

OCONTO COUNTY FOREST COMPREHENSIVE LAND USE PLAN

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100 **MISSION STATEMENT**

Natural resources, such as those provided by the County Forest, are the base for addressing the ecological and socioeconomic needs of society. The mission of the Oconto County Forest is to manage, conserve and protect these resources on a sustainable basis for present and future generations.

County Forest resources should be protected from natural catastrophes such as fire, insect and disease outbreaks, and from human threats such as encroachment, over-utilization, environmental degradation and excessive development. While managed for environmental needs including watershed protection, protection of rare plant and animal communities, and maintenance of plant and animal diversity, these same resources must also be managed and provide for sociological needs, including provisions for recreational opportunities and the production of raw materials for wood-using industries.

Management must balance local needs with broader state, national and global concerns through integration of sound forestry, wildlife, fisheries, endangered resources, water quality, soil, and recreational practices. Management will provide this variety of products and amenities for the future through the use of sustainable forest management practices.

105 **GOAL OF THE COUNTY FOREST COMPREHENSIVE LAND USE PLAN
(Hereafter referred to as the “Plan”)**

To administer the County Forest program consistent with the mission statement and the purpose and direction of the County Forest Law as stated in s. 28.11, Wis. Stats., giving consideration to input from citizens and groups. The purpose of the County Forest Law being:

“ ... to provide the basis for a permanent program of county forests and to enable and encourage the planned development and management of the County Forests for optimum production of forest products together with recreational opportunities, wildlife, watershed protection and stabilization of stream flow, giving full recognition to the concept of multiple use to assure maximum public benefits; to protect the public rights, interests and investments in such lands; and to compensate

the counties for the public uses, benefits and privileges these lands provide; all in a manner which will provide a reasonable revenue to the towns in which such lands lie.”

Each state agency, whenever it administers a law under which a local governmental unit prepares a plan, is encouraged to design its planning requirements in a manner that makes it practical for local governmental units to incorporate these plans into local comprehensive plans prepared under s. 66.1001 Wis. Stats (i.e. “Smart Growth” planning) s. 1.13(3) Wis. Stats. This County Forest plan will complement, and should be a part of local comprehensive planning efforts (e.g. Smart growth). There are similarities in the considerations of both plans although the County Forest plan is of smaller scale and focused by s. 28.11, Wis. Stats. In an effort to ensure that the values of the Oconto County Forest are fully recognized, protected and infused into local planning, the County Forest Administrator will work with Oconto County Zoning & Planning.

110 CHAPTER 100 OBJECTIVE

1. To recognize the authority of the County and State in the administration and development of operating policies on the Oconto County Forest.
2. To provide the reader of the plan with background information regarding the County Forest.

115 STATUTORY AUTHORITY

The County Forest Law (s 28.10 and 28.11 Wis. Stats.) provides the authority to establish, develop, and manage a permanent County Forest Program. (For the full text of the County Forest Law refer to Chapter 900 (905.1).

120 COUNTY AUTHORITY

The County Forest Comprehensive Land Use Plan is the official County Forest authority. The Forest, Parks & Recreation/Land Information Systems Sub Committee of the Oconto County Board (*hereafter referred to as the “committee”*) enforces the regulations governing the use of the Oconto County Forest.

120.1 ORDINANCES

The county ordinances that apply to the administration and management of the Oconto County Forest can be found in Chapter 900 – Section 905.

125 HISTORY

125.1 STATEWIDE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

In 1927, the State Legislature passed the Forest Crop Law, authorizing counties to create county forests. An opinion of the Attorney General with reference to the Forest Crop Law stated that the counties would be exempt from the owner's share of annual tax. The Legislature of 1929 specifically provided that counties were exempt from paying the "acreage share" required of private owners. The legislature of 1931 amended the County Forest Reserve Law of 1929. It provided for the payment of acreage aids to Towns for County Forest land and an additional annual State payment of \$.10 /acre to the Counties for all land within county forests entered under the Forest Crop Law. Counties were required to spend this aid money solely for the development of the county forest. In return for this aid, the state originally collected a seventy-five percent severance tax on the products cut on county forests. This was reduced to fifty percent in 1937 and then to twenty percent of gross sales in 1963.

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In 1963, several major revisions were made to the County Forest Law. The most notable change was the creation of a permanent program of forests that would be managed in accordance with a 10 Year Comprehensive Land Use Plan developed by the county, with the assistance of the Department of Natural Resources. The severance tax on harvested forest products still remains at 20% of the stumpage value, although no severance tax is collected if counties do not have a loan balance. A number of grants, loans and shared revenue payments are currently available to counties to help offset any losses in taxes due to public ownership. The acreage share payment to towns is currently \$.30/acre. In addition, towns with county forest land receive a minimum of 10% of the stumpage revenue from their respective County Forest each year. Stumpage revenues exceed \$18,000,000 annually.

Twenty-nine counties in Wisconsin now own approximately two and one third million acres

entered under the County Forest Law.

125.2 COUNTY FOREST PROGRAM HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

At one time, much of Wisconsin was covered with magnificent stands of pine, hemlock, and hardwoods on the highlands, and cedar, spruce, and balsam on its lowlands. From 1860 to about 1910, these forests provided raw material for a thriving lumber industry. The need to supply lumber for a growing nation, and the lack of sound forest management, resulted in over harvest of the forests and degradation of the landscape. Immigrants rushed to these newly cleared lands, hungry for a place to farm and build their lives. But in just a few years, the soils gave out, catastrophic fires occurred, and many people were forced to seek their fortunes elsewhere. The land was left exhausted and tax delinquent. The Wisconsin County Forest program originated with the taking of these tax delinquent lands.

125.3 OCONTO COUNTY FOREST HISTORY & DEVELOPMENT

In 1931, Oconto County hired a land agent to take deed to, and dispose of, tax delinquent lands in the county. Early in 1932, there were over \$500,000.00 in delinquent certificates in addition to the 80,000 acres on which the county had already taken a deed. The tax structure in Oconto County was in serious difficulty, particularly in the northern townships.

In 1928 the Legislature approved the establishment of a National Forest purchase unit in Wisconsin. The Oconto County Board approved a federal acquisition project in the 8 northern townships in 1930. Some 38,000 acres of county owned land in 5 townships were sold to the government in 1932. The county board approved the establishment of a county forest, to be made up largely of county owned lands in the townships of Bagley, Breed and Brazeau. The County Board approved entry of County Forest lands under the Forest Crop Law in 1933 and made an initial entry of 13,298 acres. A County Zoning Ordinance and Forestry Ordinance were both passed in 1934. As of June 30, 2005, there were 43,515.82 acres in the Oconto County Forest.

Early phases of development of the county forests consisted largely of planting open areas. Much of the early planting was done by hand using Works Projects Administration (W.P.A.) labor. Oconto County pioneered in the use of mechanical tree planters, being the first county to switch to mechanical planters in the spring of 1943. The first Oconto County Forest

Timber Sale on record was made in 1934. The second sale was not made until 1940, with subsequent sales made annually. Starting in 1936, Oconto County made appropriations to the forestry accounts from the general fund for operation of the county forest.

125.4 WISCONSIN COUNTY FORESTS ASSOCIATION

Oconto County is a member of the Wisconsin County Forests Association, Inc. (WCFA). This Association was incorporated on May 15, 1968 under Chapter 181 of the Wisconsin Statutes, without stock and not for profit. The WCFA Board of Directors is composed of ten delegates elected from the County Forestry Committees who are members of the Association.

This corporation provides a forum for consideration of issues and policy that are common to all of the county committees responsible for their respective County Forest programs, including those programs encompassed under s.28.11 and Chapter 77, Wis. Stats. WCFA also provides leadership and counsel to County Forest administrators and forestry committees through regular meetings and active committees on legislative and recreational issues.

130 DESCRIPTION OF FOREST

130.1 NATURAL FEATURES

130.1.1 Topography

The Oconto County Forest, located in the Northeast part of the state, lies primarily within the Northern Highland, Central Plains, and Eastern Ridge physiographic region(s) of Wisconsin. The topography of the forest and surrounding area has glacial origin. The glaciers eroded hilltops and filled valleys, thus reducing relief. Elevations range from 1100 in the Northern part of the county forest to 580 in the Bay of Green Bay area. The terrain ranges from gently rolling/hilly in the Northern part to flat in the Southeast part of the forest.

130.1.2 Geology and Soils

The soils of Oconto County have been derived largely from the weathering of the glacial drift deposits and show a great variation within relatively short distances. Since the glacial

period, the soils have been modified by water action, wind, and the accumulation and incorporation of organic material. Soil types on the County Forest range from fine sandy loams in the Northwestern portions of the Forest to rolling pink loam in the Southeastern. A generalized soil map can be found in Chapter 900. Detailed soils information is available in the soil survey for Oconto County and in Chapter 4000 for each integrated management unit.

130.1.3 Geography

Oconto County is the 14 largest county in Wisconsin with a land area of approximately 632,639 acres, plus another 12,814 acres of water included in lakes and streams. Approximately 57 percent of the land in the county is classified as forest land. The County Forest, which contains approximately 43,516 acres, is the 17 largest County Forest in the state.

130.1.4 Biological Communities

Wisconsin's County Forests are part of a larger landscape and are managed not as sole entities but part of a larger ecoregion. The National Hierarchical Framework of Ecological Units (NHFEU) categorizes Wisconsin into two provinces, the Laurentian Mixed Forest (212) forming the northern half of the State and the Eastern Broadleaf Forest (222). Within each province are sections, subsections and landtype associations that further group land into areas with similar geology, soil types, surface water features, wetlands and historic and potential plant communities. The Oconto County Forest is encompassed within the Laurentian Mixed Forest province including subsections 212Tb and 212Tc. Landtype Associations (LTA's) within the subsections include: Northern Lake Michigan, Northeast Plains, Northeast Hills, and Northeast Sands. LTA's, having common ecological characteristics, allow land managers to better plan for future vegetative communities, wildlife species to feature, and compatible recreation uses.

A biological community is an assemblage of different plant and animal species, living together in a particular area, at a particular time in specific habitats. Communities are named for their dominant plant species. The following biological communities are found on the Oconto County Forest:

Northern Forest: contains mixed deciduous and coniferous forests found in a distinct climatic zone that occurs north of the tension zone. Commonly found in the Northeast Hills LTA in the Northern portion(s) of the County Forest.

Oak Savannas: characterized by open grassland areas interspersed with trees, especially oaks. They are defined as having less than fifty percent of the ground covered with trees. The Northern portions of the forest, encompassing LTA Northeast sands, are typical for this community.

Oak and Pine Barrens: typically occur on sandy soils and are dominated by grasses, low shrubs, small trees, and scattered large trees. Most commonly these are pine barrens in northern and southern Wisconsin and oak barrens in the southern and west central parts of the state. LTA Northeast Plains in the center part of the forest, contains the barrens communities on the Oconto County Forest.

Grassland: characterized by the absence of trees and large shrubs and the dominance of grass and forb species. Commonly found in the Northeast Plain LTA in the center part of the forest.

Wetlands: characterized by soils or substrate that is periodically saturated or covered by water. This community is common across Northern Lake Michigan and Northeast plain LTA(s) throughout the forest.

Aquatic Communities: including springs, ponds, lakes, streams and rivers. Common to the LTA Northeast Plain through the forest.

130.1.5 Vegetative Cover Types

Approximately 84 percent of the Oconto County Forest land base is forested. Forested uplands are comprised of primarily aspen, red pine, northern hardwoods, jack pine, red maple, white pine and oak, while swamp hardwood and cedar occupy the forested lowlands. The remainder is classified as non-forested, including types such as open water, wetlands, lowland brush, rights-of-way, grass openings, underbrush and bogs. The different cover

types present on the Oconto County Forest are detailed under “Forested Communities” in Chapter 800 (820.1).

The great majority of the forest (66 percent) is located in the North one-half of the county. The remaining portions are scattered in the Southern one-half of the county with the two largest blocks located Northern.

Chapter 900-appendix contains maps showing the location of the County Forest.

130.1.6 Wildlife

The Oconto County Forest is habitat for wildlife common to Wisconsin. No formal survey has been conducted to identify or inventory the fauna occurring on the Forest.

Numerous species of songbirds, waterfowl, raptors, shorebirds, reptiles, amphibians, fish and mammals frequent the forest. Each species, or interacting group of species, do best under different conditions, ranging from recently disturbed ground to old growth. A diversity of plant communities is key to providing a niche for a variety of wildlife species. For example, two very popular wildlife species in the county are the ruffed grouse and white-tailed deer. The aspen forest type is recognized as key habitat for these species and is important in maintaining biological diversity across North America. Longer rotation forest communities, such as unevenaged northern hardwood, similarly provide important habitat for other, less well-known species, such as pileated woodpeckers or northern goshawk.

Permanently sodded, grassy openings within the forest, many originating from old log landings, camps, old burns, or frost pockets] are vital components of forest wildlife habitat. An effort is being made to maintain and improve the quality and, in some cases, the quantity of openings.

130.1.7 Rare and Endangered Resources

A review of the Natural Heritage Inventory (NHI) indicates the presence of a number of rare species, natural communities and unique natural features on the Oconto County Forest. See Chapter 900 for a listing of threatened and endangered species in the Forest.

130.1.8 Water

Oconto County has 12,814 acres involving 379 named lakes, 7 flowages and 1,073 miles of streams. Of this total, 316 miles are classified as trout streams.

Within the County Forest boundaries there is a variety of fishery resources. Approximately 25 named and 5 unnamed lakes have all or portions of their shoreline under county ownership. In addition, the county owns frontage on over 7 named trout streams totaling over 10 miles. A complete inventory of the lakes and trout streams in Oconto County can be found in Chapter 900.

Oconto County also has 4 streams totaling approximately 65 miles which are classified as Outstanding and Exceptional Resource Waters including:

- First South Branch of Oconto River
- Second South Branch of Oconto River
- South Branch of Oconto River
- Hills Pond Creek

130.2 CULTURAL FACTORS

130.2.1 Recreation

Forest-based recreation has expanded rapidly in recent years in Oconto County. Recreational opportunities with developed facilities include: parks, beaches, campgrounds, primitive camping sites, boat landings, canoe campsites, and snowmobile, all-terrain vehicle, hunter/walking, or cross country ski trails. The county forest also provides tremendous opportunities for informal recreational pursuits not requiring developments. These include hunting, fishing, berry and mushroom picking, bird watching, hiking, mountain biking, and sight-seeing.

130.2.2 Economy

Production of forest products and spin-off industries derived from the recreational opportunities on the Forest and the forest products it produces are vitally important to Oconto County's economic well being. The quality of life in many counties is heavily dependent on the traditional resources the County Forest provides.

130.2.3 Roads & Access

All Oconto County Forest lands are open for public use and for foot travel. In addition to the town and county roads that access the forest, the county also maintains 36 miles of County Forest roads. A number of gated or bermed special use trails and roads are also available. Access management remains a controversial issue on the Forest. Both motorized and non-motorized recreation are provided for within the Forest. See Chapter 700 for detailed discussion on Forest access.

130.2.4 Education and Research

Education and research continue to be critical components in making decisions that affect our natural resources. As public needs and demands of our forest and its products increase, we must be prepared to assure that sound decisions result. To this end, Oconto County encourages and supports research efforts that relate to the forest, and educational opportunities that will promote a better understanding of forest communities and management.

130.2.5 Trends

The values and uses of the Oconto County Forest contribute significantly to fulfilling many of society's ecological and socioeconomic needs now and in the future. Changing trends will impact the values and uses of the Forest in coming years.

- a. Greater demands are being placed on the Forest by people using it to fulfill their recreational pursuits. The popularity of trails for various uses has lead to user conflicts. In particular, dramatic increases in the number of all terrain vehicles (ATV's) has pressured County forests into providing trails for their use and resolving access conflicts on the County Forest. Conflicts between motorized and non-motorized users are commonplace.

- b. Demands for timber products are predicted to increase. At the same

time, more private forest land is being lost to residential development, and forest landowners are decreasingly interested in managing land primarily for timber values.

c. Wisconsin's forests are naturally changing due to forest succession. Most of the County Forest acreage statewide is a result of regeneration or planting from the early to mid 1900's. Mid to late successional northern hardwood forests are replacing the early successional aspen-birch, oak and jack pine forests of the 1940's through the 1970's. The aspen cover type is key habitat for many of the state's premier game species including deer, ruffed grouse, snowshoe hare and woodcock. A declining harvest and a movement away from even-aged species on Wisconsin's National and State forests may place the responsibility of maintaining aspen, birch and jack pine types on the county forests. The county forest system currently has 15% of the State's public land base and 24% of the aspen resource.

d. Conflict over timber management practices will likely continue to increase as more individuals and groups demand greater involvement in forestry decisions. Practices such as clearcutting and even-aged management will continue to be controversial. Efforts to educate the public on the merits of these sound forest management techniques will continue.

e. Oconto County may experience funding problems as municipalities are being required to provide more services with less money. Potential losses of revenue from decreased shared revenues and resistance to tax increases may make county timber revenues increasingly important to the finances of county governments. This is complicated by increasing public pressure to reduce timber harvests on county forests.

f. Increasing knowledge about a wider variety of species and their habitat needs is leading to a growing list of threatened and endangered species. This could lead to improvements in managing the forest and mitigating impacts to these species. Mitigating measures have the potential to impede recreational and forest management activities. Refer to Chapter 800 (840) for specifics on this subject.

g. Invasive exotic species pose an ever-increasing threat to the County Forest. Gypsy moth, Asian long-horned beetle, garlic mustard, buckthorn, honeysuckle have all gained a foothold in Wisconsin's forests. Refer to Chapter 800 (830.4) for specifics on this subject.

h. The Forest is considered to be an outdoor classroom serving all age groups. It consists of diverse communities with a large variety of plant and animal life giving ample opportunity for study and observation.

130.3 COUNTY FOREST OWNERSHIP

The County Forest is composed of 90 management compartments ranging in size from 88 acres to 1,022 acres. Within the county forest boundaries approximately 70 percent of the land is county owned with most of the remaining 30 percent in small private holdings. A map of these compartments can be found in Chapter 900, exhibit.