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# Are Our Forests Sustainable?

## Multiple Perspectives on the National Report On Sustainable Forests—2003

by Michael Buck, Jay O'Laughlin and Alicia Robbins\*

*"The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased, and not impaired, in value."* — **Theodore Roosevelt**

Today too few people ask whether we are increasing or impairing the value of our forest assets. It may not be feasible to succinctly catalog and describe all the environmental, economic, and social benefits that one acre of forest can provide, let alone all 749 million acres of forests in this country. Instead people simply want to know if forests are being managed "sustainably."

Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) involves the conscious consideration of different perspectives on forests so that the results of management are ecologically sound, economically viable and socially desirable. SFM proposes that all forest landowners consider these three goals before they make decisions with long-term consequences about what to do on their land. The overall objective of SFM is to ensure that there will be healthy forests in the future and that they will continue to provide society with opportunities similar to those enjoyed today. This is the essence of a stewardship ethic that will benefit future generations.

Given the wide range of biophysical variability and diverse objectives of more than ten million forest owners in the U.S.,

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\*Michael Buck is Sustainable Forestry Representative for the National Association of State Foresters, Jay O'Laughlin is director, Policy Analysis Group, College of Natural Resources, University of Idaho, Alicia Robbins is Program Manager of the University of Washington's Center for Sustainable Forestry at Pack Forest.

the question of whether or not our forests are sustainable is a challenging one. Nevertheless, more than ten years ago—driven by the many concerns people have expressed about the future of forests and the many goods, services and values they provide—our nation joined the international community in a voluntary commitment to begin the journey of integrating and applying the concept of SFM.

Although as a nation we lack a comprehensive policy or program to guide us toward SFM, many people who care about forests have affiliated under a program called the Roundtable on Sustainable Forests (RSF). With leadership from the U.S. Forest Service and land grant universities, and with participation from organizations representing state forestry agencies as well as industrial, tribal, family forest owners, and non-profit organizations, the RSF has helped guide the U.S. Forest Service in its efforts to assemble and report on a database to make judgments about SFM. In recent years, the RSF has been engaged in refining the Montreal Process Criteria and Indicators (C&I), which were the basis for the development and release of the National Report on Sustainable Forests—2003.

For the December 2005 RSF meeting, nearly 65 forest and natural resource professionals, landowners and concerned citizens gathered for two days in Washington, D.C. to hear points of view from many perspectives regarding the U.S. Forest Service's National Report on Sustainable Forests—2003, recommend improvements in future national reports, and approve a new Roundtable Work Plan. Speakers provided perspectives on the effectiveness and applicability of the C&I and the National Report for their own regions and constituents.

Through these presentations and subsequent discussions, several central themes emerged:

- *Public Education:* We face a critical, uphill battle in educating the public and raising awareness on forest sustainability, both among consumers about the meaning of sustainability and among landowners on the wide variety of decision support tools available.
- *Greater Involvement:* Effort should be made to provide for greater inclusion of more diverse stakeholders in the Roundtable. Encouragement of dialogue at regional and local levels would help carry the message to greater numbers.
- *Personal Responsibility:* Individuals and their home institutions must take more initiative in bringing home the message of the Roundtable and participating in public education and enlisting greater involvement by more diverse stakeholders.
- *National Report:* There is definitive support for the development of a second National Report on Forests, but the report should be made more user-friendly and marketed to a wider audience. Clarity is needed as to what purpose the report is intended to serve, especially in regard to making judgments on the sustainability of our nation's forests.
- *Additional Data:* Some refinement of the appropriate scales for data collection is needed, especially in regard to regional, national and global decision-making processes. We may be overlooking new challenges and key drivers affecting forestland and forestland conversion.

So, are America's forests sustainable? Maybe. Maybe not. Consistent with our national policies to periodically assess the demand for and supply of forest resources, the U.S. Forest Service has been assigned the task of identifying

programmatic opportunities to align supplies with demands. Without good information the task cannot be done adequately. Whatever the assessment shows that current situation to be, we know it will not change unless forest owners decide to take some kind of action.

Over 80 percent of our nation's forests are under non-federal ownership and management. Whether perceived or real, the social concerns that underlie sustainability mold the decision environment in which owners' actions will shape the forests of the future. Ultimately the decisions made on private land are the responsibility of individual landowners, as informed by their technical advisors (e.g., foresters, accountants, etc.).

Although Roundtable participants did not always agree on how to approach issues, there was an inspiring level of enthusiasm and commitment to continue SFM forums designed to address the many challenges facing our nation's forests—aggressively and with an open mind for new approaches. There was overall consensus that our most pressing challenge is to maintain and enhance existing forestlands. This means slowing conversion of forests to other land uses, such as development, that permanently remove forest cover; such attempts at slowing must be supported by incentives for family forest owners to retain their forests in traditional wood-based forestry or in emerging recreationally-focused forestry, possibly by employing new market-based mechanisms that bring additional monetary value to the environmental services provided by forestlands.

For more information on the Roundtable on Sustainable Forests, go to [www.sustainableforests.net](http://www.sustainableforests.net). For a copy of the National Report on Sustainable Forests, go to [www.fs.fed.us/research/sustain](http://www.fs.fed.us/research/sustain).