

Forest Roundtable
Convened by the Vermont Natural Resources Council
October 28, 2008
Draft Meeting Summary

Meeting Participants: Leo Laferriere, Jonathan Wood, Peter Upton, Put Blodgett, Ehrhard Frost, Hervey Scudder, Dan Davis, Diane Burbank, Jeff Smith, John Roe, Jon Binhammer, Rodger Krussman, Phil Huffman, Steve Long, Virginia Barlow, Michael Snyder, Joan Allen, Lisa Sausville, Jens Hilke, Matthew Hoffman, Eric Sorenson, Deb Brighton, Peter Condaxis, Ann Ingerson, Patrick Bartlett, John Austin, Hugo Liepmann, Shawn Geoffrey, Jake Brown and Jamey Fidel

Informal conversation over lunch, meeting convened at 1 pm.

Welcome, Introductions, review of materials (minutes, agenda)
Jamey Fidel, Forest Program Director, VNRC

Discussion re: Changes to the Current Use Program

Jonathan Wood, the commissioner of the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, (FPR) said that developing the new enrollment standards for “ecologically significant treatment areas” (ESTA) has been a good process and a good change. This will expand what is one of the most important conservation programs in the state, he said.

He described the legislation and thanked Michael Snyder, Nancy Patch, and Eric Sorenson for doing work on the standards. He hopes to do three other meetings, one with industry, one with consulting foresters and one with landowners, and maybe a general meeting for the general public. He stressed the standards being presented are a working draft.

He said this gathering is the first time a group outside ANR has looked at the criteria. He said ANR is required to have a final product by April 15, saying he needs to report to the legislature in the meantime. He said FPR has concerns about how this new program can be implemented because of budget constraints in state government. State government is contracting, he said, and FPR is now coming out with an additional product. He said this is “really bad timing.” He said it is worthwhile and beneficial but how the state

administers it is going to be challenging. He said this is a major caveat on how the state will be able to administer this.

He said the changes are not to allow landowners who don't want to cut trees to have "an out" – this is the major caveat here, he said. This is going to be based on the criteria. This message is important, he said.

Steve Sinclair gave a detailed presentation of the changes made by the law. He noted that under the law, municipalities owning land in another town may now enroll that land and that there was a section in the law about continuing the work of task force by discussing additional issues; and that the statute improves administrative efficiencies. He said the additional meetings might include naturalists as well as those parties that Jonathan Wood suggested. Steve Sinclair said FPR wants to have something in January for the legislature to look at.

Steve Sinclair went through definition of parcel and what acreages are eligible. He said that under the new law the 20 percent cap on the amount of Site 4 (non productive land) gets thrown out, but the proposed guidelines require a minimum of 20 acres of productive forestland. So, if you start with the 25-acre minimum for enrollment, you can subtract up to 5 acres if they are site 4 and because you do not drop below 20 acres, you are still eligible to be in the program.

Example: if you had 40 acres and 30 acres are Site 4, you would not be able to enroll all 40 acres because the remaining 10 acres is under the 20-acre minimum.

Under the proposal, FPR is also suggesting that the Site 4 lands (non productive) could also include land over 2500 ft elevation w. slopes of over 20 percent. Beaver ponds, rock outcroppings, and other water bodies and other features are examples of site 4 lands.

Jonathan Wood said that FPR doesn't want people gaming the system.

Under the proposal for open land, open land is pastures or wildlife openings mowed no more than two times a year.

Questions arose from participants over the mowing requirement. Why two times? Why not once? Why not make it once every five years?

A discussion followed about pasturing. Some people want to have a few cows in an opening. Steve Sinclair said that land that is used for pasturing should be in the agriculture portion of the UVA program.

Jonathan Wood stressed that open land (not Site 4) and ESTAs will be required to have normal management plans (covering a 10 year period with goals and objectives and activities with a required update.) Inventory will be required on those areas as well.

Another provision of the FPR proposal: under no circumstances can ESTAs be more than 20 percent of Sites 1-3 (productive) land. There is no appeal to commissioner to get more than 20 percent.

John Austin of the Fish and Wildlife Department reiterated Jonathan Wood's statements on the issue of resources: John Austin said it's going to be very challenging, but it's too good an opportunity to let pass by.

Steve Sinclair noted that for wildlife-related lands, the landowner has to get the areas verified by F&W before the plan shows up on doorstep of FPR. F&W has to do the verification ahead of time.

Eric Sorenson of the F&W made a presentation on the ecological details of the ESTAs.

Generally, ESTAs would not include regular timber harvesting, but could have some activity (eg. invasive species control). Burden has been shifted to the landowner to identify these areas.

Natural communities: In areas already mapped, you would need to do field delineation; other areas that are not mapped, you need documentation.

The management plan update every ten years would catch any changes in species ranking (importance of the species.)

Riparian areas: The FPRs position is that most are well suited for timber harvesting, and if you want to manage riparian areas as ESTAs you really need good reasons, like gorges, bank failure, etc. – so you must make the case that the riparian area merits taking a no harvest approach, and a landowner will need to apply to keep it out of traditional management.

Vernal pools: For a long time the agency has not tracked vernal pools. This would be treating them as a state significant natural community. Those could be enrolled as an ESTA.

Eric Sorenson says there could be 7,500 vernal pools statewide. Some are already mapped. Tracking this could be a very big workload increase, he said. Delineating the vernal pools could be done by the landowner as long as they are done by the right standards.

Forested wetlands: They would be identified by the landowner or forester. It would not be necessary for the state Fish and Wildlife Department to approve them.

Old Forests: The trees would have to currently meet the standards for being an old forest. In other words, a landowner could not enroll areas in an ESTA by saying they are planning to grow younger trees to old growth. Eric Sorenson said there is not a bright line on what is an old forest; there will have to be some forester discretion. Leo Lafferiere expressed concern about making these analyses too complicated for landowners and he used an example that coring an old sugarbush would be very difficult. Jonathan Wood said this “old forest” category needs more work and said the department would take another shot at it.

Diane Burbank raised a question about experimental management techniques, like an oak burn. Could they come in under an ESTA?

Jonathan Wood said FPR probably would have to add something specific if FPR wanted to allow this. He said he did not want to open the door too wide, saying the department might look at a new category, or something more specific under this section.

Jamey Fidel asked whether it is possible to track how many people are being cut off at the 20 percent line for ESTAs. Eric Sorenson said clayplain forests are good examples of that possibility because they tend to be big.

Overall, Roundtable participants expressed support for the new enrollment criteria and thanked the Departments of Forests, Parks, and Recreation and Fish and Wildlife for their work.

Sinclair asked for comments on the proposed standards by December 1.

Break

Discussion re: Biomass

Chris Recchia, Executive Director of the Biomass Energy Resource Center (BERC) gave a presentation about biomass and its potential for Vermont.

He noted BERC's publication of the Northern Forest Biomass Energy Action Plan.

According to Chris Recchia, the big question is this: will the change from a fossil fuel emphasis on our economy lead to exploitation of our forests or to sustainable use of this resource? There is the potential boom and bust cycle kind of like the paper pulp area.

He noted that the approaching "peak oil" pressures will put the Northeast at a competitive disadvantage because some 80 percent of our heating in the region is done with oil, which is high compared to other regions.

Chris Recchia said that local biomass energy could act as a force for sustainable forestry. Efficiency is key. Including heat in any biomass electricity generation process is far more efficient. The McNeil plant in Burlington is 20 percent efficient; you can get 65-70 percent efficiency for combined heat and power and even higher for industrial process heat and space heat, he said.

He said increasingly there will be pressure from other states for our wood, and we also need to track what is going in other states.

Chris Recchia used the term "low grade wood" and was asked by a participant to define it. He said it's wood that is not for lumber, but pulp and paper, and lower grade than that. Thinnings and badly shaped wood is low grade wood. It's the material you take out to improve the wood in the lot, he said.

Chris Recchia said that renewable energy credits (RECs) and electricity price signals are bad to the point where plants would not bother to try to

generate heat in their plants. He said heat is not included in the REC accounting.

Under the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, he said, there needs to be a better incentive to reward people who have managed their forests over time; not clear cut and replanted.

Chris Recchia said that BERC is looking at the viability of grass as a biomass source, but he noted that the burners are not technologically advanced enough to be capable of efficient burning of grass pellets. Stoves need to be improved.

Another question came from the group: how do you measure forest sustainability? BERC's Adam Sherman said BERC are not the forestry experts, but that they rely on partners including county foresters, consulting foresters, etc.

Chris Recchia identified an important region wide concern - will there be enough wood to go around?

Jamey Fidel closed the meeting at approximately 5 pm.