a newly renovated lodge at the Leisure Lake Youth Camp, with lunch and good conversation along the water. In the afternoon, we toured a local distillery and the Hunt Hill Nature Center. After a fantastic evening banquet, on the second day, the group toured Wascott Wood Products, which specializes in fence posts, and a local DNR fish hatchery. Another very successful and well-attended WCFA Summer Tour!





COMMITTEE WORK

WCFA continues to have a few internal standing committees that meet on a regular basis to address issues, develop guidance, and work on a variety of tasks. Standing committees include the Executive Committee, Legislative & Forest Certification Committee, Budget Committee, and Personnel Committee. Committee membership is made up of County Forest Administrators, Board of Directors, and/or WCFA staff. Our Executive Committee provides oversight and input on organizational matters and deals with any immediate or time-sensitive issues that may arise. WCFA's Personnel Committee is charged with providing oversight on WCFA's staff.

The Legislative & Forest Certification Committee addresses the bulk of the issues that come before WCFA, including forest certification matters and developing recommendations for legislative action and state budget priorities. Mike Peterson, Washburn County Forest Administrator, continues to lead that committee. Work on the state budget starts well in advance when the Legislative & Forest Certification Committee meets in June of the even years. Last June, the committee discussed several ideas, but increasing available funding for the three primary grants the counties receive (county forest administration grant, sustainable forestry grant, and wildlife habitat grant) was recommended to the Board to be the top priority. The second priority is to increase DNR time standard hours, and the third is to support the DNR Forestry budget overall. A lot of work and discussion goes into these priorities, including data collection and strategy, but starting early has been key.

Our Budget Committee, chaired by Pat Smith, Florence County Forest Administrator, is tasked with dealing with the financial matters of WCFA. Recent examples of the Budget Committee's work include evaluating and recommending WCFA's membership structure and annual dues to the Board, developing WCFA's annual operating budget, and developing ideas for diversifying and increasing revenue for the Association, which includes the new special license plate and continuing to work on WCFA's investment strategy and portfolio.



Left: WCFA Annual Meeting, Fall 2025

Every spring and fall, WCFA facilitates a conference for continuing education and networking

Right: WCFA invested in the new cooperatively owned and operated chip mill in Tilleda, WI.
Ribbon cutting - October 2025



Left: The WCFA Board of Directors, along with some WCFA staff and Forest Administrators, tour Trees for Tomorrow in Eagle River and their soon-to-be outdoor learning center. Fall 2025

Right: Jill Nemec, Oneida County Forest Administrator, and Sarah Kendell, Douglas County Forester, help staff the WCFA booth at the UWSP natural resources job fair in December.



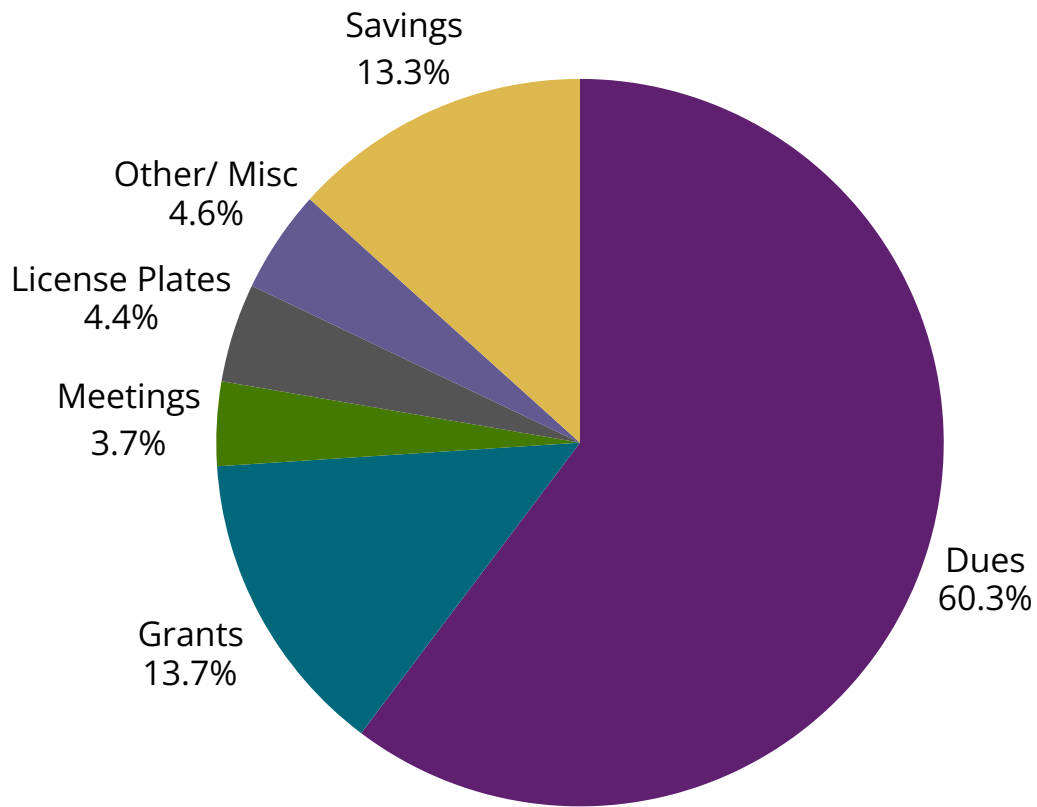
Financial Review

WCFA had a successful year financially. It's important we continue to do all we can to ensure WCFA is financially stable and around for a long, long time. In order to do that, the Budget Committee and Board of Directors have been working on ways to diversify our revenue. The launching of WCFA's special license plate was a significant step in doing that. As of this report, over 1,300 plates have been sold. With an annual \$25 donation per plate, WCFA will be able to continue serving member counties and partners while supporting other projects and programs. Even though we dipped into savings to cover expenses last year, we were fortunate that our investment portfolio did amazingly well, allowing membership dues to stay the same for now.

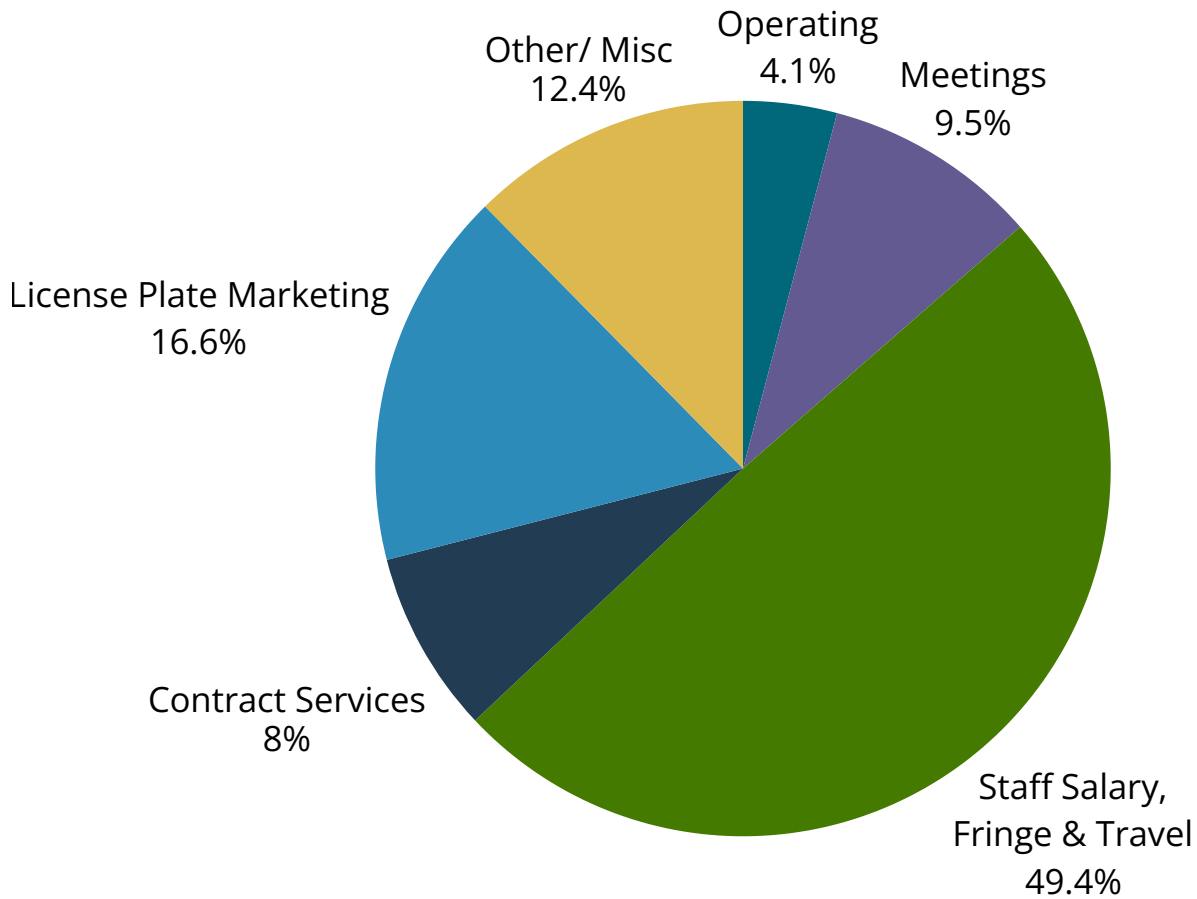


Income		Budget	Actual
	Dues	\$ 192,651	\$ 192,651
	Grants	\$ 20,000	\$ 43,750
	Meetings	\$ -	\$ 11,950
	License Plates	\$ -	\$ 14,045
	Other/ Misc		\$ 14,627
	Savings	\$ 18,200	\$ 42,600
Total Income		\$ 230,851	\$ 319,623
Expenses		Budget	Actual
	Operating	\$ 13,500	\$ 13,169
	Meetings	\$ 18,000	\$ 30,255
	Staff Salary, Fringe & Travel	\$ 165,606	\$ 157,911
	Contract Services	\$ 22,200	\$ 25,614
	License Plate Marketing	\$ -	\$ 53,126
	Other/ Misc	\$ 11,545	\$ 39,548
Total Expenses		\$ 230,851	\$ 319,623
Net Gain/ Loss		\$ -	\$ -

2025 Income - Actual



2025 Expenses - Actual



SUPPORT COUNTY FORESTS!

Remember to purchase your
special license plate today!



**INVEST IN
FORESTS
INVEST IN
THE FUTURE**

