

Sustainable Forest Management Plan Public Summary

FOR

Pocomoke State Forest

Sustainable Forests for People and the Bay



FOREST SERVICE



December 21, 2010

POCOMOKE STATE FOREST 16,922 ACRES

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Pocomoke State Forest Sustainable Forestry Management Plan Public Summary

Background:

Pocomoke State Forest is located in the southwestern section of Worcester County and is managed by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Forest Service Division. The State Forest covers almost 17,000 acres of forest land located in the Coastal Plain physiographic province. Elevation ranges from sea level to fifty five feet. The terrain is flat and drainage ranges from very poor in the swamps to very good at the higher elevations.

In the early 1900's before the establishment of the State Forest much of the land had been cleared for farming or used as farm woodlots. When the depression era hit in the late 1920's and early 1930's many of the farmers fell on hard times, resulting in the acquisition of large amounts of land by the Federal Government. In the mid to late 1930's, two Civilian Conservation Camps were located on the federally owned Forest. The camp workers did considerable road and trail work, established boundary lines, provided for fire protection and suppression, planted trees and performed to improvements to the recreational area at the Milburn Landing property along the Pocomoke River. Then in 1954 the Federal Government deeded all of its holdings to the State, the State in turned combined these lands with their holdings which they had acquired during the same time period, thus creating the Pocomoke State Forest. In 1964, the Milburn Landing and Shad Landing areas were separated from the Forest and developed for intensive recreational uses both areas are now known as the Pocomoke River State Park. The State continues to purchase in-holdings and other ecologically important areas along the Pocomoke River to add to the State Forest system. The current acreage of the forest is 16,922 acres.

The Pocomoke State Forest Sustainable Management Plan dated December 21, 2010 came together after several months of internal Departmental review, citizen advisory committee input and public comment. This plan is an extensive update and expansion to the original 1996 *Pocomoke State Forest Ten-Year Resource Management Plan: Volumes I & II*. Other documents used as references for this plan include *Maryland Scenic Rivers: THE POCOMOKE Planning for its Scenic, Wild and Recreational Resources* and the 2009 *Chesapeake Forest Sustainable Management Plan* including its most recent revisions. The additions, revisions, and changes to the Ten-Year plan are the result of annual FSC/SFI audits recommendations and land acquisitions. Several recent acquisitions added over 1,000 acres of forest to PSF, these new tracts are located in the Nassawango River watershed and along the Pocomoke River.

Resource Assessment:

The Pocomoke State Forest currently consists of 16,922 acres divided into 15 complexes across 3 counties. The majority of the land is located in central and southern Worcester County between Snow Hill and Pocomoke City, with some acreage in Somerset and Wicomico counties. The forest includes some of the last large segments of unbroken forest in a region that is largely agricultural in nature. The Pocomoke State Forest includes more than 5,000 acres of wetlands that comprise portions of 4 separate watersheds, many of which have been given a high priority for conservation action under the Maryland Clean Water Action Plan. They contain established populations of threatened and endangered species, including the Delmarva fox squirrel, bald

eagle, and some 150 other species that have been identified as rare, threatened, or endangered in the region. Abundant populations of deer, turkey, and waterfowl create the basis for extensive hunting opportunities and other recreational activities on the land.

Goals for Pocomoke State Forest:

The Sustainable Forest Management plan for Pocomoke State Forest outlines in detail the processes and methods used to achieve the primary goal of the forest, which is to demonstrate that an environmentally sound, sustainable managed forest can contribute to local and regional economies.

This goal will be pursued subject to the following constraints:

- That the quality of the water flowing through the properties will not be impaired due to any actions on the land, and in many cases will be improved. Where feasible, wetlands, riparian areas, and ditches will be the site of watershed improvement practices specifically aimed at improving the quality of water entering the Chesapeake Bay.
- Monitor proposed projects within Pocomoke State Forest that may potentially result in blockages to fish passage and recommend design changes that will allow continued fish passage during all stream flow conditions. Continue to identify existing blockages to fish passage and make recommendations for providing access to upstream habitat.
- That management policies and actions are consistent with state and federal requirements for protecting and managing rare, threatened and endangered species of plants and animals. The Department will identify locations of rare, threatened and endangered species habitat and forest conditions associated with the habitat requirements of these species. Management actions will consider opportunities to enhance existing habitats and provide for corridors. Abundance and distribution goals for common species will be periodically updated through DNR based resource assessments. Habitat goals for common species will be reflected in forest management activities.
- That forest harvest levels comply with targets established by a long-term sustainable harvest plan. To the extent possible, harvest and thinning activity levels will produce reasonably uniform flows of products and contractor activities year-to-year. Short-term deviations due to natural disturbances, operational logistics, or unusual events are anticipated, but exceptions for an extended period will require re-evaluation of the sustainable harvest level. Spatial and timing constraints will prevent thinning or harvesting operations from concentrating impacts in any watershed or visual scene in violation of water quality goals, habitat diversity and connectivity goals, or the green-up requirements imposed by the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) Standard
- That the Department makes use of the best available data to determine what activity levels are consistent with the sustainability of the forest ecosystems so that harvests will not decrease the ability of the forests to continue that average level of yield.

Ecosystem sustainability means, in addition to the factors listed under the first two bullets, no net loss in soil fertility and no loss of non-target species due to on-site forestry practices. Past and present data are limited, so future harvests will be based on adaptive response to appropriate monitoring, forecasting, and revision.

- That forest recreational and educational opportunities will be provided as appropriate, and are consistent with the above goals. Recreational and education program opportunities available on the forest should be integrated with those available within Pocomoke River State Park and the Pocomoke Wildlife Management Area. The Department will determine the appropriate levels of recreational activities on the Forest as part of its ongoing evaluation and monitoring process.
- Pocomoke State Forest has a very small remnant area of Old Growth Forest approximately 5 acres in size. The goal on PSF is to expand Old Growth Forest by connecting a series of forest stands identified as “nearly old growth forest”. The larger areas that contain the nearly old growth stands will be mapped as old growth management zones.

Oversight to insure that the Department is striving to achieve these goals and is meeting the requirements outlined in the plan is provided through the following sources: The internal Departmental Interdisciplinary Team, the Chesapeake\Pocomoke Forest Citizens Advisory Group and the annual audit review completed by auditors representing the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI).

Forest Management & Priority Management Layers

Each portion of Pocomoke State Forest is placed in a particular management zone depending upon the highest and best use for that site given its location and characteristics. Each zone features specific resource objectives which are accomplished through implementation of a set of management guidelines for that area. The percentages below are listed based on the priority of that management layer. For example Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA's) have the highest priority for habitat management but may also contain segments of all the other management layers that are listed after it.

The current breakdown of management areas on the forest are as follows: Ecologically Significant Areas (ESA) and other protected lands comprise 49.4% of the forest. These are sites containing rare plant and or animal communities that will be managed to protect and enhance their special qualities. Also included in this category are State Wildlands, Wetlands of Special State Concern (WSSC), Old Growth Forest, Rare Community Soil Types and Natural Heritage Areas. The Core Forest Interior Dwelling Species (FIDS) designation is next and covers 6.6% of the Forest where the key management focus is improving the stocking of hardwood species and increasing rotation lengths. Forested riparian buffers follows covering an additional 5% of the forest. The remaining portion comprising 39% of the forest area contains Future Delmarva Fox Squirrel Habitat. These areas have a management focus for the retention and enhancement of the respective habitat but also will provide a significant component of the forest products harvested annually.

On average annually approximately 300 to 400 acres of Pocomoke State Forest have some form of forestry activity. This ranges from final regeneration harvests, to first and second commercial thinning and pre-commercial thinning operations. This equates to around 8,000 tons of pulpwood and 1,500,000 board-feet of pine sawtimber being removed annually which in turn provides substantial returns to both the local and regional economies.

Forest Certification

As outlined in the Sustainable Management Plan, a primary objective of the Pocomoke State Forest Project is to become a national model of certified sustainable forestry. To meet that objective the State of Maryland through the Department of Natural Resources committed to certification under both the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) standard and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) standard. In the spring of 2009 dual certification under these two standards was achieved for the entire Pocomoke State Forest, compliance with certification is monitored through annual audits.

Certification Guidelines Premise:

It is the Department's belief that an independent review and certification of the Pocomoke State Forest management plan and practices has the potential to improve the management of the forest and build public confidence in the quality of that management.

As part of the process in maintaining the dual certification, follow-up annual audits/inspections will continue. The Pocomoke State Forest project remains committed to resolve any audit issues that hinder us in obtaining and or maintaining SFI/FSC certification.

High Conservation Value Forest (HCVF):

The concept for HCVF is to insure that existing fragile and unique ecosystems are managed to maintain their identified conservation attributes. Described within the Sustainable Management Plan are four such areas that will be protected through implementation of specific management activities. The identification of the unique values of each area along with the prescriptive management protocols was a collaborative effort between the DNR Forest Service and the Wildlife and Heritage Service. Listed below by priority are the four identified HCVF layers on Chesapeake Forest, many of these areas tend to overlap each other. In two of these layers only the "Core" zones which are defined as "*occupied habitat*" are designated as HCVF (*Delmarva fox squirrel & forest interior bird habitat*), within the ESA layer zone 1 & 2 are designated as HCVF, this is the area where the rare species actually occur. Approximately 56% of Pocomoke State Forest is designated as High Conservation Value Forest.

Ecologically Significant Area (ESA)

The goal of ESA management is not only the maintenance of existing rare species habitat, but restoration of additional habitat to further enhancing rare threatened & endangered (RTE) populations and natural communities. In addition, the protection of ecosystem function from a landscape level perspective is also an important objective to pursue.

Core Forest Interior Dwelling Bird (FID) Habitat:

In the designated core FID areas (*forest blocks usually larger than 500 acres in size*) the goal is to improve the stocking of hardwood species. This will be accomplished through commercial thinning operations that will create mixed stands of pine and hardwoods. These areas will be then be maintained with long rotation ages in excess of 100 years.

Future Core Delmarva Fox Squirrel (DFS) Habitat:

In the designated DFS areas, the forest will be managed on longer rotations while encouraging an additional hardwood component in the over story. The goal is to grow larger trees and hold them longer on the landscape. Regeneration harvests will occur between 40-60 years in accordance with DFS Future Core rotation lengths. The plan requires that over half of the DFS areas at any point in time remain in “suitable DFS habitat” that is stands that are 30 to 40 years old or older. There are currently no “Core” DFS areas located on Pocomoke State Forest, but this could change if DFS populations are re-established in the region.

Riparian Forested Buffers:

On the Pocomoke State Forest the Department has included riparian areas within the HCVF designation. This is any forest area within 300 feet of a primary natural (or once natural) stream which flows into the Chesapeake Bay and may include based on field reviews other forested wetland areas such as vernal pools and Delmarva Bays. Many of these riparian areas are part of one of the priority management layers listed above.

In the expanded stream buffer, forests will be managed to encourage a mixed hardwood or mixed hardwood/pine community with a combination of diverse herbaceous, mid-story, and over story plants. Hardwood species will be encouraged to ensure maximum functions for denitrification, canopy diversity, woody debris, and nutrient uptake. To accomplish this goal for pine plantations that fall inside the expanded buffer, management prescriptions will include thinning to reduce pine basal area to allow for natural regeneration of hardwood species. The expanded buffers also provide for critical habitats and other functions that enhance water quality.

Including riparian areas as HCVF clarifies protection and future management regimes for areas that are crucial to water quality, habitat diversity and the connectivity of wildlife habitat and hydrology. The definition was derived from both Maryland’s most prominent natural feature, the Chesapeake Bay, and from the original goal for acquiring the Pocomoke State Forest (SFMP page 1), which states: *“The goal of this transaction was and continues to be to retain the property as a working forest that will be managed in a conservation-minded way to provide forest products, local employment, and recreation opportunities **while protecting or improving the water quality and habitat value of the lower Chesapeake Bay watershed.**”*

The Department of Natural Resources recognizes the important role that these riparian forests play in the protection and conservation of our treasured Chesapeake Bay. Furthermore, it is DNR’s ultimate goal to positively enhance the Chesapeake Bay and its associated local economies through the conservation of these important forest lands. The riparian forests provide a connective link between many other HCVF areas (ESA, DFS, FIDS, etc.) on Pocomoke State Forest.

Public Use & Education

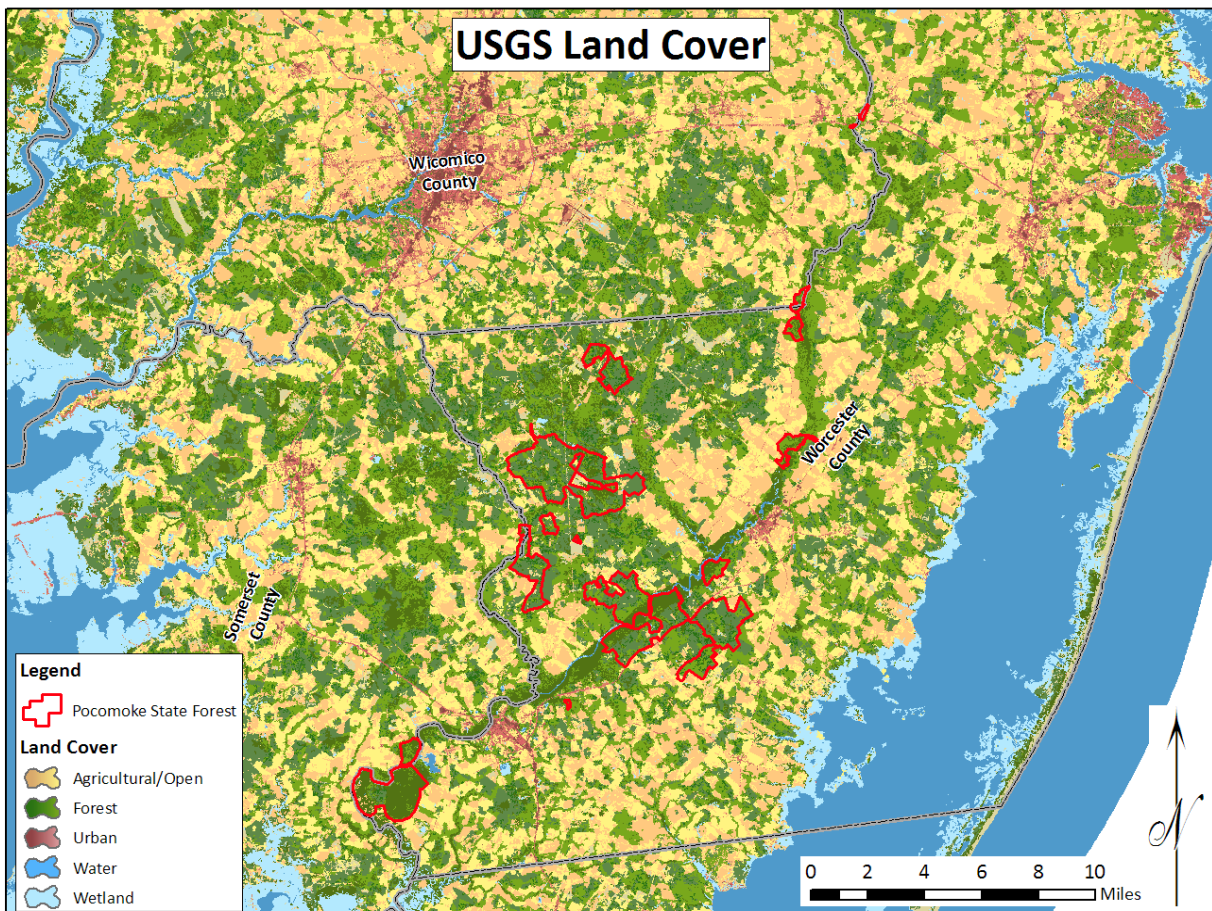
The primary types of public use to be encouraged on the Pocomoke State Forest include activities such as hiking, hunting, fishing, birding, horseback riding, nature/wildlife observation, environmental education, primitive camping, trapping and access for canoeing and kayaking. In select cases, minimal development may be undertaken to provide picnicking, camping at primitive sites, bike trails and recreational opportunities targeted for seniors and the disabled.

Hunting on Pocomoke State Forest

Pocomoke State Forest lands have traditionally been hunted for numerous important forest game birds and mammals, including wild turkey, white-tailed deer, and gray squirrels. Nearly all of the forest land is open to public hunting in season, with exception to roads, safety zones, and other similar areas. Fishing opportunities are also available in season.

For additional information about Pocomoke State Forest and to provide feedback concerning management policies please visit the website at:

<http://www.dnr.maryland.gov/publiclands/eastern/pocomokeforest.asp>



A complex mix of agricultural lands surrounds Pocomoke State Forest