

Establishing a New County Forest

Background of County Forests

- 1928 – First county forest established in Langlade County. DNR’s longest standing partnership.
- 30 counties – 2.41 million acres, mainly north and west (MAP) – 42% of public land in Wisconsin
 - Adams County was the most recent to enroll in June 2020 with 140 acres.
- Counties have management responsibility, with DNR providing assistance and oversight
- Public use & maximum public benefit focus
- Purposes and sideboards of management are spelled out in s. 28.11, Wis. stats.
- Long range planning – Provides year to year guidance within the bounds of s. 28.11, Wis. stats. and is a requirement under the statutes.

WI §28.10 **County forests.** *The county board of any county may by resolution establish a county public forest and acquire land by tax deed or otherwise for that purpose.*

WI §28.11 **Administration of county forests.**

WI §28.11(1) **Purpose.** *The purpose of this section is to provide the basis for a **permanent program of county forests** and to enable and encourage the planned development and management of the county forests for **optimum production of forest products together with recreational opportunities, wildlife, watershed protection and stabilization of stream flow, giving full recognition to the concept of multiple-use to assure maximum public benefits**; to protect the public rights, interests and investments in such lands; and to compensate the counties for the public uses, benefits and privileges these lands provide; all in a manner which will provide a reasonable revenue to the towns in which such lands lie.*

WI §28.11(2) **Defined.** *“County forests” include all county lands entered under and participating under ch. 77 on October 2, 1963, and all county lands designated as county forests by the county board or the forestry committee and entered under the county forest law and designated as “county forest lands” or “county special-use lands” as hereinafter provided.*

The county board of any such county may:

WI §28.11(3)(a) *Enact an ordinance designating a committee to have charge of the county forests and specifying the powers, duties, procedures and functions of such committee. The members of such committee shall be appointed pursuant to s. 59.13 and may include well-qualified residents of the county who are not members of the county board.*

WI §28.11(3)(b) *Establish regulations for the use of the county forests by the public and to provide penalties for their enforcement.*

Items to be considered before entering lands in the law:

- Entry of first lands need to be designated by the County as County Forest lands, not county parks.
- Timber is a primary objective of a county forest. A County Forest must produce raw material (through harvesting or other forest management) to the market.
- This is a County Forest Program, not a County Park program, nor a land (agricultural or forest) preservation program.
 - a. County Parks can be part of a County Forest program, but not exclusively parks.

Benefits to County

- Stable management with focus on public benefits, recreation & timber production.
- Plan developed with public input and provides long-term guidance
- Guaranteed technical assistance
- Stumpage revenue – generated by sustainable sale of timber
- Opportunity to participate in WCFA and its many benefits
 - Guidance, support, education, liaison to DNR, advocacy, etc.
- Access to WisFIRS – DNR supported forest reconnaissance database complete with tabular and GIS (web-based)
- Enhanced access to additional support people – E.g. Forest Health, Utilization & Marketing, Natural Heritage Conservation, Wildlife Biologists, etc.
- Access to financial assistance (grants and interest free loans)
 - Interest free loans available (~\$1.5 million total annually) for forest management projects (including land acquisition), which are paid back via 20% severance on timber sale revenues.
 - Variable Acreage Share Loans – Counties may annually request loans from \$0-\$0.50 per acre of regular county forest land to be used for the purchase, development, preservation and maintenance of county forest lands.
 - Project Loans - Counties may annually request project loan to be used for specific projects for the purpose of permitting the county to undertake meritorious and economically productive forestry operations, including land acquisition.
 - Administration grant – provides up to 50% of the salary and fringe costs of a person employed as a county forest administrator.
 - Sustainable Forestry Grant – Counties may apply for funding of sustainable forestry projects for up to 100% funding of eligible projects if selected.
 - Wildlife Habitat Grant – Counties receive \$.10 per acre annually to fund projects that improve wildlife habitat.
 - Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Grant – County Forests are eligible to compete for Knowles-Nelson Stewardship grants that fund up to 50% of acquisition costs of land purchases to be enrolled in the county forest program. Note: This program is set to expire June 30, 2026.
 - Nursery Stock Discount - Counties are eligible to a 50% discount on state nursery stock purchases.
 - Forest Certification – Counties are eligible to join Forest Certification Groups (SFI, FSC, or both) with the State paying for the direct certification costs.

County Commitments

Once you're in, you're in – You have made a commitment to manage accordingly and it is very difficult to withdraw lands from the program.

- Develop a 15- year County Forest Comprehensive Land Use Plan (with DNR assistance). This plan details how the county will manage their forest for the next 15 years. It includes policies, standard operating procedures, best management practices, objectives and more. A template is available to assist in the creation of a plan. Most county forest plans are published on their individual websites. Here are a few examples:
 - a. Douglas County - <https://www.douglascountywi.gov/1198/Comprehensive-Land-Use-Plan-2021-2035>
 - b. Clark County - <https://filecloud.co.clark.wi.us/ui/core/index.html?mode=single&path=/SHARED/%21pHyrlhTo5dGo7iVclaFAgToPGBVTa0nsD3LxNPx1pA3v3Ww6tOw4xAAPjEelg4wj0giJ50/Approved+15+YR+Plan+Document&shareto=#/>
 - c. Florence County - https://www.florencecountywi.com/departments/page_f9cfad008434/?department=b911d343d487&subdepartment=f42b7bf89a2b
- Develop annual work plans and budgets to support planned activities identified in County Forest Plan.

(b) An annual work plan and budget based upon the comprehensive plan shall be prepared by the county forestry committee with the assistance of a forester of the department. The plan shall include a schedule of compartments to be harvested and a listing by location of management projects for the forthcoming year. In addition, the plan shall include other multiple-use projects where appropriate. A budget, listing estimated expenditures for work projects, administration and protection of the forest, shall accompany the annual plan both to be submitted to the county board for approval at the November meeting.
- Designate or hire a person (administrator) and a committee to oversee the administrator and management of the forest.
- Finances – Set up segregated accounts for funds, specific to Forestry for funds received from DNR.
- Timber management basics
 - DNR doesn't handle the timber sale program for the county. DNR assists the county.
 - Need a forester to evaluate stands for treatment (DNR assists).
 - Create timber sales – prescriptions, mark timber, establish timber sale boundaries, boundaries between CF and private, etc. (DNR assists)
 - Create timber sale contracts
 - Create prospectus and bidding policy
 - Establish timber sale bidders list (get from neighboring Counties, DNR)
- Timber Sale Accounting
 - Set up timber accounting program to handle timber sales, billing, receipts
 - Timber Base or create your own
 - Haul Tickets, or scale wood
 - Track stumpage revenues, including 10% payments to townships. Due by March 1st every year.

- If a loan with DNR exists, depending the size of the loan relative to the size of the county's timber sale program and ability to pay back, a minimum of 20% and up to 40% of stumpage revenues goes to the DNR when sale is invoiced.

Sustainable management of the lands enrolled, within the sideboards of WI §28.11.

Benefits to Towns

- Acreage Payments – The DNR pays each town \$0.63 per acre annually for all lands in that municipality which are enrolled in the county forest program.
- Town Timber Sale Revenue – The County Forest Law requires each county to pay a minimum of 10% of their gross timber sale revenue to townships containing county forest land (on a proportional area basis) annually. Due by March 1st every year.

DNR Involvement

- Technical assistance (26 FTEs annually) – provided to assist with actual on-the-ground management. Provided in the form of DNR staff time dedicated to planning, implementation, and monitoring of forest practices on the county forest. The amount of technical assistance is based largely on acreage, past accomplishments, and planned work goals and is calculated using a formula that equitably distributes the DNR's available staff time among the enrolled county forests. Currently, the 30 county forests receive 46,000 DNR staff hours annually.
- Oversight responsibility – timber sales and planning
- Approves all timber sales following County approval
- Approves county forest comprehensive land use plan
- Approves entries & withdrawals
- A DNR Liaison to the county is identified to provide a direct DNR staff link to each county forest
- Administers grants and interest free loans
- Coordinate County Forest's forest certification for the county forest certification group(s), if desired by a county

For more info:

- County Forest Program - <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/CountyForests>
- Public Lands Handbook - <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/sites/default/files/topic/ForestManagement/24605.pdf>
- Timber Sale Handbook - <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/sites/default/files/topic/TimberSales/2461.pdf>
- Contact [Doug Brown](#), DNR County Forest & Public Lands Specialist
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