

OHM Trail Development and State Forests

I participated in a meeting today (24 Apr 12) to review some of the work done in support of the Council on Forestry State Lands Business Plan.

The Division of Forestry went through an 18 month planning process to develop outcomes to achieve by 2017. We were tasked to review part of the Division of Forestry's priorities for the next five years to see if they aligned with concerns from stakeholders.

There were several groups convened with each group being tasked to look at a specific element of the plan. Our group focused on state lands. One sub-topic for our group to consider included recreation in the state forests.

The meeting was facilitated by The Nature Conservancy liaison to the Council on Forestry and a WDNR Forestry representative. The rest of the nine other attendees came from forest products companies/councils, the legislature, conservation groups, a northern sports business, and myself from our State Trails Council. This was an excellent group with a lot of wisdom and insight into the issues.

Much of the time was spent on issues specific to timber production and management. We also developed a good group discussion concerning recreation in the forests. The discussion appropriately remained focused at the macro business process level and did not deal with specific recreational interests.

In reading the background material and comments I found that the issues were well covered. I offered some areas of concern to consider for the plan.

The plan talked about recreation issues at a division (macro) level but noted that master plans for a property were done at a local level.

Master plans are done on a 15 year cycle. A principal input for recreation is SCORP. SCORP is produced at a five year interval, is only a snapshot that does not show whether an activity is emerging or declining, and SCORP does not accurately reflect interest in all recreational activities. For example, if there are limited opportunities for a certain activity, SCORP will only show limited participation which leaves unmet demand unaccounted for.

The division has a macro vision (plan), but master plans are locally developed and rely on a narrow source of recreation data (SCORP) which may also be inaccurate or out of date. Since the master plan is on a 15 year cycle there is a real possibility that that we may be acting on old information that will never catch up to current recreational interests.

I also expressed a concern that I didn't see a mechanism for establishing more and better partnerships at the division (macro) level with user groups, associations, and the like that can help establish what the current unmet demand for various recreational interests really is.

Partnerships with user groups and associations can assist the division with developing recreational opportunities and can also assist the division with education, outreach, and issues like managing invasive species.

User groups and associations are aware of where existing opportunities for a recreational activity are already in place. Locations may include county lands, private recreation facilities, and the like. Bringing this knowledge to a partnership with Forestry can contribute to developing better plans for offering opportunities at locations on state land.

Forests and their associated recreational activities are significant economic engines that can make strong contributions to rural economic development which we sorely need. Toward that end, local governments, chambers of commerce, and the like need to be part of the partnership between the forest division managers and recreational user groups since that combination could be a significant influence in identifying and developing appropriate recreational activities in state forests.

Important to the partnership is accountability concerning whether action is being taken to properly address recreational interests. The macro plan needs to be manifested in the local master plans.

For example, if the macro plan says we need to develop a certain recreational interest closer to where the user group lives, some authority needs to zero in on a particular property to make sure that there is a proper commitment to incorporating that interest in the local master plan. From the remarks I read by DNR personnel and others in the background material, it was clear that just as for other issues in life, individual DNR employees and others have their own ideas, interests, and priorities for recreation opportunities. A partnership at the macro scale might contribute to the division directing development of recreational activities at properties that might not otherwise have pursued them at their local site. This would be part of the division's management of their macro level plan.

I also cautioned against relying on Councils as sole representatives. Councils are important but are limited in their ability to contribute and they are only one element of the sources of input available. Involving associations, clubs, and the like that represent recreational interests can offer a great deal to forestry division managers and will likely be an important tool in actually developing an opportunity.

Apart from further developing partnerships at the macro level, we already have some form of partnerships between local user groups and local property managers. Consider that if there is no opportunity for a particular activity at a specific property, there is probably no relationship with a user group for that activity. This is why it is important to form a relationship with a broad range of user group organizations at the division (macro) level so that recreational interests can be considered and appropriately addressed as part of an overarching program that includes many properties.

The Division of Forestry manages recreation for the northern forests. Recreation in the southern forests falls under the Division of Parks. Our State Trails Council, which is intended to serve the entire DNR, does a good job advising the Division of Parks about trail issues and our user groups. I think we may be missing a connection with the Division of Forestry and suggested to that the STC consider whether an appropriate representative of the Division of Forestry should be included in our meetings. A long term relationship with an appropriate Division of Forestry representative will contribute to Forestry's efforts toward best addressing recreational interests.

Some participants made some excellent suggestions regarding partnerships with stakeholders concerning forestry issues. There seemed to be a theme developing that inclusive partnerships offered a lot to everyone involved when it came to coordinating practices and unifying efforts. This seems to fit with the recreation aspect as well.

Overall there was a lot covered in the meeting - a lot of wise people with a lot of good ideas.

It will be important for clubs and associations to partner with the Division of Forestry as they adjust their business plan to accommodate partnerships at the division level.

If you have questions or wish to discuss this matter further you may contact me at bryan.much@charter.net and if you send a phone number I will be happy to call you.