

NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT – A Cause for Concern

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The phrase “Best of Wisconsin’s North Woods” caught my eye recently while visiting the Land and Resource Management Section of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest website. The author uses the words to tout, glowingly, how diverse the landscape is in the 1.5 million-acre forest in Northern Wisconsin with its multitude of lakes, streams and rivers and that the land is “managed with multiple uses in mind.” I can attest it is a fine place to live and recreate, but my doubts are growing about how long our local National Forest can live up to its top billing.

As a biologist, I’m expected to verify my recommendations or comments with scientific facts or evaluations. Over the last decade public pressure has been placed on land managers to prove that they are managing forests sustainably. Independent, third-party certification has been conducted across the country to determine if the management of forests meets strict standards for ecological, social and economic sustainability.

In Wisconsin alone, the following forested lands have received third party certification:

- Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources – 1.5 million acres, includes 10 state forests, state parks, wildlife areas and natural areas
- Wisconsin County Forests – 2.4 million acres
- Non-industrial Private Lands in the Wisconsin Managed Forest Law Program – 31,000 landowners managing over 2.2 million acres
- Industrial Forest Lands – over 300,000 acres



Absent from the list of certified forests in Wisconsin is the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. The US Forest Service contracted in 2007 to have pilot evaluations conducted on several National Forests, including the Chequamegon-Nicolet, to look into the potential for forest certification. The report concluded that, “While in many aspects the National Forests evaluated measured up well against widely-accepted standards for sustainable forestry, there were several important conservation challenges that would need to be addressed.” As noted in the Chequamegon-Nicolet’s evaluation, the Forest faces “legal challenges outside of their control that could introduce delays in implementing planned future projects.”

REASONS FOR LACK OF MANAGEMENT

These legal challenges have delayed the implementation of important forest management activities and “could result

in continuing forest health issues and a potential failure to protect the forest from damaging agents.” The Forest Service decided not to move forward with certification so our National Forests remain as one of the largest forest landowners in the country lacking certification.

Those RGS members who have hunted on our National Forests over the years have seen a steady reduction in active forest management. Instead of watching ruffed grouse and woodcock flush from newly regenerated stands of aspen, acres and acres of over-mature aspen are tumbling to the ground. Not since 1989 has the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest achieved its annual plan goal for aspen harvests (see Figure 1).

Over the past 10 years, this Forest has only harvested 25% of its current plan goal for aspen. Neither we nor the suite of wildlife species that utilize this important young forest habitat can tolerate a poten-

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tial 75% drop in available habitat. The declines in populations of species like the American woodcock and golden-winged warbler will only continue unless we return proper management to these National Forest lands.

Well-intended laws and regulations, including the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), have guided the management of our National Forests for many decades but have been used by some to strangle the agency.

The Ruffed Grouse Society was present during the entire eight year plan revision process for the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, as well as most other forests in the range of ruffed grouse, providing scientifically based comments and highlighting our concerns. Unfortunately the threat of lawsuits from environmental groups seemed to carry more weight and a final decision that could reduce ruffed grouse populations by 20,000 birds per year prevailed. Then Forest Supervisor Anne Archie in her Record of Decision states, "During the first decade aspen habitat could potentially decrease by only a very small percentage. In the second and third decades there would be a noticeable decrease in aspen habitat." This decision was based on the assumption that Forest Plan harvest goals for aspen would be achieved at Plan levels, not at the 25% level that has actually occurred.

Forest Supervisor Archie went on to say, "Another Forest Plan Revision will occur in 10-15 years that will position the Forest and the public for discussion and decision on the amount of aspen habitat to retain into the future." As a taxpayer and Forest user, the last sentence really concerned me. The Forest Service was saying that it's okay to put off into the future a decision on the amount of aspen in the Forest. Unfortunately, anyone who knows about the life history of aspen knows you can't keep putting off the decision – once lost it may never return. We have already witnessed thousands of acres of over-mature aspen succeeding to maple and basswood forests, a far less desirable habitat for ruffed grouse and woodcock.

BRIGHT SPOTS ON HORIZON

Fortunately there are some glimmers of hope. After many years of litigation by environmental groups over nearly every forest management project on the Forest, recent judgments have ruled in favor of the Forest Service to move forward to implement the Plan. Forest management once stalled in place is moving forward. Forest staff, once stymied by constant appeals and litigation to their work, are eagerly moving forward to do what they do best.

Projects are being implemented that are targeting over-mature aspen stands such as the Medford Aspen Project on the Medford/Park Falls Ranger District. Also included in a recent project proposal are the management of 11 of the Forest's 15

cooperative Ruffed Grouse and Woodcock Management Areas. Although well behind the goal of renewing habitat in these areas every 10 years, this management proposal – once implemented – will provide over 5,500 acres of young forest habitat. RGS members in large numbers have provided written support for this project and the Ruffed Grouse Society is planning to provide both biological and financial support to help this work move ahead.

In addition, natural events, that don't listen to lawyers and judges, have had quite an impact on the Forest in recent years. Large wind events, including a tornado that was on the ground for over 40 miles in Northeastern Wisconsin in 2007, and a recent disease outbreak that devastated over 8,000 acres of spruce

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plantations, have done what forest managers couldn't do: provide an abundance of young forest habitat in a short period of time. Wildlife populations in the areas affected are already responding, with increased use by breeding woodcock.

Also of note is an increasing awareness in the scientific community of the importance of young forest habitats. The American woodcock is now a priority species of the US Fish and Wildlife Service in many regions and this species is also on most states' lists of Species of Greatest Conservation Need. The golden-winged warbler is currently being considered for federal listing as an Endangered or Threatened Species. Studies have shown the critical habitat that young forests provide is important even for species often thought to prefer more mature forest habitats. Research has documented that of 187 species of neotropical migratory songbirds that breed in the Midwest, more than half use shrub-sapling or young-forest habitats to some degree during the breeding season. Without a doubt a diverse landscape that includes a wide array of forest ages and types is essential for the survival of a litany of species.

The planning regulations for the National Forest system are currently under review and RGS is at the forefront of these discussions, attempting to reduce the stranglehold that the current regulations have put on managing our National Forests. These opportunities and concerns make it even more important that the Ruffed Grouse Society, its staff and its members, continue our efforts to support sound forest management on our National Forests. We all need to work together to once again bring these important public lands back to being the "Best in the North Woods." ☐