

Minnesota Forestry Association – The Future

By: Bruce ZumBahlen

“Serving Minnesota’s woodland owners by promoting stewardship of all forest resources” has been the mission statement of MFA ever since I can remember. At the time I joined in the late 70’s, MFA’s over-all goal was to be an advocate for management of all MN’s forestlands, regardless of ownership. Over time, MFA’s focus has become primarily to support sustainable management of MN’s family owned forests, some 5.3 million acres owned by 193,000 families and individuals according to the latest FIA data from the USDA Forest Service (up from 173,000 families in 2003).

With that focus in mind, I’m pleased that we were invited to participate in this panel and respond to the following questions posed by the conference planners:

- 1) **What is MFA’s vision for its future leadership role in MN, especially in terms of achieving the “Next Million Acre” goal?** (i.e. 1 million more acres under Forest Stewardship Management Plans).
- 2) **What is your vision for your organization’s future?** and
- 3) **How could the conference participants (or others) help you achieve that vision?**

Those questions prompted the MFA Board to hold a facilitated discussion at its August 15, 2007 Board of Directors meeting.

Many of you in the audience are MFA members. But, for those unfamiliar with MFA, I’m going to provide a short background on where MFA has been in recent times that will help you put some context to the answers to those questions.

We’ll start with membership. While most of our members own forest land in MN, it is not a requirement for membership. In fact, half of the current Board members do not own woodland in MN. Our membership also includes those who support our education mission, or just like to receive the 2 magazines and bi-monthly newsletter or they have an interest in protecting forest lands from development or are concerned over the threat to MN’s forest ecosystems from invasive species. We are particularly concerned over the impending transfer of woodlands to the next generation, a generation that many of us perceive as being apathetic towards keeping woodlands intact managing them. We are a non-profit 501 (c) (3) tax-exempt organization.

MFA has operated without an Executive Director going onto 5 years now. The Board and its Officers have taken on the role of a working board, besides governance. Directors and Officers receive no compensation for their service, other than a free lunch provided at Board meetings arranged to expedite completion of the agenda. At the time we decided to operate without an Executive Director, the MFA Board of Directors was 14 members in size. Today, there are 9 members. MFA’s membership overwhelming voted to reduce the size of the Board 2 years ago so it could be more nimble on its feet

responding to issues in a timely manner. With these and other changes over the past 5 years, MFA's financial situation has stabilized, its assets have grown in value, and the membership numbers have increased slightly (to about 800 members).

Membership dues only account for about 40% of our operating budget. The rest of the budget is supported by reimbursements for educational services, a share of the revenue from ads in the annual Forest Resource Management Directory (published in partnership with the MN Logger Education Program), and an annual distribution of year end assets that MFA placed with the St. Paul Foundation. MFA also has an investment account which the current Board has been reluctant to tap so that it can grow to the point that income from the account can support an Executive Director.

Now, to the questions posed for this conference. While I wish I could say that the MFA Board reached consensus to completely answer those questions posed to us regarding a vision, I have to say that we did not. If you have ever been in an organization that has embarked on creating a vision and mission statement, you can probably appreciate it takes time to reach consensus.

At issue is a minority view that MFA should seek to be the primary source of information for family forest landowners and provide services to only its members.

I sense a majority of the Board, however, feels that we should continue to provide a leadership role where it makes sense for us to take on particular issues that contribute to sustainable management of family woodland owners, like what we have been doing by sponsoring education events and to affect changes in property tax laws for rural woodlands.

I think I can say that every one on the Board would like to have an **Executive Director. If we can afford one!** We've done o.k. without one, but if we want to go to the next level, we probably need one. **Because,**

We would like to be at any table that deals with family owned woodlands. A volunteer organization can only go so far in meeting that challenge.

So, what can I say about a **VISION for MFA's Future Leadership Role?**

The nearest thing to a vision that will likely emerge for MFA's leadership role in MN will come from the following themes:

- 1) **MFA will provide leadership to build the capacity of private woodland owners to receive technical assistance and information.**
- 2) **We will serve MN's private woodland owners by promoting stewardship through education of all forest resources.**
- 3) **Protecting privately owned working forest lands from development and encouraging their management will be part of the equation.**

Whatever we come up with for a new vision, I expect that MFA will seek to partner with like minded organizations concerned with maintaining healthy forests that contribute to healthy economies.

What is a **Vision for MFA's Future?** (these are my own thoughts)

We will be a respected member of the forestry community and will be sought out on matters dealing with sustainable management of family owned woodlands. But, our membership numbers won't be the most impressive thing we are known for.

This past spring, some of us on the MFA Board attended a working session with the leadership of several woodland owner organizations from other states in Green Lake, Wisconsin (e.g. Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, and Wisconsin). We all seem to have the same problem in attracting members. My guess is it is a reflection on the reasons why many landowners own woodlands: they are more interested in recreational activities or just a place to escape and be left alone.

While I would like to think that we have the potential to attract a lot more folks to join MFA, I've come to realize that rather than numbers - it may be more important to have quality. I'd personally rather see us have folks who can make a difference in their local communities and in their own personal circles that advance the cause of sustainable management of privately owned woodlands.

Like the folks who have committed their time and own money to participate in the Wisconsin Leadership Institute. We really do appreciate the support that the Blandin Foundation provided to supplement MFA's budget to accomplish that. And, I am pleased to report that 3 of this year's class will be running for a seat on MFA's Board of Directors this fall.

To the issue of: **What can MFA do to help achieve the "Next Million Acre" goal? And, as important, see the woodlands actively managed?**

I've shared this with the Family Forests Action Team that is developing some strategies to improve timber productivity in MN that will be presented at the Productivity Conference in Duluth on October 16. And, it may not be news to others here after Tom Kroll's enthusiastic presentation.

The one thing at this point in time that could have the most meaningful impact on private woodland management, is to resurrect and pass the language in the recently vetoed MN tax bill that would lower the property class rate on rural woodlands and value those properties on their current use rather than have the valuations based on their highest and best use that is helping to drive development of privately owned woodlands.

Based on public surveys, MN's property taxes appear to be the least liked form of taxation.

Lowering the class rate would serve as a “carrot” for attracting woodland owners to apply for forest stewardship plans. The vetoed tax bill stipulated that woodland owners would have to have an approved management plans that meets the requirements in the Sustainable Forest Incentive Act (SFIA). Those plans are supposed to have a schedule for carrying out recommended practices.

That’s where the schedule in the management plan can serve as a “stick” to drive those recommendations to be implemented. The vetoed tax bill stipulated that the county assessor would be in a position to ask for information in order for the landowner to receive the lower class rate, similar to what agriculture producers can be required to do to keep their land in the Green Acres program. Landowners would have to apply annually to receive the lower class rate; thus, that provision serves to provide some level of monitoring.

I think this new property tax class rate would do more to generate an interest by woodland owners to get management plans, but just as important – it would create the self-interest needed to actually implement the plan in order to get the significant property tax relief.

MFA stands ready to do what it can to see that these changes are enacted into law. I should also mention that the vetoed tax bill sought to increase the SFIA minimum annual incentive payment to \$5.00 per acre. We were prepared to act appropriately in the event the agenda for the special session just held also included the tax bill, but now we will have to wait until the next regular legislative session beginning next February.

What can conference participant do to help us achieve our vision? (the third question asked)

MFA member Tom Kroll has drafted a letter in support of the changes I mentioned plus some enhancements to make it more effective. We would like to have other organizations represented here and in the broader natural resource community to sign that letter lending their support to making the changes. A final draft of that letter will be forthcoming sometime this fall so that it ready to be circulated to the legislative leaders.

In the meantime, want can you do to help MFA another way? Well, for those folks who aren’t members – join us! As I said, we seek quality and you are the kind of people we want as members or you wouldn’t be here if you didn’t have the same concerns and interests as MFA does. You can see me for an application.