

Sand Dunes State Forest Public Engagement Project

Process Evaluation for May-December 2016 Stakeholder Advisory Group Meetings

Background

In June through December of 2016 the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources held a series of public meetings in order to engage in discussion with interested stakeholders over management decisions in the Sand Dunes State Forest (SDSF), located in Orrock Township, Sherburne County in west-central Minnesota. DNR held six meetings with appointed members of a Stakeholder Advisory Group and interested members of the public who attended as audience members. All attendees were invited to participate in feedback opportunities.

A variety of techniques were employed during and between meetings to provide information, create discussion, and collect feedback from the public. Examples include informational presentations, group discussion, written feedback to discussion questions, email communications, meeting summaries, DNR responses to suggestions and questions, and maintenance of a project website for storing resources. A process evaluation was distributed (using Snap Surveys) in late December to email lists of past meeting attendees to assess the effectiveness of the overall process and individual techniques in informing and engaging the public in the discussion around SDSF. This report summarizes the results of the process evaluation.

Results of Questionnaire

Twenty-four participants (note: this process did not allow for filtering out potential repeats) completed the process evaluation questionnaire; fifteen participants were members of the Stakeholder Advisory Group and nine attended meetings as members of the audience. Assuming there were no duplicate responses, this was about 42% of (non-DNR) people who attended at least one meeting and provided their email address, and about 62% of people who attended at least two meetings and provided their email address. There were opportunities for both stakeholder advisors and audience members to participate in all aspects of the process described in this report, so results are presented as a combination of all participants.

71% of participants attended at least four of the six meetings, and 88% attended at least three (half) of the meetings. The questions presented below assessed participants' satisfaction with various communication tools used throughout the process.

Q: How satisfied were you with the following aspects of the Stakeholder Advisory Group meetings? Please rate your answer on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is very dissatisfied and 7 is very satisfied.

Participants were satisfied overall with all listed aspects of the meetings. They were most satisfied with the frequency of meetings (monthly) and the meeting topics, and less satisfied with the time spent on small group discussions and the presentations from members of the Stakeholder Advisory Group.

Meeting Aspect	Average rating (1-7 scale, very dissatisfied to very satisfied)
Frequency of meetings (monthly)	6.08
Topics of meetings	5.83
Presentations from DNR staff	5.54
Presentations from Stakeholder Advisory Group members	4.88
Discussion questions (written feedback)	5.00
Time spent on small group discussion	4.43
Time spent on large group discussion	5.04

Q: How useful were the following products that were provided after each meeting? Please rate your answer on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is not at all useful and 7 is very useful.

Overall, participants found both the meeting summaries and the feedback they received on their suggestions to be fairly useful. They found both of these products to be about equally useful. Over 40% of respondents found these products to be very useful.

Product	Average rating (1-7 scale, not at all useful to very useful)
Meeting summaries	5.63
DNR feedback on written suggestions	5.64

Q: Have you visited the project website?

Most survey participants (88%) had visited the project website.

Answer	Percent
Yes	87.5%
No	12.5%

Q: Overall, how useful was this website to you? Please rate your answer on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is not at all useful and 7 is very useful.

Overall, of those who visited the website, participants found the website to be somewhat useful (average of 4.78 on a 7-pt scale).

Q: Specifically, how valuable was having access to these resources on the website? Please rate your answer on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is not at all valuable and 7 is very valuable. If you never used a particular online resource, select "never used".

Of those who used the website products listed, participants found the products to be fairly useful, with the project handouts and other documentation being the most useful resource. However, with only 75-79% of respondents using the products listed, there seems to be some room for improvement in advertising the website.

Product	Average rating (1-7 scale, not at all useful to very useful)	Never used
Project handouts and documentation	6.00	15%
Presentations from DNR staff	5.41	15%
Questions and Answers page	5.50	10%

Q: How effective was this process at collecting your feedback on DNR's management of the Sand Dunes State Forest? Please rate your answer on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is not at all effective and 7 is very effective.

Overall, participants felt that this process was somewhat effective at collecting their feedback (4.71 on 7-pt scale).

Q: This question asks about your degree of familiarity with the Sand Dunes State Forest operational plan before and after this public engagement process. On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is not at all familiar and 7 is very familiar, how would you rate your familiarity with the operational plan...

- at the beginning of this public engagement process?
- by the end of this public engagement process?

Participants were asked to describe their familiarity with the SDSF operational plan before and after the public engagement effort. Familiarity with the plan increased significantly from beginning to end of the process, raising nearly two points on average (on a 7-pt scale). At the beginning of the process, five respondents said they were 'not at all familiar' with the plan (rating of 1 on a 7-pt scale) and only 35% were highly familiar with the plan (rating 6 or 7 on a 7-pt scale), but by the end of the process the lowest rating was a 3, and 75% of respondents were highly familiar with the plan.

Product	Average rating (1-7 scale, not at all useful to very useful)
Beginning of process	4.17
End of process	5.96

Q: Overall, did you feel that you had adequate contact and engagement with DNR staff throughout this process?

The majority of respondents (71%) felt they had adequate contact and engagement with DNR staff during the process, though nearly 30% did not feel they had adequate engagement. Respondents were also asked to briefly describe their reasoning. Respondents appreciated DNR staff's attendance at meeting, willingness to listen and respond to questions, and approachability. Concerns/dislikes included discontent with not being an Advisory Group member, perceived lack of focus on issues of concern to residents, feeling 'outnumbered' in small group discussions, and lack of communication about the plan before the public engagement process.

Answer	Percent
Yes	71%
No	29%

Direct responses:

- I am a landowner with land and home adjacent to the SDSF and was never contacted or sent a copy of the plan for comment, contrary to what was indicated in the FINAL Plan.
- The commitment of meeting attendance by the staff was excellent
- the forest tours were a good idea
- We were given every opportunity to ask questions and respond. We still want to preserve and keep the name "Sand Dunes State Forest", keeping it a "forest."
- They were always willing to answer a question.
- They seemed to listen.
- There was information shared, questions answered and the DNR was open and honest about what was going on.
- Friendly staff, easy to approach, felt welcome. But also felt "outnumbered", especially during small group discussions. One such had 2 "locals", but 4 DNR and/or SNWR contributors, and the SNWR guy talked so much no one else had a chance to speak.
- I asked to be on the board and was denied but they kept guys on that never showed up, I saw their names up and listed every time but they never came, but somehow there wasnt room for me, who did show up.
- DNR staff controlled the meeting subjects and agenda---so that much of the meeting time was spent on issues other than the original issues that alarmed us residents.
- DNR staff were very approachable and willing to engage and answer questions and provide explanations

Q: Overall, did you feel respected by DNR staff throughout this process?

Most respondents felt respected by DNR throughout the process (83%). Respondents were also asked to briefly describe their reasoning. Some respondents provided comments indicating that DNR staff were genuine and professional during interactions. A few concerns were expressed in the comments as well. A couple of these concerns seemed to be related to interactions from before the Stakeholder Advisory Group was formed. However, a few respondents felt that their comments did not matter/would not impact the results, and a couple respondents were concerned about the objectivity of the Stakeholder Advisory Group membership.

Answer	Percent
Yes	83%
No	17%

Direct responses:

- Can't answer because I was never acknowledged, even after submitting written comments on the FINAL Plan. Never had access to a Draft Plan
- Through out the process staff on both sides of the issue would interact civilly to lay out their point of view.
- I felt like it didn't matter what we said
- Everyone was very pleasant.

- courteous and professional, in spite of sometime hostile locals
- The first mtg was a no, a very big NO!
- Yes, but not the eco group.
- Yes I felt valued and respected by the DNR, they were genuine in their interactions with me.
- Yes, when I was actually able to engage them. Some of the engagement by others (non DNR) for example the SNWR rep and the guy that started the BLOG site were very good at talking - but very poor at listening to viewpoints they did not agree with. I felt very much like they did not even listen to the concerns I expressed, instead they just kept restating their views and didn't even acknowledge or discuss views I expressed.
- I was dismissed as a possible person because they didnt want more real input, they filled the room with so called groups but durning breaks they all stood around and talked and consorted like old friends, not some objective group of people. they loaded the room with friends it was clear and obvious.
- The staff set up a process to fulfill the requirements of the Mn Legislature without changing their overall plan for the SDSF---by stacking the SAG with lots of special interests---discussing minor issues---while avoiding the elephant in the room.
- All DNR staff were very approachable and willing to engage and answer questions and provide explanations
- Staff member I had contact with was rude and dismissive.

Q: What was the most valuable part of this public engagement process? Q: What was the least valuable part of this public engagement process?

Respondents were asked about the most and least valuable aspects of the public engagement process (separate questions and response boxes). Due to an error in the survey instrument, a character limit seems to have been placed on responses for these two questions. Unfortunately, this may have limited some respondents' abilities to fully respond to these two questions, as indicated by at least one respondent.

In summary, based on the responses that were provided, respondents found the most value in:

- The process educating/informing the public while also engaging them and listening to their input
- The opportunity to hear diverse points of view
- The presentations at meetings, the field tour, and group discussions
- The mediator
- All aspects of the meetings

In summary, respondents found the least value in:

- Redundancy in covering certain topics, not enough detail on others
- Participation by legislators (dominating the discussion)
- Concern that legislative goal was not met, or that DNR would not change its mind
- Feeling outnumbered by DNR or that DNR was disconnected with local issues
- Unwillingness by some to hear others' perspectives; inability to correct misinformation

- Inconsistency of meeting attendance by some stakeholders/audience member
- Small group discussions

Direct responses: most valuable part of the process:

- The tour and to be able to communicate with some stakeholders who have a different view than I do
- Staff presentations
- Understanding all the special interests
- Informing the public of the actual intentions
- Cannot comment due to feeling somewhat disenfranchised.
- I thought it was valuable to have support from individuals that held the same beliefs as me but I also enjoyed hearing the other side.
- The opportunity for the public to engage in the topic.
- Most of the presentations were very informative
- interaction with those in the field with specific knowledge of their subjects
- DNR education efforts on the importance of protecting natural resources
- When the eco people were not talking.
- To get our feelings out in the open and that our input did make a difference.
- The ability to have all stakeholders heard and to allow the DNR to share the plans and the reasoning behind the plans.
- I cannot tell you because this program is limiting my response.
- The mediator. He used verbal and visual tools to summarize points, he also kept things moving and on track.
- It drew public attention to the destruction planned by the DNR for the SDSF
- Trying to educate the public about the purpose and function of forest lands and the importance and value of the natural communities they contain
- DNR presentations and group discussion
- I found the entire process interesting

Direct responses: least valuable part of the process:

- The drive from the metro
- All parts valuable
- I am not sure these meetings met the goals and intent of the legislation
- Time spent going over the same things outlined in the plan because people did read them
- Same as above
- The lack of specificity on some very basic questions. Not getting into enough details.
- Rep. Newberger was present which is a conflict of interest. He passed legislation that formed group, then continued to dominate discussion
- Small group discussions
- summing things up done by people that work in tall buildings....far away.
- That there would be no change from what the DNR wants to do or how they would do it
- Most people didn't attend all the meetings, and had no idea what had been discussed before,
- Grandstanding by elected officials
- When the eco people were talking.

- The repetition of some of the lectures
- Several people were only willing to have their perspective be the right one, we cannot get anywhere with that attitude.
- This evaluation tool is not valuable. It is forcing my answers to a limited criteria and I am unable to express my true opinions.
- meetings spent discussing issues that aren't at issue---such as the value of timber to Mn,the value of SDSF for recreation, etc.
- I cant think of anything that came forward in these meetings that could have been left out.
- [N]ot being able to have enough time to really refute some of the inaccuracies presented by the opposition
- felling out-numbered by the dnr

Q: What advice do you have for improving future processes like this?

Finally, respondents were asked to provide feedback for improving future public engagement efforts similar to this one.

One concern expressed by several participants was a feeling that DNR was interested in informing stakeholders and placating them, but not in listening to them and making changes. Some felt that stakeholders should get to participate in writing the plan, while others felt the plan was already good and did not require public involvement. Some felt that earlier public outreach (before writing the plan) would improve future efforts.

Several respondents commented on the composition of the Stakeholder Advisory Group. Some felt that the legislators should not have been involved because they received special treatment and biased the process. One respondent felt the group was imbalanced in representation. Another felt the large group was productive, and another expressed desire for a better forum for non-advisory members.

Direct responses:

- None
- Shorten the process.
- Begin working with the people long before a project begins so there are fewer conflicts.
- Have the process before any draft plan
- Have a better forum for Non-advisory board public involvement. Communicate specifically with adjacent landowners. They are the citizens affects most directly by the plan.
- I would make the analogy of this process being like a college class that lasts a semester. Attendance, quizzes, labs and papers account for 30% of the grade. The final is accounts for 70% of the grade. To me the rewritten ops plan is the final. So far I would say the grade is an "A" but the process cannot really be accurately assessed until after the final.
- Group should be comprised of representatives of interested organizations 1 rep per group, with 1 alternate. The concerned citizen group was over represented.
- None
- The very first meeting, there was a child in attendance, and that was disruptive.
- Don't give the local elected officials that impression they are more important than anyone else.
- Do not let the dnr try to copycat the insane ideas the feds come up with!!!

- The bigger group may be harder to control but I think it is more productive. I just wanted to add that "I am a conservative, therefore I am weary of change." -[name of participant redacted]
- There has to be a willingness to work together, to see things from others perspective, a willingness to trust and learn and operate from facts when you are given them. I don't know how you ask people to engage in that way. In addition, I don't think the legislators should have been allowed to be part of the process. They were the ones receiving the report and Rep. Newberger in particular was trying to exert inappropriate influence on the process that he clearly had a strong bias in. He was pushy and expected certain outcomes that were not reflective of the entire group of stakeholders. This is a state resource not his to mandate how the process or the outcome should look.
- After all the time spent, I feel very little was accomplished. The objectives were defined by the DNR to be "polite and educational" and that was accomplished. But I was hoping for something more like a coalition of local "stakeholders" to actually be able to participate in the creation/revision/execution of the plan, instead of being educated and informed. I already was educated and informed by reading the plan before the meetings were even conceived. Also, this form of process evaluation is very limited and frustrating. It feels like you are more interested in finding out if you placated the farmers carrying pitchforks than in finding out what they want and working to provide that.
- Move tables, chairs, closer together. Always use a sound system. I thought the "process" went well. My problem is with the fact that there was a "public engagement" at all. Yes, we need to be good, watchful stewards of gov't, but I'm thinking this may have been more of a "political move" than any real concern for the state of the forest itself, by a bunch of homeowners whining because they didn't practice "Buyer Beware" & are now mad because their "pine" forest is being managed in a way they don't like. I prefer pine over oak as well, but I don't have to live here if I don't want to. My choice. There, got my say in!!!
- we should be part of the actual writing of the new proposal, not just some BS pretend focus group that in the end gets ignored.
- poll the general public to see what is important to the citizens of Mn---not what is important to a small group of people that have a financial interest in promoting a particular plan. Approach the process as if you really want to listen to the residents---not---how can we have these meetings and still do what we want to do?
- The DNR went above and beyond what was necessary for explaining management of these lands. The management plan is very good.
- Expanded public notification and research on ALL facets of the project. Eco staff had no concept of the value, community regard for, utilization of, and opinions of the recreational component of the SFRA in this particular project.
- Have DNR provide written short summaries and maps of acreages for each area where pine plantations are to be harvested, replanted, or restored to oak savanna versus having on one big map. Folks there need to see it on the smaller scale. Provide them again at each meeting for new attendees and to remind all that the majority of trees will still be there.
- with each meeting I left feeling the dnr is going to do what the dnr wants to do.

Summary of Findings

We estimate that this process evaluation questionnaire was completed by approximately 60% of stakeholders who a) attended at least two of the six Stakeholder Advisory Group meetings (as either an advisor or an audience member) and b) provided their email address at meetings (n=24).

Respondents were generally satisfied with the structure of the meetings, especially meeting frequency and the topics covered in meetings. The least satisfying component (of those listed) was the small group discussions, during which one respondent noted feeling “outnumbered”. Respondents also generally found the meeting summaries and the feedback provided by DNR on their suggestions to be useful.

The project had a [webpage](#) to hold resources, project documentation, and a ‘Q&A’ page for DNR to respond to questions and misinformation. Most respondents had visited the website at some point. While overall the website was useful to visitors, it was not rated as useful as the meeting summaries or DNR’s feedback on stakeholder suggestions. The most useful resource on the website was the project handouts/documentation.

We sought to understand how well the process engaged and informed stakeholders. Respondents generally felt that the process was effective at collecting their feedback, though the overall rating was ‘luke-warm’ (4.7 on a 7-pt scale of effectiveness). In later comments, some stakeholders expressed feeling that their opinion would not produce a change in the operational plan. While some stakeholders felt their voices were heard, others did not feel that much was accomplished during the process. However, it was clear that respondents’ familiarity with the operational plan grew as a result of the process, with the percentage of those who felt highly familiar with the plan increasing from 35% to 75% over the course of the process.

Stakeholders were asked if they felt respected by DNR and if they had adequate contact with staff throughout the process. Most respondents felt respected (83%) and many felt that contact with staff was adequate (71%). Respondents described staff as “approachable,” “professional,” “friendly,” “open and honest,” as having “excellent” commitment to meeting attendance, and as being willing to listen and answer questions. However, some respondents expressed concerns, such as discontent with the make-up of the advisory group and concern that their feedback would ultimately be ignored. A few other concerns that were expressed seemed to stem from experiences respondents had before the Stakeholder Advisory Group was formed.

Finally, stakeholders were asked about the most and least valuable aspects of the process, and what feedback they had for improving future processes. (Note: due to an error in the survey instrument, response length was limited for the most/least valuable aspects questions, which limited at least one respondent’s ability to answer; there seemed to be no restriction on the feedback question). Respondents found the most value in the fact that the process informed and educated the public while also engaging them and listening to their input; the opportunity to hear diverse points of view; and interactions with experts through presentations and the field tour. ‘Least valuable’ aspects were more variable among respondents. Examples include: redundancy in covering certain topics, not enough detail in others; unwillingness by some to hear others’ perspectives; inability to adequately correct misinformation; and inconsistency in meeting attendance from some stakeholders, leading to confusion over things that had already been covered.

One concern expressed by several participants was feeling that DNR was interested in informing stakeholders and “placating” them, but not in listening to them and making changes. However, there were differing opinions on this subject, as some respondents felt they were treated fairly and listened to. Responses were also mixed on the role of the public in the planning process – some expected to be able to participate in the plan-writing process, while others felt that the plan was already good and public involvement was unnecessary. Several stakeholders expressed concerns about the involvement of elected officials in the Stakeholder Advisory Group, feeling that they received special treatment and dominated the process. Other concerns with the advisory group were that it seemed imbalanced in its representation, and that a better forum was needed for non-group members beyond what was offered.

Overall, respondents were satisfied with the public engagement process. While some respondents expressed concerns about certain aspects of the meetings and the ultimate impact of their feedback, most felt respected throughout the process and many felt they had adequate opportunity to provide feedback and have their questions answered by DNR staff.