

# Forestry<sup>The</sup>Source

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## Oregon Develops Sustainable Forest Indicators

It is one thing to say you practice sustainable forest management. It is quite another to prove it or at least to use some means of measuring sustainability. The latter is the goal of an ambitious project spearheaded by the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF).

The Forestry Program for Oregon, a strategic plan completed by the Oregon Board of Forestry in 2003, listed a framework of seven strategies for sustainable forest management. The board then assembled an advisory committee charged with drafting a set of indicators of sustainability, each of which is assessed by one or more metrics.

The committee released a draft set of 19 indicators and 58 associated metrics in July. The indicators are intended as “measuring sticks” of sustainability across all forestland in the state, including tribal and federal lands. The committee includes members of state and federal forestry and fish and wildlife agencies, Indian tribes, timber companies, environmental organizations, and other stakeholders.

“We’ve tried to get people to endorse the concept that sustainability is a worthy goal but that you really need to address, in an integrated fashion, the environmental, economic, and social aspects of sustainable forestry,” said David Morman, project coordinator for the ODF. “If you don’t address all three, you’re not going to end up with any politically sustainable solutions. You may win short-term battles, but the battles will still continue.”

Morman said the Forestry Program for Oregon has its roots in the international Montreal Process Santiago Declaration of 1995, which former state forester Jim Brown felt was applicable at the state level. The Montreal Process includes 7 criteria and 67 indicators of sustainable forest management.

“Oregon is ground zero for forestry controversy. If we can get people, regardless of their values, to approach forest management around this framework of strategies and indicators, then everybody can see their values honored, but we can all work toward a common vision of what sustainable forestry might mean in Oregon,” Morman said.

Chris Jarmer, water policy and forest regulation director for the Oregon Forest Industries Council and

member of the advisory committee, said that the indicators will give the Board of Forestry and Oregonians a clearer picture of forestry throughout the state.

“We’ve always focused on the number of spotted owls and the number of salmon species listed as threatened or endangered as indicators of the fact that we aren’t sustainable,” he said. “To the department’s credit, they want to get out of that box. So now we’ve got economic and social indicators that also count as indicators of sustainability and social responsibility.”

One problem, said Jarmer, is money. “There are 50-some metrics that they are going to propose to use as measures of the 19 indicators. This is a great concept, but they’ve identified a whole lot of things that we don’t have funding for and that we don’t do now.”

Another advisory committee member, Sara Vickerman, senior director of biodiversity partnerships for the Northwest office of Defenders of Wildlife, agrees that funding is critical. She also wonders to what degree the indicators will be used in policymaking.

“It’s an extraordinary first step on the part of the agency. I think it is commendable that they had the conversation at all and the indicators came out as well as they did. They’re technically sound, and it’s a pretty good list. The question now is whether they will be taken seriously,” she said.

Vickerman cites the Oregon Benchmarks as an example. Oregon’s state government has developed a set of 100 benchmarks—social, economic, and environmental indicators—that all state agencies are to consider in addressing key statewide issues, such as education, air quality, crime rates, employment, and infant health.

“Even though the agencies are encouraged to think about the indicators as they develop their programs and budgets,” said Vickerman, “one gets the sense that the connection isn’t as strong as it could be between the measurements and the programs.”

In addition, she says, ODF will have to engage the public in the process if the indicators are to be useful.

“If nobody knows about these indicators but the insiders, then they’re not going to make any difference,” said Vickerman. “If the public pays attention and if they communicate with the agency, the Board of Forestry, and their legislators that they are paying attention, then they could well make a difference.”

Jarmer said the indicators and metrics will overwhelm the public with information.

“I’ve been very vocal in saying that this is way too complicated,” he said. “The public isn’t going to grasp it—there’s too much noise or static. [The board] is going to have a hard time distilling all of this down into a statement that says ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ ‘we’re sustainable or we aren’t.’”

That, said Morman, is the next step.

“The indicators are measuring sticks, but they don’t tell you what the right measurement is,” he said. “We may stop short of picking firm targets, but maybe we can at least agree on which direction we’d like these trends to go. For instance, we have a water quality indicator. Can we agree that we want water quality on forest streams to be maintained or improved? We can come up with similar statements for the other 18 indicators and then begin to track them over time.”

Vickerman argues that the board and ODF should set specific goals or targets for each indicator.

“Sooner or later we’re going to have to make judgments about where and to what degree, and to what scale these various values are going to be accommodated as a matter of forest policy in Oregon,” she said.

Trends alone can tell a story about how well Oregon’s forests are being managed, said Morman.

“If we look at these trends down the road and they’re all positive, which may be unrealistically optimistic, then maybe we won’t have to fight about every single timber sale or policy decision,” Morman said. “Or if an indicator or two isn’t going the way we’d like, then we can drill down into the issue and see if we can change that trend.”

“We hope that this process leads to something we’ve lacked for about 30 years—a platform for building common ground to move forward on forest management in Oregon.”

In addition to Oregon, a group of states in the Northeast has developed a set of 18 indicators, as well. For more information, visit the USDA Forest Service’s Northeastern Area website at [www.na.fs.fed.us/stratplan/stratplan04\\_08/index.htm](http://www.na.fs.fed.us/stratplan/stratplan04_08/index.htm)