



Sustainable Timber Harvest Analysis and Wildlife Management Areas

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: I've heard that the Department of Natural Resources has a new approach to timber harvest on wildlife management areas. What is the Sustainable Timber Harvest Analysis?

A: The [Sustainable Timber Harvest \(STH\) Analysis](#) provides a statewide approach to sustainable timber harvest on a range of state-administered lands, including state forests, wildlife management areas (WMAs), and School Trust Lands. The current STH plan is the result of a 16-month departmental effort that included a staff project team representing the divisions of Fish and Wildlife, Ecological and Water Resources, and Forestry, as well as DNR regions. It also included a 14-member stakeholder advisory group that involved conservation and environmental groups, land managers and forest products industry representatives.

The STH plan does not specify which, or even how many, forest stands to harvest. Rather, it establishes an overall framework for managing timber harvest and sets a 10-year goal of offering 870,000 cords per year from state-administered forest lands. The plan accounts for important factors such as differences in geography, tree species, existing tree inventory, and land management objectives, all while seeking to appropriately balance the full range of values for which we manage state forest lands. Importantly, while the STH plan establishes a broad framework to guide forest management, it provides flexibility to consider and address site-specific issues in a structured, stepwise process of moving from the statewide plan to the literally hundreds of decisions made annually about whether and how to harvest specific sites. Those site-specific decisions are not made by the computer model, but rather will be made following a rigorous process involving wildlife biologists, ecologists, and foresters before any particular stand is offered for sale through a timber auction.

Q: Will timber harvest on WMAs increase under the STH plan?

A: No. WMAs are working lands and have for many years been included as part of the state’s timber harvest planning. Since 2011, the amount of timber offered on WMAs has been around 130,000 cords annually, or about 14 percent of timber offered from all state lands. The STH plan calls for about 104,400 cords, or about 12 percent of timber offered from all state lands to come from WMAs. Relative to many other types of state forest lands, the plan calls for more, older forest on WMAs, a higher percentage of trees left uncut during harvest, and other measures to support wildlife and biological diversity. With that said, the age and species mix of the timber offered for sale from WMAs will differ from recent years, reflecting changes that are needed over time to achieve and maintain a balanced age and species structure that supports diverse habitat values.

Q: How many acres of forest does DNR manage?

A: Overall in Minnesota, there are nearly 15 million acres of productive forest land. About 1.8 million acres of that total are federally managed, 2.4 million acres are managed by counties or municipalities and nearly 8 million acres are privately owned or are held by tribal nations.

The DNR manages just over 5 million acres of land in the forested part of the state. Not all of that is available for timber harvest. Areas like state parks, scientific and natural areas, old growth forest stands, and buffers along rivers, lakes and streams do not have planned harvest, and other areas grow trees but are not marketable. All told, the DNR manages 2.7 million acres of “productive timber land” that was included in the STH analysis. About 400,000, or 15 percent, of these 2.7 million acres are on WMAs.

Q: Does the way in which lands came into state ownership affect DNR management obligations?

A: Yes. Many state lands have management obligations attached to them. Two examples that have particular relevance to the STH are School Trust Lands and Consolidated Conservation Area “Con-Con” lands.

The DNR manages 2.5 million acres of School Trust Lands, which the United States granted to the state in the mid-1800s. The Minnesota constitution and state law require that these lands be managed in ways that maximize long-term revenue to the Permanent School Fund, consistent with sound natural resource principles. Interest and dividends generated by the Fund are used to support the annual budgets of all school districts in the state. There are about 25,000 acres of forested School Trust Lands in WMAs.

The DNR also manages 1.55 million acres of Con-Con lands that came into state ownership through tax forfeiture in the 1920s and 1930s. Con-Con lands that are designated as WMAs are managed primarily, but not solely, for wildlife. Income generated from management on these lands is split evenly between the state and the county in which the lands lie. There are nearly 134,000 acres of Con-Con lands in WMAs in Minnesota.

Most of the remainder of DNR-managed lands were acquired through purchase, county board action, or gifts. For additional information about public lands managed by the DNR, see [the public lands page](#) on the DNR website..

Q: Did the STH analysis take into account wildlife habitat?

A: Yes, very much so. The analysis included a range of factors. In addition to timber values, other critical values accounted for included water quality, wildlife, and biological diversity. Using a sophisticated model, the DNR and its stakeholder advisory group were able to examine the effects of different approaches to timber harvest (amount, species mix, etc.) on other critical forest values. Of particular note, the authorizing language for WMAs requires that they are managed primarily for quality wildlife habitat, and the harvest levels identified in the STH plan are fully compatible with this requirement. The plan recognizes that different forest-dependent wildlife species benefit from different ages and types of trees. It relies on active management to ensure a diverse mix of forest types now and indefinitely into the future in order to provide a full range of habitat.

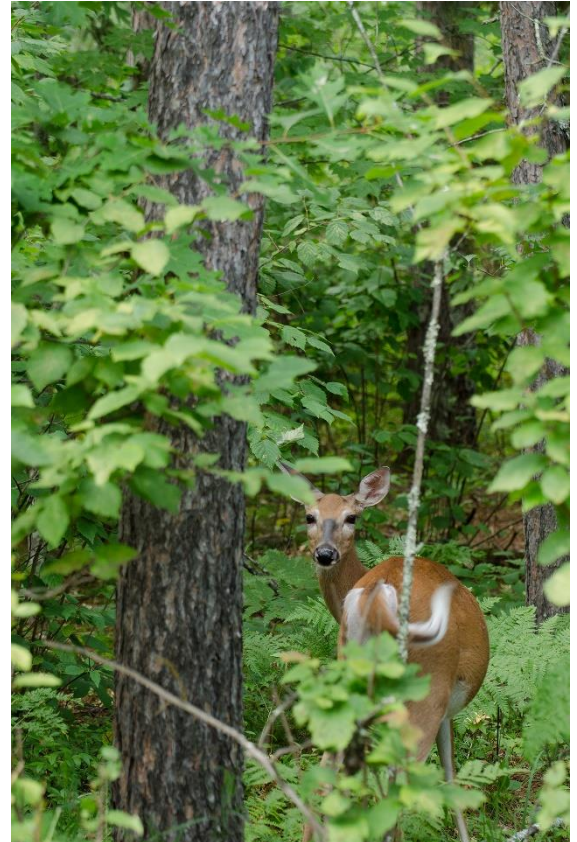
Q: Why cut timber on WMAs at all? Doesn't that disrupt wildlife?

A: Disturbance is an essential part of how natural systems work. This is true of Minnesota's rivers, lakes, grasslands, and forests. Forest disturbance, whether through fire, wind events, or timber harvest, is key to long-term forest health and wildlife habitat. Some important kinds of forests—oak and jack pine for example—require disturbance in order to regenerate. Carefully planned harvest is the primary active management tool we have available to help generate a desirable mix of tree species and ages sustainably into the future. This ensures our WMAs support a range of species, including those that benefit from young forests (e.g., ruffed grouse, woodcock and white tailed deer) and old forests (e.g., fisher, marten and some ducks). Younger forests and older forests can differ in many ways, but one is not necessarily better than the other.

Q: I've heard that the DNR's wildlife managers feel their concerns haven't been heard. How were different perspectives within the DNR considered in this process?

A: DNR experts in plant ecology, rare species, wildlife, and forestry had considerable input into the STH plan and continue to have a strong voice as we move to implementing that plan. For example, the STH planning process considered specific habitat management input from wildlife staff for each WMA or work area. This was done to ensure that the statewide framework recognized important geographic differences and needs. At the same time, one of the objectives of STH was to ensure appropriate consistency to how we meet habitat objectives and other forest values through timber harvest across the state. That is to say, the same general principles should be guiding our approach to achieving a particular forest type and age over similar site conditions.

It is important to remember that the STH planning effort resulted in a basic framework to guide timber harvest statewide in a way that meets our multiple forest management goals. As we move to implementation and



specific stands of timber are identified for potential harvest, wildlife managers, ecologists, and foresters will all have additional opportunities to provide critical input at the site level. This continues a decades-long history of interdisciplinary forest management at the DNR. Working collaboratively, our wildlife managers and other experts will have meaningful discretion to make adjustments, as well as to develop site-specific prescriptions that protect and enhance wildlife habitat while meeting timber harvest goals. Importantly, the STH computer tool will not dictate which stands are harvested, or how harvest is done. Rather, based on the STH plan's overall objectives, the computer model is used to generate the list of potential stands that are then subject to the interdisciplinary review process. The end result is a process that very much values the expertise of wildlife managers and other natural resource professionals, while also seeking to improve the consistency with which we pursue our habitat and other forest management goals.

Q: Do local wildlife staff have the final say in determining how timber harvest is conducted on WMAs?

A: The professional expertise and experience of the DNR's wildlife managers is critical to our forest management decisions. However, no staff in the DNR have complete autonomy and final decision authority, whether they work managing wildlife, parks, fisheries, or minerals. The DNR employs a robust, interdisciplinary approach to making all complex natural resource decisions, including those involving timber harvest. This approach includes rigorous analysis, such as that involved in the STH, and robust conversations among staff and with leadership. We also carefully consider the perspectives of local, federal, and tribal governments, stakeholder groups, and the public. These conversations make our decisions better, and we have important processes for ensuring all voices are carefully considered. Often these processes do result in decisions being made at the field level, and that will continue to be the case with many of our timber harvest decisions on WMAs and elsewhere. However, there are also times when these decisions will be elevated to ensure consistency and appropriate balancing of multiple objectives.

Q: Why use a computer model to do this work?

A: The work is actually accomplished through a combination of computer modeling and collaboration among fish and wildlife managers, botanists and ecologists, and foresters. The 2.7 million acres of state forest land where timber harvest occurs are made up of 140,000 individual stands—each with its own species composition, age, growth potential, and conservation characteristics. This is too much information to track and sort without the aid of a computer model. Every year, a work list (stand exam list) is created, and those forest stands are considered by DNR staff to decide: if the stand should be harvested, how it should be harvested, and how the stand should be regenerated. As described below, the DNR also seeks comment on the annual stand exam lists from a range of external parties.

Q: What happens next with STH implementation?

A: While the STH plan included stakeholder input and interdisciplinary work to set the 10-year goal, this is not the end of coordination and outreach. Staff across DNR divisions have been working together to develop a 10-year stand exam list. This is the pool from which annual timber harvest plans are developed. The 10-year exam list will be shared with the public once it is compiled and documentation is complete.

Each year, an annual stand exam list will be derived from the 10-year pool and made available for review and comment by tribal nations, federal and local governments, environmental and conservation groups, the timber industry, and the public. Each stand on the annual list will be visited by field staff to verify the stand conditions and develop a site-level management strategy for that particular stand. Stand management decisions will be informed by DNR wildlife biologists, ecologists, and foresters and may include harvest – such as a final harvest or thinning – or no action based on the conditions of the stand and overall goals and objectives. All of this will happen before a particular stand is offered for sale through a timber auction. The many steps between completing the STH plan and the harvest of a specific timber stand allow flexibility to evaluate and adjust timber harvests to account for site-specific information and management needs, while meeting the overall STH goal.

Q. I understand that the DNR intends to support diverse and healthy forests under the STH plan, but what if problems are discovered as you implement the plan—e.g., the approach is found to have unacceptable adverse impacts to a particular species or habitat type?

A. The current STH is a 10-year plan, with a scheduled mid-term check-in after five years to see what, if any, adjustments are needed to achieve balanced forest management. However, we are also taking an adaptive, continuous improvement approach to implementation. If we need to make adjustments before the five-year check-in, we will do so.

Q: I contribute to WMA acquisition when I pay the \$4 surcharge on my small-game hunting license. Can I be assured my contribution is helping wildlife and WMAs?

A: Yes. The DNR uses this acquisition funding wisely and makes strategic land investments with it. WMAs are managed primarily for wildlife habitat and wildlife-oriented recreation. In the forest, the principal habitat management tool is thoughtful timber harvest.