

WISCONSIN COUNTY FORESTS ASSOCIATION

DNR BUDGET SUPPORT FOR WISCONSIN COUNTY FORESTS

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 938,000 cord equivalents of wood products, valued at \$44,600,000 during calendar year 2021, 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.

Their success, in no small part, is due to the strong relationships they've built with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), especially the Division of Forestry, over the decades. In addition, the work they accomplish is dependent on the grants and financial assistance they receive from the DNR annually. In addition to sustainable funding for the counties, 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.

CURRENT STATUS: We have built a system over the years which has created substantial reliance on the DNR for assistance, both financially and technically. However, without technical assistance (time standard hours) and financial support (grants) keeping pace with inflation and the complexity of the county forest system, both in scope and scale, the impact realized by our county forests is diminishing every year.

RECOMMENDATION: The revenue to cover these items already exists within the DNR's coffers but the spending authority has been overly restrictive. We respectfully request legislative support of the county forest system by raising the DNR's spending authority, increasing funding available in the DNR budget and backing the following initiatives.

1. **County Forest Administrator Grant** – Per §28.11, the DNR agrees to “fund all of the following for one professional forester in the position of county forest administrator or assistant county forest administrator: 1. Up to 50% of the forester's salary. 2. Up to 50% of the forester's fringe benefits, except that the fringe benefits may not exceed 40% of the forester's salary.” The amount the DNR's allocates for this grant annually is quickly consumed by the ever-increasing costs of salary and fringe.
 - **Request:** The allocation amount should be increased by a minimum of 5% each year of the biennium to cover these costs.
2. **Sustainable Forestry Grant** – Because the Sustainable Forestry Grant is taken from the same pot of money as the County Forest Administrator Grant, as salary and fringe costs grow with inflation, the less becomes available for forest management work accomplished through these grants.
 - **Request:** Allocate the full \$250,000 for this grant, above and beyond what is made available for the County Forest Administrators Grant, essentially making the Sustainable Forestry Grant whole once again.

3. **Wildlife Habitat Grant** – The Wildlife Habitat Grant has been at \$0.05/acre since 2010. However, it has also been prorated for the last several years, as the funds are being redistributed elsewhere. Even so, \$120,000 doesn't go a long way on 2.4 million acres of publicly owned land.
- **Request:** At a minimum, the Wildlife Habitat Grant should be made whole with no proration occurring. Secondly, we request the Wildlife Habitat Grant be increased back up to \$0.10/acre as it states in statute.
4. **Time Standard Hours** – Time Standard Hours are critical to the county forests' mission. Division of Forestry personnel complete essential tasks on behalf of the counties. The time standard allocation has been more or less 46,000 hours for 20 years. A recent needs assessment exercise, using calculation formulas established by the Division of Forestry, WCFA and the Counties, showed a need of over 52,000 hours. However, due to other priorities and staffing shortages, the Division is still only able to supply 46,000 hours, a proration of 88%. Given the increasing complexity of the county forest system, both in scope and scale, more work is having to be done with the same number of hours received.
- **Request:** The allocation of time standard hours should be increased to 52,000 hours. This will require an increase of the Division's position authority and the hiring of an additional 3.3 FTE staff to support the county forests mission.
 - It should be noted that we do not want to diminish the work of the DNR on their own lands, for their own priorities and are not suggesting reprioritizing work or reallocating staff time.
 - **Request:** Going forward, the allocation of hours should be seriously reviewed every time a needs assessment is completed. It would be appropriate to adjust the allotment of hours based on the actual need over time as programs, services, funding and staffing shifts.

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