

The Status of Southern Forests:

Productivity, Ecological Diversity, and Sustainability

BACKGROUND

The USDA Forest Service is initiating an effort to compile and analyze data and information necessary to evaluate the status of the forest resources of the southern U.S.; their productivity, ecological diversity and sustainability. Forest resources to be evaluated include timber and forest products, biological attributes, and aquatics. The geographic scope of the evaluation includes the 13 states that comprise the Southern Region (Region 8) of the Forest Service: AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, and VA. It will be conducted in close cooperation with southern state forestry agencies, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and Tennessee Valley Authority.

For the purposes of this effort, productivity of the forests is intended to connote their ability to produce a full range of amenities and commodities (timber, wildlife, recreation, water, range). Ecological diversity includes biological organisms and their habitats. Sustainability means managing forests to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs by practicing a land stewardship ethic which integrates the growing, nurturing and harvesting of trees for useful products with the conservation of soil, water quality, wildlife and fish habitat, and aesthetics. (American Forest and Paper Association, 1995).

Some initial issue identification was completed as part of the federal interagency staff's recent effort to define issues surrounding forest ecosystem sustainability for the Southeastern Natural Resource Agency Leaders Group. More detailed and comprehensive analyses will be required to ensure that all pertinent and answerable questions are surfaced for this assessment. Input from cooperating and interested agencies and the public will be actively sought.

TIMEFRAME

The project is expected to take 2 years.

SCOPE AND SCALE

The assessment will include 2 primary phases, or components: a region-wide status report and one or more smaller area evaluations.

Region-wide Assessment

While the geographic scope of the project is the 13 southern states noted above, data and information will be retrieved and analyzed at the state and "section" ecological unit levels. Reporting at these scales will maximize the assessment's usefulness at the state and local level and provide an ecological context that transcends political boundaries.

State-level analysis and reporting fits well within traditional means of collecting, storing and reporting forest inventory data. Questions answerable by Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) data will be readily addressed at this scale. The FIA program for the South is located at the U.S. Forest Service Southern Research Station in Asheville, NC.

The ecological unit "section" level analysis will prove useful in answering questions on an ecological basis. This scale of analysis, however, provides challenges regarding data compilation and interpretation, as data of different ages and formats must be combined in order to be analyzed.

The scope of subjects to be evaluated will be limited to those for which data and information are readily available and which contribute answers to the critical questions regarding forest resource sustainability. During the region-wide assessment, collection of new data will not be feasible, given the limited time and resources available to address the 13-state area. It is likely, therefore, that some important questions will not be answerable by this evaluation. These will be noted as requiring further study.

Smaller Area Assessment

Because some resource questions are best answered at a smaller scale, a second tier assessment is also planned. Its purpose will be to focus on smaller areas i.e. ecological units, states, or portions of states, where sustainability appears to either be in question or demands additional attention. This scale of assessment should facilitate more detailed data analysis and evaluation of potential cause/effect relationships.

Criteria for selecting and evaluating these study areas will be identified early in the overall process. Choice of study areas and parameters to be evaluated will be based on information gathered during the region-wide assessment, other agencies' data and information, and public input.

Unlike the region-wide assessment, it is anticipated that this scale of analysis will require additional data collection. Potential sources include FIA, forest industry, regional and state sources, satellite imagery, and other non-government sources. Specific data needs, sources, and associated cost will depend on the number and nature of the smaller area(s) chosen for further study.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

The public will be involved throughout the process; from identifying and refining questions to be addressed, to review of the final product. Progress reports will be prepared on a regular basis, and will be available via the Internet. Input will be actively sought from individuals and groups of stakeholders. A public involvement and communications plan, to be developed during the startup phase (April and May, 1999), will provide more details on this important aspect of the project.

EXPECTED OUTPUTS

The assessment will result in a bound publication containing a variety of tabular, graphic and GIS data accompanied by narrative analysis. The region-wide assessment will be reported separately from the smaller area assessment, The latter will also include tabular, graphic and GIS displays and narrative analysis, but will also likely reflect the use of satellite imagery.

AGENCY CONTACTS

David Wear, USDA FOREST SERVICE ph. 919-549-4011

John Greis, USDA FOREST SERVICE ph 404-347-7223

Lee Barclay, US Fish and Wildlife Service ph 931-528-6481 Ext. 212

Heinz Mueller, US Environmental Protection Agency ph 404-562-9611

Jim Williamson, Tennessee Valley Authority ph 423-632-1516

Tom Loggins, Georgia Forestry Commission ph 912-751-3524