



Legislative Auditor Judy Randall
Office of the Legislative Auditor
State of Minnesota
Via e-mail: Judy.Randall@state.mn.us

December 13, 2023

Subject: Department of Natural Resources Employee Survey Findings

Dear Legislative Auditor Randall,

I am writing on behalf of PEER, a non-profit advocacy organization that supports current and former public employees who seek a higher standard of environmental ethics and scientific integrity within their agencies. Because of employees that came to PEER with their concerns about employee dissatisfaction and forest management, our organization recently conducted a survey among Minnesota Department of Natural Resource (DNR) staff. On September 21, 2023 we mailed surveys to 325 employees in four DNR divisions—Ecological Resources, Fisheries, Forestry and Wildlife—the professionals directly involved in the management of forest and related habitat resources.

Over the next month PEER received 39 survey results. We were informed by DNR employees that managers in at least two DNR divisions told their employees not to respond to the survey. Although the survey response rate was only 12 percent, the survey results reveal concerns that DNR management of forest and habitats leans heavily toward favoring the timber industry and sheds light on the persistent issues plaguing the management of state-managed forests in Minnesota. We are bringing these insights to your attention for consideration and potential improvement. PEER is committed to working collaboratively with you to ensure the sustainable management of Minnesota's natural resources.

Results

1. Perceived Bias in Resource Management:

More than two-thirds of respondents expressed concern that the DNR's management of forest and related habitat resources are biased in favor of timber management. This perception raises questions about the balance between ecological conservation and economic interests.

2. Flexibility in Timber Cord Quota System:

A substantial majority, more than 2/3 of respondents, advocate for a revision of the timber cord quota system, suggesting that greater flexibility for field managers could enhance resource management efficiency and effectiveness.

3. Leadership Communication and Trust:

Over two-thirds of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the clarity of directions provided by DNR leadership in settling controversial issues. Additionally, a similar majority does not trust DNR leadership to support sound natural resource management against political pressure from special interests.

4. Mission Balance and Emphasis on Habitat Management:

While more than half of respondents agree that the DNR has a balanced mission, a significant portion disagrees that habitat management for non-game species, species of special concern, and threatened or endangered species receives adequate emphasis.

5. Sustainability Concerns and Succession Habitat Bias:

More than half of respondents are uncertain about the sustainability of timber harvest on state land, and a similar percentage believes that, after 10 years of the State Timber Harvesting Initiative (STHI), fish and wildlife habitat across the state will be biased toward earlier succession habitat.

6. Divisional Leadership Support:

More than half of respondents expressed hesitancy to perform certain aspects of their jobs due to concerns about not having the support of Divisional leadership for using professional judgment in resource management matters.

Next Steps

Based on these findings, we would like to make the following recommendations to enhance employee satisfaction and improve the effectiveness of natural resource management within the DNR:

1. Review Timber Management Policies: Consider a comprehensive review of timber management policies, including the timber cord quota system, to explore alternatives that offer greater flexibility to field managers while maintaining sustainable resource practices.

As we expressed in an earlier letter to the Commissioner of the DNR (see attached), the current timber harvest implementation seems to be unduly prioritizing timber production for the primary purpose of producing income over essential habitat conservation and management efforts. This one-sided focus has already led to the loss of heritage woods, and if not rectified promptly, it will lead to irreversible damage to our forest habitat ecosystem, including the potential extirpation or even extinction of special status species.



2. Balance Economic and Ecological Objectives: Reassess resource management strategies to strike a better balance between economic objectives, such as timber management, and ecological conservation goals.

3. Enhance Communication and Transparency: Implement measures to improve communication and transparency in decision-making processes, particularly in settling controversial issues. It is imperative to ensure that Divisional leadership is well-equipped to support staff in utilizing their expertise and professional judgment, particularly in matters of resource management.

Clear and well-explained directions from leadership can contribute to a more collaborative and effective working environment. An example of this is the Midpoint Assessment of Forest Management Strategic Direction: Sustainable Timber Harvest Implementation Report. The report is vague and the absence of specific measures for proper documentation and coordination in forest management raises concerns about the transparency and efficacy of the entire planning process.

To this end, we respectfully request that you commission an independent audit to identify potential solutions and improvements that can address these concerns while ensuring the efficient operation of the DNR.

We believe that a discussion with you would provide a more in-depth understanding of these findings. **Would it be possible to meet to discuss these survey findings in detail, share additional insights, and explore collaborative solutions for the benefit of both our members and the DNR's mission?** There are a number of other items which we are interested in sharing with you.

We appreciate your consideration of these important issues and we look forward to the opportunity to meet with you.

Sincerely,

Chandra Rosenthal

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Attachments:

December 12, 2023 [Unveiling Challenges in Minnesota's Forest Management](#) commentary reviewing DNR survey and with links to PEER survey and results.



October 25, 2023 Letter from PEER to Commissioner Strommen re: Midpoint Assessment of Forest Management Strategic Direction

Cc: Governor Tim Waltz
Representative Rick Hansen – Chair MN Legislative Audit Commission
Senator Mark Koran – Vice Chair MN Legislative Audit Commission
Commissioner Sarah Strommen, DNR
Minnesota Legislature