

## County Forest Law

### Issue: County owned land not fully utilized

In 1999, Vernon County owned about 650 acres of largely forested land near a flood control structure that was designated as a park, but not really actively managed. Some timber harvests were done on this land, but not in the context of a management plan.

During that time a land transition was occurring in the county that continues today. Recreation is an ever more popular land use and some landowners are deciding to subdivide and sell because the recreational value of their land is more than the agricultural value. Other landowners are harvesting more timber than is healthy for their forest, in attempts to increase value they receive from their land.

With the above trends in mind, the Parks and Land Conservation Departments thought their park land could be used more cost effectively and provide more public recreation.



*This existing park land that was enrolled in the County Forest Law is now managed in a sustainable way and provides quality recreation.*

*Vernon County is rural and 42% forested. At least 85% of its forested lands are privately owned.*



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### Approach: County enrolls in County Forest Law program

The Parks and Land Conservation Departments learned about the County Forest Law program from a neighboring county. It is a state program to manage county land in cooperation with Department of Natural Resources (DNR) county foresters. Since there is no minimum acreage, the county was eligible. The only requirement was that they had to write a ten year management plan when they entered into the County Forest Law.

Under the County Forest Law program Vernon County was also eligible for different grants and loans. A grant funds 50% of the County forest administrator position with the other 50% matched by the county. Vernon County has also received two zero interest loans:

- A variable acreage share loan based on the amount of acreage enrolled in the program funds items such as plantings, timber stand work, and computer and GIS software purchases.
- A project loan focuses on land acquisition, but also funds equipment, trails, access roads, and buildings.

The county board passed a resolution to enroll the 650 acre parcel in the County Forest Law program in 1999, becoming the 29<sup>th</sup> county to enroll.

Vernon County uses 20% of its timber harvest revenue to pay back their zero interest loans to the state, and 80% of timber harvest revenue stays in Vernon County. The Park and Forestry Department keeps 70% and 10% goes to the township where timber was harvested to help compensate for lost tax revenue.

The County Board decided not to allow motorized recreation on its County Forest land except for snowmobiles in a few sections. This is a decision that is left up to individual counties.

## Reflections on the County Forest Law

### Limitations

Some of the County Board supervisors were skeptical about the program because it meant working with the DNR. They ultimately decided that the benefit of the grants and loans, and forestry assistance outweighed the requirement to have a DNR approved management plan.

Some residents who lived on or owned land bordering the County Forest land were concerned with forest boundaries. They did not want hunters or other forest users coming onto their private land. This has not been proven to be an issue due in part to limited motorized recreation in the County Forest.

Since the county already owned the land that was initially enrolled in the County Forest Law, there was not much debate about the impact that designating it as County Forest could have on taxes. As the Vernon County Forest expands to take private land off the tax rolls the need for more public land may be questioned.

### Strengths

The County Forest is managed in a sustainable manner. All of the timber harvests are planned rather than doing random harvests when revenue is needed. The public likes to see that their lands are actively managed.

Vernon County now has a forester who manages the land and can provide assistance to private forestland owners. The revenue from harvests can fund parks, additional plantings, timber stand improvements, and more. The Towns where County Forest land is located also like receiving 10% of timber harvest revenue.



*"For counties to join the County Forest Law Program is a real no-brainer"*  
says Erik Aleson,  
Vernon County Forester.

Vernon County is now a member of the Wisconsin County Forest Association where they can network and share ideas with other counties.

The public also appreciates the additional recreation opportunities that come with the funding available for county forests. More public hunting land is available. Parking areas, access roads, trails and shelters are now able to be built to encourage use of the forest.



*Horseback riding is a valued use of the Vernon County Forest*

### Future

Currently the County Forest is 880 acres. There are three separate properties managed for recreation and timber harvest. Besides the initial 650 acres, there is a separate 53 acre parcel and a 120 acre parcel that was donated.

Vernon County is looking to add another parcel that is next to the existing County Forest. They might acquire some state owned lands too. The county does not plan to actively try to acquire additional acres, but if parcels open up next to the forest they will try to purchase them.

The program looks to be sustainable both ecologically and economically.

### Conclusion

Vernon County is satisfied with their decision to enroll in the County Forest Law program. As a forest management program exclusive to Wisconsin, it is successful at conserving forestland and serving the needs of counties.

*This case study was written by Bobbie Webster*

### For more information

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