



# Illinois Forestry Development Council

## Critical Issues Facing Illinois Forests and Forestry

### **Critical Issue: The Need for More Science-Based Educational Programs for Illinois Citizens of All Ages about What Constitutes Forest Health and Proper Forest Management Practices**

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**Who Needs More Education?** According to the 2000 U.S. Census, over 87% of Illinoisans live in urban environments. A large percentage of our citizenry, therefore, most frequently encounters wood and wood products in the context of lumber or furniture retail stores. The tree farmer, the logger, and the forest products industry are 'out of sight, out of mind.'

The future of Illinois forests is dependent upon environmentally literate Illinois citizens. Comprehensive environmental education programs for young and old alike are needed to produce citizens cognizant of the roles natural forest systems and resource management play in supporting our quality of life.

**What Constitutes Forest Health?** A forest is a living community of interdependent organisms and their physical environment. A healthy forest is a forest capable of maintaining desirable ecosystem functions and processes. Indicators of forest health include measures related to biological diversity, viable wildlife habitat, aesthetic appeal, and resource sustainability. A healthy forest provides the human community with services that include improved air quality, clean water, abundant wood products, and recreational opportunities.

Both natural and human disturbances can impact forests in positive and negative ways. In fact, natural disturbances, such as fire, insects, disease, and severe weather are essential drivers of forest renewal. A healthy forest is not static, but is resilient to disturbance and change. The challenge facing Illinois foresters is to educate the general public about the ecologically sound basis for forest management.

**What are Proper Forest Management Practices?** Managing a forest is not mining a forest. Sound forest management evaluates current status, charts a course toward sustainable production, and implements a plan. Forest management practices incorporate planting, growing, and cutting trees to produce wood while conserving air, soil, and

Landowners learn  
about water quality  
benefits of  
streamside  
vegetation

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**“Many private forest landowners know very little about issues related to forest management and ecology. Current elementary school curriculum are very lacking on these subjects primarily due to lack of knowledge and training of teachers.”**

**-Illinois citizen comment**

*Holly Victor-Bold, a Jackson county public school teacher, says incorporating forestry or other ‘nature’ literature (i.e., environmental education) is left to a teacher’s own discretion. Illinois is among the ranks of states that have not incorporated structured units on local, state, or national environmental issues into their standards-based curricula.*



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water quality, wildlife habitat, and landscape aesthetics.

**What is the Current Status of Environmental Education in Illinois?** It is vitally important for citizens to be adequately and appropriately informed on issues that affect Illinois forests and the overall environment. At present, Illinois is not listed among the 31 states which require that environmental concepts be incorporated into their K-12 curriculum. Although a variety of forest science educational materials for teachers and students are available, there are not enough personnel from private organizations or public agencies to disseminate the information effectively.

Over 90% of Illinois forestland is in private ownership, therefore, educating landowners about sustainable forest management practices is critical. Chronic budget shortfalls at the Illinois Department of Natural Resources can cause landowners to wait up to two years before requests for technical assistance are answered. As private ownership numbers continue to increase the prospect of reaching each landowner with individual assistance becomes impractical, thereby necessitating innovative demonstration programs.

**What are Some Possible Solutions?** The Illinois Forestry Development Council has advocated development of comprehensive statewide conservation education programs for both youth and adults since its inception. Legislative action is needed to add environmental education to the Illinois standards-based K-12 curriculum.

Adult education programs that build bridges between the forestry community and the general public by demonstrating techniques necessary to manage Illinois forests sustainably are also needed. Initiatives to build collaborative partnerships among agencies and organizations within the forestry community will be necessary to address this need and prevent duplication of effort. State support for university-based outreach and extension efforts, such as the Illinois Virtual Forest, must be maintained.

Educated citizens become land stewards. By educating Illinois citizens about forest health and sound management practices, we protect both market and non-market values of Illinois forests for citizens, communities, and the state today and in the future.

#### **Additional Reading**

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