Increasing the Productivity of Minnesota’s Forest for Timber

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As we near the end of the 20th century and prepare to move into the 21st, we see the forests of Minnesota becoming increasingly important. They continue to be an important source of raw material to meet increasing demands for wood, paper, and related products. They continue to be important for the production of quality water, recreation, and wildlife habitat. The emerging awareness of the importance and increasing interest in biological diversity provided by our forests is creating added interest in our forests and the way they are managed.

With this increasing interest comes the potential for conflict. The Generic Environmental Impact Statement (GEIS) for Timber Harvesting and Forest Management was in response to this increasing, interest and concern, as well as the need for ensuring that our forests are being managed in a sustainable manner. The GEIS recommended more than 20 strategies to mitigate the potential impacts of timber harvesting in our state.

We, in the forestry community, have spent considerable time and energy addressing many of the significant issues raised in the GEIS. Some of these efforts began even before the GEIS was completed. For example, we have DNR guidelines for old growth and extended rotation forests, BMPs for water quality, wetlands, and visual quality; and draft guidelines for riparian management, site-level wildlife habitat, cultural and historic resources, and long term soil productivity. These are very important efforts involving a lot of people that are resulting in significant environmental benefits.

However, one of the mitigation strategies from the GEIS that has yet to receive much serious attention is “increasing the wood fiber productivity of timberlands.” The GEIS concludes that “the area of timberlands available for harvesting in Minnesota is projected to decrease. Increasing the productivity of existing and future forest stands is one way of ensuring an adequate supply of timber for harvest.” In fact, our continued efforts in some of the important environmental initiatives named above, will likely contribute to a loss in the area available for harvesting and overall productivity of timberlands. In order to integrate these environmental initiatives into forest management effectively, it is time we focus some energy on forest productivity for timber. I am pleased to see such a large number of people involved in forest management and policy doing just that, investing time and energy in this conference which I am sure will result in on-the-ground action to increase timber productivity.

Minnesota’s forest land base provides ample opportunity to increase timber productivity while at the same time protecting the natural values important to many of us. For example, Minnesota has 16.7 million acres of forest land, 14.7 million acres of which is classified as timberland. More than 8.5 million acres of the timberland are capable of producing more than 80 cubic feet per acre per year. The remaining 6.2 million acres of timber land have a potential productivity class that averages 34.5 cubic feet per acre per year. If two-thirds of the growth potential (or acres) was realized from the higher productivity lands and one half from the lower productive lands, we would be producing about seven million cords. Add to that a potential two million cords that could come from some riparian and other agriculture lands planted to hybrid poplars and cottonwoods in the form of an alternative cash crop and we are looking at nine million cords. This could leave 5.5 million acres untouched or managed for other purposes.

First, I am not necessarily advocating this scenario. I present it to illustrate the opportunity we have to create a win/win outcome for our economy and our environment. Second, if we are to achieve increased productivity, we need to have a community with a vision, a will, and a technical know-how to do it. Having the land with the potential is not enough.

Again, that is why we are all here—to get a vision, to reinforce the will, and to develop the technical know-how to make it happen. Good luck. I look forward to the excellent program. Most of all, I look forward to the action that will follow to result in increasing the Productivity of Minnesota’s Forests for Timber.

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1Director of Forestry, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, 500 Lafayette Rd. N., St. Paul, MN 55128.

2An Analysis of Minnesota’s Fifth Forest Resources Inventory. 1990. USDA Forest Service Resource Bulletin NC-165 (p. 61).

3Ibid (p. 69).