

LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

Forest Views

Mark Jacobs is a retired Aitkin County Land Commissioner and is now an Associate with Dovetail Partners, Inc., whose mission is to provide authoritative information about the impacts and trade-offs of environmental decisions.



Mark Jacobs
Forest Views

Since my retirement as a public forestland manager, I've paid close attention to perspectives on Minnesota forests. I've noticed a number of things: One is that people genuinely care about the state's forests. Having worked with a wide variety of forest stakeholders over the years, be they environmental activists, timber companies, wildlife biologists, or recreational users, one of the few things they all agree on is the importance of maintaining our forestland base. Forests provide habitat for wildlife, store atmospheric carbon, filter rainfall to produce clean water, support a billion-dollar forest products industry and provide the base for numerous outdoor recreational activities. These are reasons why Minnesotans care about forests.

I've also observed that people tend to rely on "sound bites" as their source of information on forest and other natural resources issues; this has led to many misconceptions. One common misconception is that the amount of Minnesota forest land is continually decreasing. Obviously after the logging era of the early 1900's massive deforestation occurred due to the follow up human development (agriculture, housing, etc.). Prior to that era, it's estimated that Minnesota's forest acreage was around 31-million acres, concentrated in the northern 1/2 of the state. So, if you live in northern Minnesota, you likely live in a spot that was

once forested.

The good news is that despite continued deforestation, forest acreage in Minnesota has increased over the last 50 years. Currently we have 17.7 million acres of forest, up from a low of 16.5 million acres in the mid-1970's. Forest management actions such as the reforestation of former farm fields and pastures have contributed to the net gain in forestland over that period. So, while you hear reports on global deforestation, you can take some solace in the fact that our local forests have been increasing.

Unfortunately, the rate of "net gain" in forest acres has continually declined over the last two decades to a near "break even" situation today. Every indication points to a gradual loss of forest acres over the next few decades.

We know that forestland will continue to be converted to valuable non-forest uses such as agriculture, commercial or residential development, thus leading to a potential reduction of forestland. Knowing the importance of forestland to our economy, environment, and quality of life should we be concerned?

My view: We are certainly not in "crisis mode" relative to loss of forestland, but I think that we, as a society, should identify, promote, and even incentivize practices/programs that retain or expand our forest land base before we reach a crisis.



"The good news is that despite continued deforestation, forest acreage in Minnesota has increased over the last 50 years."

Mark Jacobs

