

## Conservation Easement Helps Offset Development

## Protecting Minnesota's Private Forests

## The Challenge

Minnesota has been losing forests to other uses since Anglo-European settlement. Forests originally covered over 31 million acres of the State. By 2002, the forests had been reduced to just over 16 million acres; some forests, like the Big Woods in south-central Minnesota, had been reduced to just a few thousand acres, compared with 1.9 million acres in pre-settlement times. Minnesota's forests are important economically, ecologically, and socially. The forest products industry contributes \$4.3 billion annually to the gross state product and employs over 53,000 people. Forested habitats are important for hundreds of plant and animal species, from the common, such as white-tailed deer, to the uncommon, such as timber wolves and Canada lynx. Forests are also an important place for outdoor recreation, attracting hunters, hikers, birdwatchers, and campers from around the State and the county. As Minnesota's population grows, the pressure to convert and subdivide private forests for development and recreation purposes will continue.

## The Solution

In 1999, Minnesota identified the protection of large blocks of forest cover that are reasonably intact as the foundation for its State Forest Legacy Program. Fifteen candidate Forest Legacy Areas were identified as meeting those criteria. The State further identified that partnerships were critical to accomplishing the goal of protecting Minnesota's important private forests. Minnesota's Forest Legacy Program works in cooperation the State Forest Stewardship Coordinating Committee and other partners to develop applications and identify priority projects annually.

## Resulting Benefits

Working with partners, Minnesota has activated 6 of the 15 candidate Forest Legacy Areas, making landowners there eligible to submit program applications. Projects have been completed or are underway in each of the six areas. The Minnesota Forest Legacy Partnership—a unique coalition of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, conservation groups, the Blandin Foundation, and other key groups—has formed to focus on protecting

*Forest Legacy conservation grants conserved nearly 6,000 forested acres in Minnesota.*



Dignitaries gather to celebrate completion of the 4776-acre Brainerd Lakes Forest Legacy project.

Minnesota's 1 million acres of industrial ownership. Also, the Blandin Foundation, working in cooperation with The Nature Conservancy of Minnesota and the Minnesota Forest Legacy Partnership, has provided a \$6 million challenge grant to jump start efforts to protect large blocks of industrial land in northern Minnesota.

## Sharing Success

The Blandin Foundation's initial challenge grant of \$6 million has led to additional grants totaling over \$1.5 million from other foundations and individuals. Additionally, the Minnesota Legislature, with the Governor's backing, has provided \$7 million to this effort over the past year. These monies will be critical to securing working forest easements that will not only ensure sustainable forestry, but also protect wildlife habitat and guarantee public access.

## Highlights of Minnesota's Forest Legacy Program

- The Forest Legacy Program has used \$4,839,950 in Forest Legacy Program funds to protect 19 properties totaling 5,941 acres and valued at \$7,036,850.
- Seventeen tracts in south-central Minnesota protect over 1,100 acres of hardwood forests and related habitats, remnants of the historical Big Woods that once covered over 3,000 square miles.
- The Brainerd Lakes Forest Legacy project protects nearly 4,800 acres of prime forest land owned by Potlatch Corporation, ensuring public access in this popular resort and tourist location.
- An additional 16 tracts, totaling nearly 79,000 acres, have been proposed for funding.



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