



Summary of Input Received on the Draft Strategic Issues for NA S&PF to Potentially Address Over the Next Five Years

Background and Executive Summary

Background: The USDA Forest Service, Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry (NA S&PF) is committed to strategic planning to focus resources on priorities that we are uniquely positioned to address. A NA S&PF strategic planning team with representation from each business unit, field office, and program area compiled a draft list of strategic issues for NA S&PF to potentially address over the next five years. We considered the 2010 State Forest Action Plans; objectives from the NA S&PF FY 2008-2012 Strategic Plan; NA S&PF program and resource specific strategies; input from employees and an external Scoping Team; resource conditions and trends; and events and emphasis areas that arose since 2008.

National S&PF Priorities and Draft Issues: The draft issues were organized in four categories: the three national priorities for S&PF in the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act,¹ and an “organizational effectiveness” category. Although the issues in this fourth category are more operational, they were commonly identified by both employees and the Scoping Team. While each issue is important on its own, they are highly interrelated and will be considered holistically.

Internal and External Review of Draft Strategic Issues: A description of the draft strategic issues was shared with NA S&PF employees, partners and stakeholders and posted on-line. An online poll asked how important it is for NA S&PF to address each of the issues (on a scale of 1-6) and had open-ended questions for input on the draft strategic issues and solutions to address the issues. This document provides a summary of responses received through the on-line poll as well as input shared by State Foresters during the Northeastern Area Association of State Foresters meeting in July, 2012.

Key Points from Input Received:

- A total of 120 people provided input on the draft strategic issues: 50 NA S&PF employees, 67 rtners and stakeholders, and 3 who did not identify their affiliation.
- The high importance ratings confirmed that each of the draft strategic issues is important for NA S&PF to address over the next five years. We will also continue to consider the set holistically.
- The issue question focused on leveraging our technical expertise in collaboration with partners in support of common goals was rated the highest across all respondents.
- Common themes in input to the open ended questions across all issues were: (1) NA S&PF is uniquely positioned to address issues from a regional perspective and coordinate across States, (2) importance of NA S&PF collaboration with a variety of existing and new partners, (3) communications efforts and conservation education programs are critical.
- We fully appreciated receiving hundreds of suggestions and ideas.

Next Steps: Based on the input outlined in this document, we decided to keep all issue areas for consideration in the NA S&PF strategic planning process. We made some minor edits to the strategic issues and will make additional edits to the descriptions. We also re-stated the issue questions as objective statements (see page 12). This document is a summary of the input and we received many additional ideas. We will consider all of the comments shared as we draft the strategies. Draft strategies will be available for internal and external review in late October and posted at: <http://www.na.fs.fed.us/strategic-planning/>. As part of this strategic planning process, we are also identifying how NA S&PF will implement the strategy on an annual basis and are updating our mission and vision statements.

¹ Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act as amended by the 2008 Farm Bill: <http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/coop/library/SPF-CF%20handbook.pdf>

Demographics of the Respondents

As shown in figure 1, a total of 120 people provided input on the draft strategic issues for NA S&PF:

- 50 NA S&PF employees
- 67 partners and stakeholders
- 3 respondents who did not identify their affiliation.

Partners and Stakeholders:

Partner respondents self-identified their affiliation by organization name, which was then classified into the five categories shown in figure 2.

State agencies were primarily forestry focused and all State agency responses were from States served by NA S&PF. Staff from 14 of the 21 State forestry agencies NA S&PF serves responded.

Federal agencies were mostly employees from other USDA Forest Service units, such as the Washington Office, National Forest Eastern Region, and Northern Research Station; but also included employees from the US Environmental Protection Agency and US Fish & Wildlife Service.

The *NGOs & Partnerships* category was the most diverse group. It includes employees with non-profits, governmental partnerships that span multiple agencies at the Federal and State level, and local governmental partnerships.

Academia was the smallest group and included respondents who affiliated themselves with an academic institution, including cooperative extension employees.

The *Other* category included respondents who did not identify an organizational affiliation (6), an independent consultant, and a local government employee.

NA S&PF Employees:

NA S&PF employs 135 permanent employees, of which 50 provided input. Employees were asked to identify the business unit and/or program they work for and could choose as many of the categories shown in figure 3 that apply. Of the 50 employees, 16 identified themselves as Area-wide Program Specialists and 18 identified themselves as Field Office employees. At least 3 employees responded for each NA S&PF business unit and program area. Slightly more respondents identified themselves as working in Forest Health (9) and Fire and Aviation (8) compared to the other program areas (3 each).

Figure 1. Type of respondents.

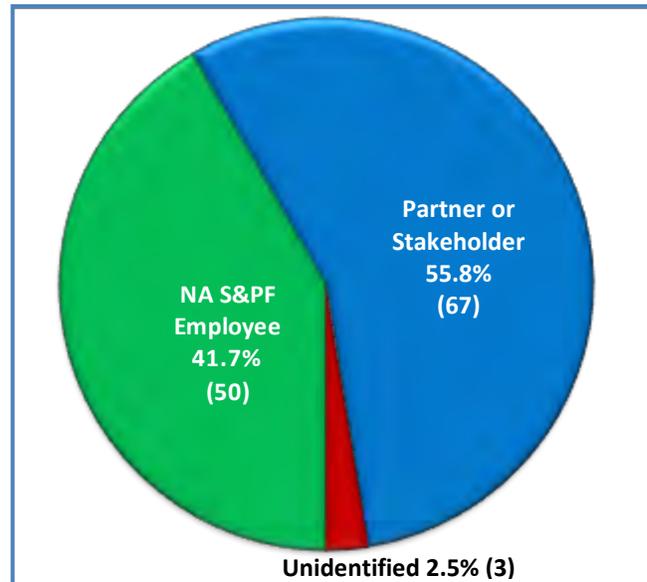


Figure 2. Partner and stakeholder respondents.

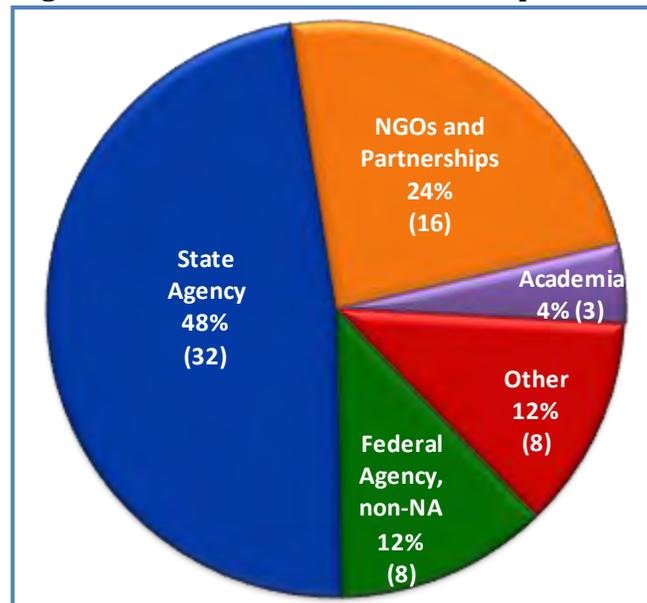
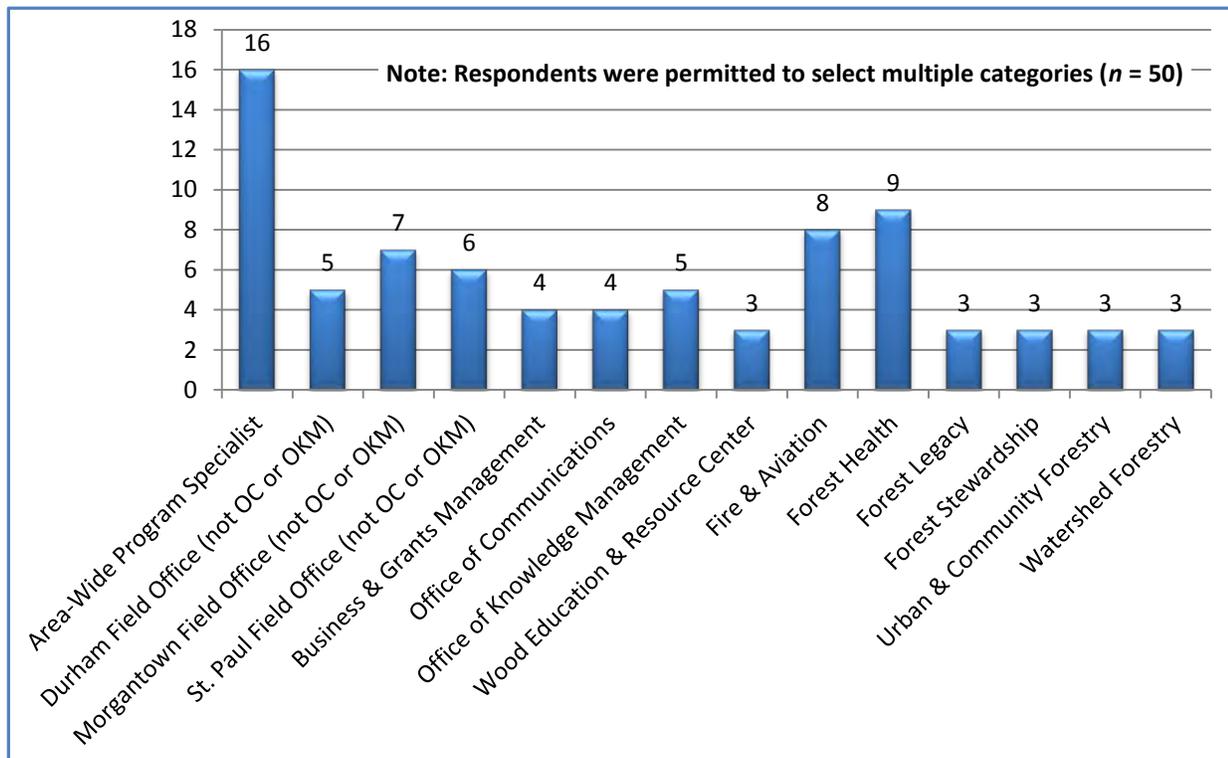


Figure 3. NA S&PF employee respondents.



Importance of Draft Strategic Issues

Respondents were asked to “rate the relative importance of NA S&PF work over the next five years to address” each draft strategic issue on a scale of 1-6, where 1 = not important for NA S&PF to address and 6 = extremely important for NA S&PF to address.

As shown in figure 4, the average ratings were high across all of the draft strategic issues. Across all respondents, the average rating was highest (5.24) for the issue, “How can NA S&PF leverage our technical expertise in collaboration with other Federal agencies, State agencies, academia and other partners in support of common goals?” This one was rated highest by partners and stakeholders and second highest by employees. The issue focused on climate change received the lowest rating by both employees and partners and stakeholders, however was still rated within the “important” range at 4.48 on a scale of 1 to 6.

A chi-square test was also performed for each question to test to statistical significance of the difference in average ratings by NA S&PF employees and partners or stakeholders. The only issue question for which the difference in responses was statistically significant ($p < .05$) was: “How can NA S&PF (collectively) maintain technical expertise, enhance communications, increase productivity, capitalize on new technology and ensure employee safety...?” The average rating by employees was highest for this issue (5.46), while the average rating by partners and stakeholders was significantly lower (4.68).

The next largest differences in ratings by employees and partners or stakeholders were for the issues focused on climate change and wildfire, but these differences were not shown to be statistically significant.

Note: Respondents were required to answer all of rating questions, but had the option to select “No Opinion.” Therefore, the number of responses in the statistical analysis did not always equal the number of respondents for each demographic category, as shown in the tables at the bottom of figures 5, 6, 7, and 8. Additionally, “All Responses” includes the 3 respondents who did not identify their affiliation (depending on whether they provided a rating or selected “No Opinion”).

Figure 4. Average rating, by respondent type, for each draft strategic issue question.

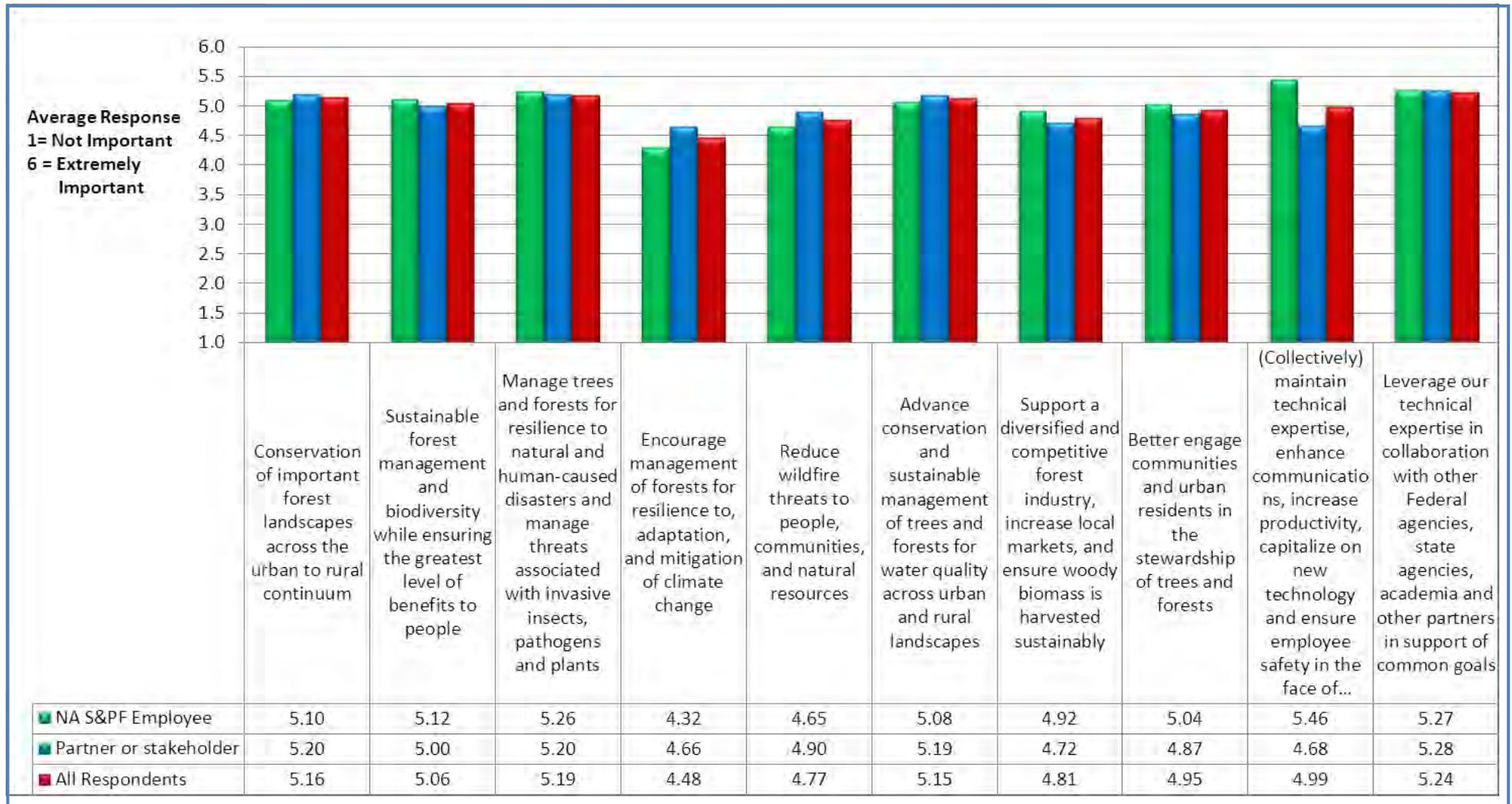


Figure 5. Average rating, by respondent type, for *Conserve and Manage Working Forest Landscapes for Multiple Values and Uses* priority area.

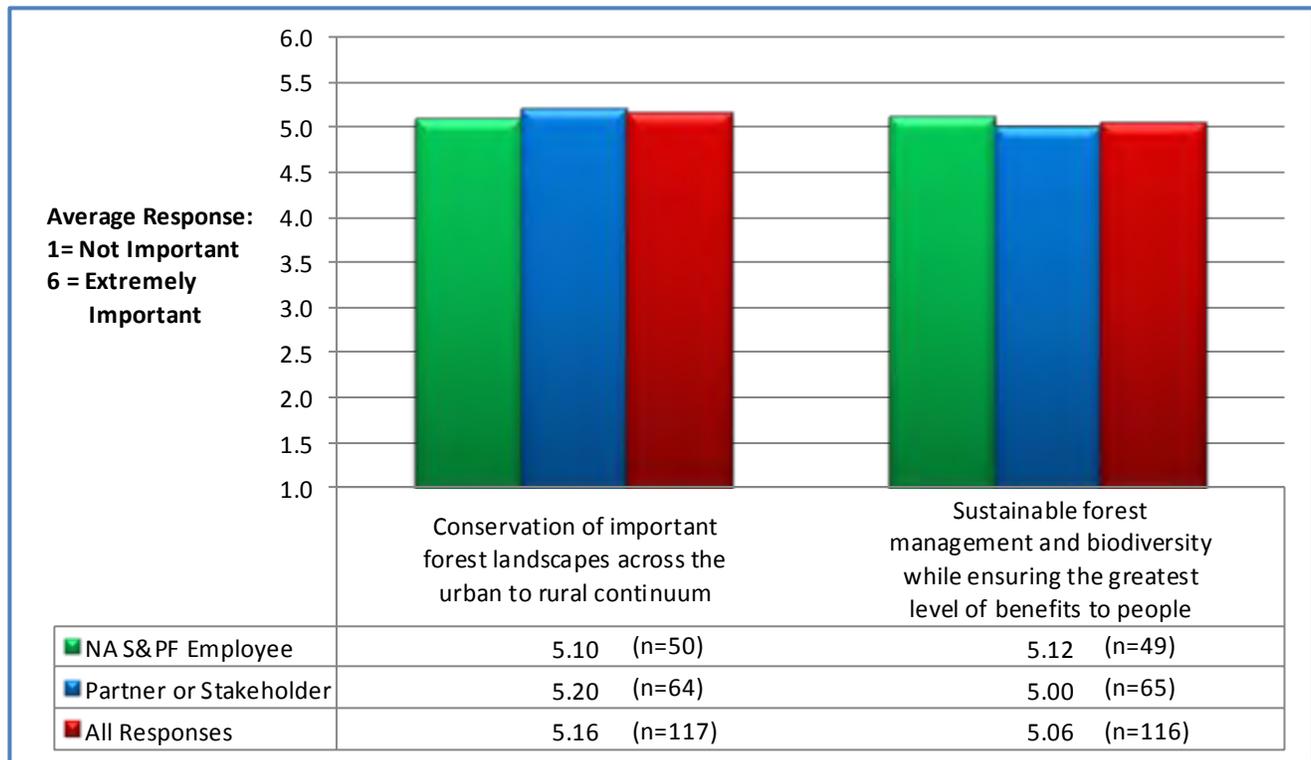


Figure 6. Average rating, by respondent type, for *Protect Forests from Threats* priority area.

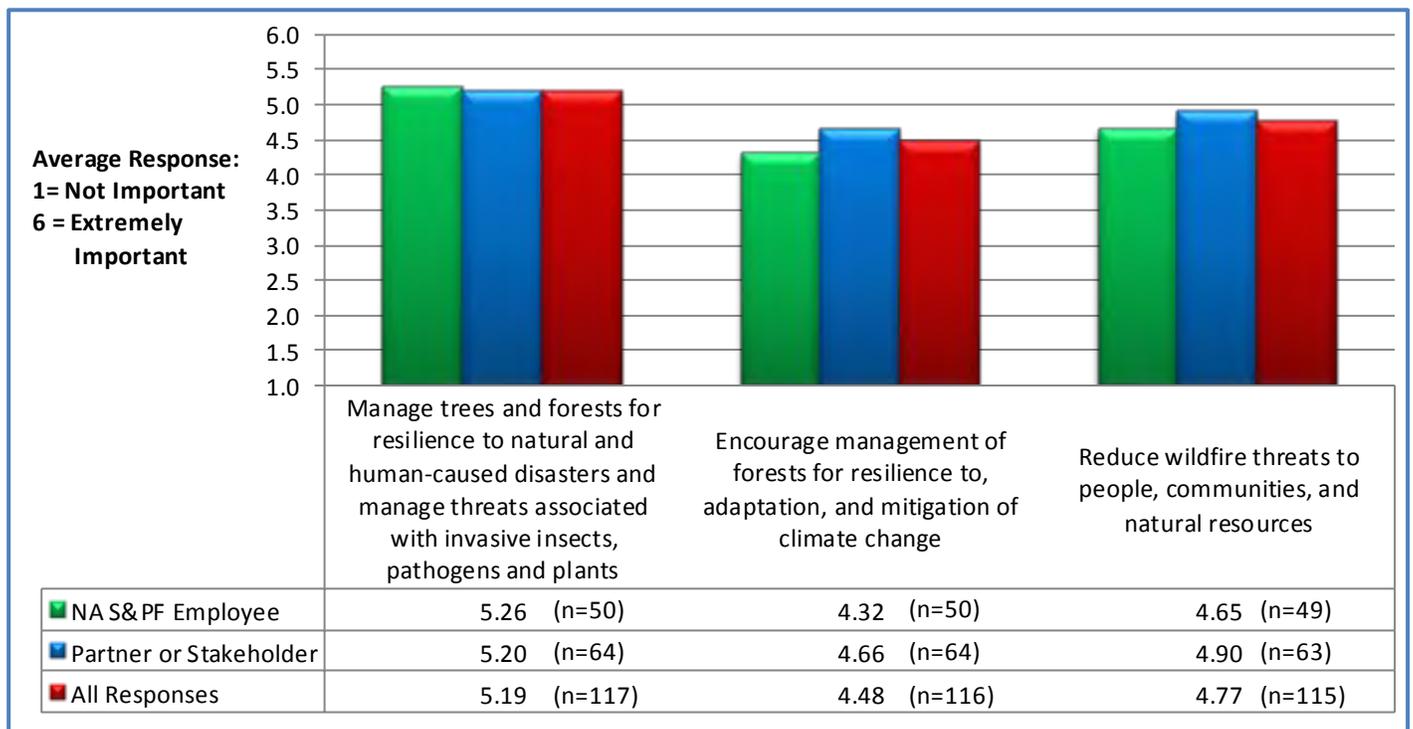


Figure 7. Average rating, by respondent type, for *Enhance Public Benefits from Trees and Forests* priority area.

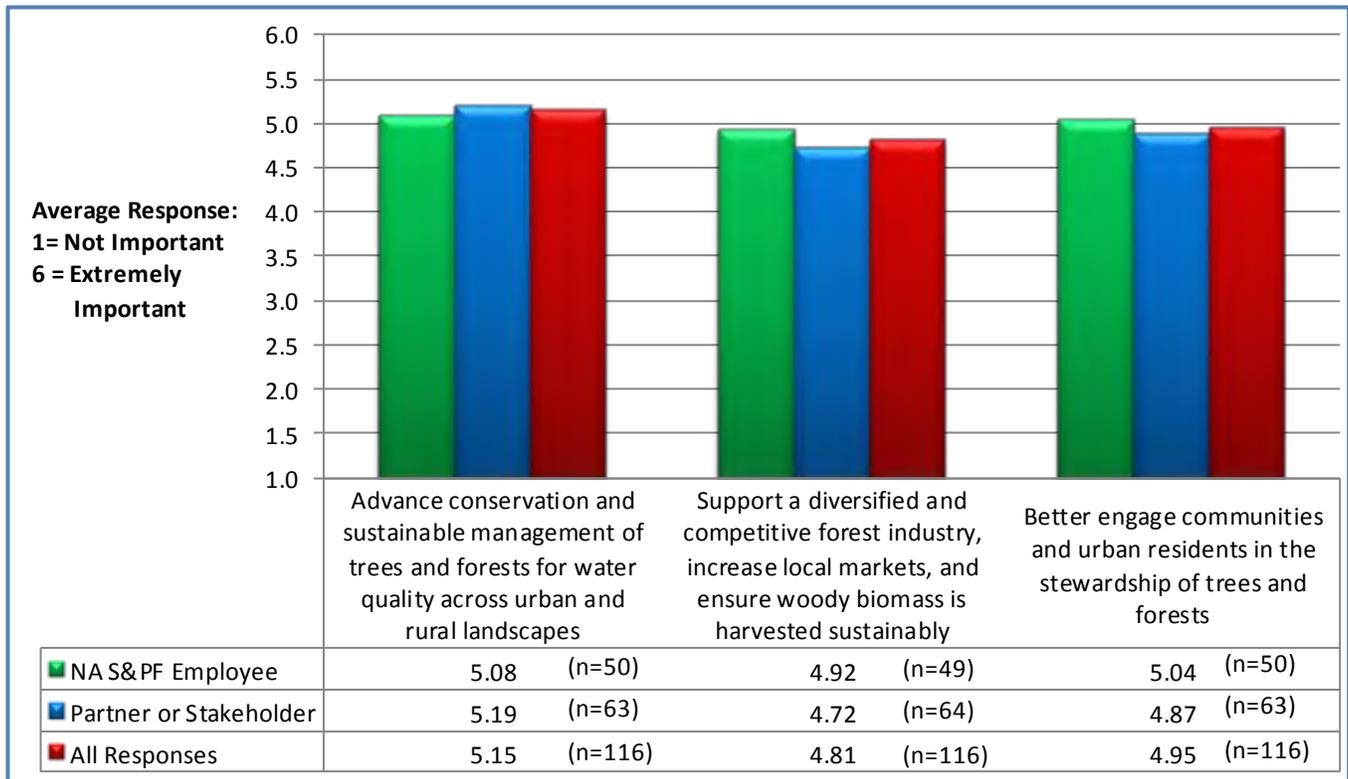
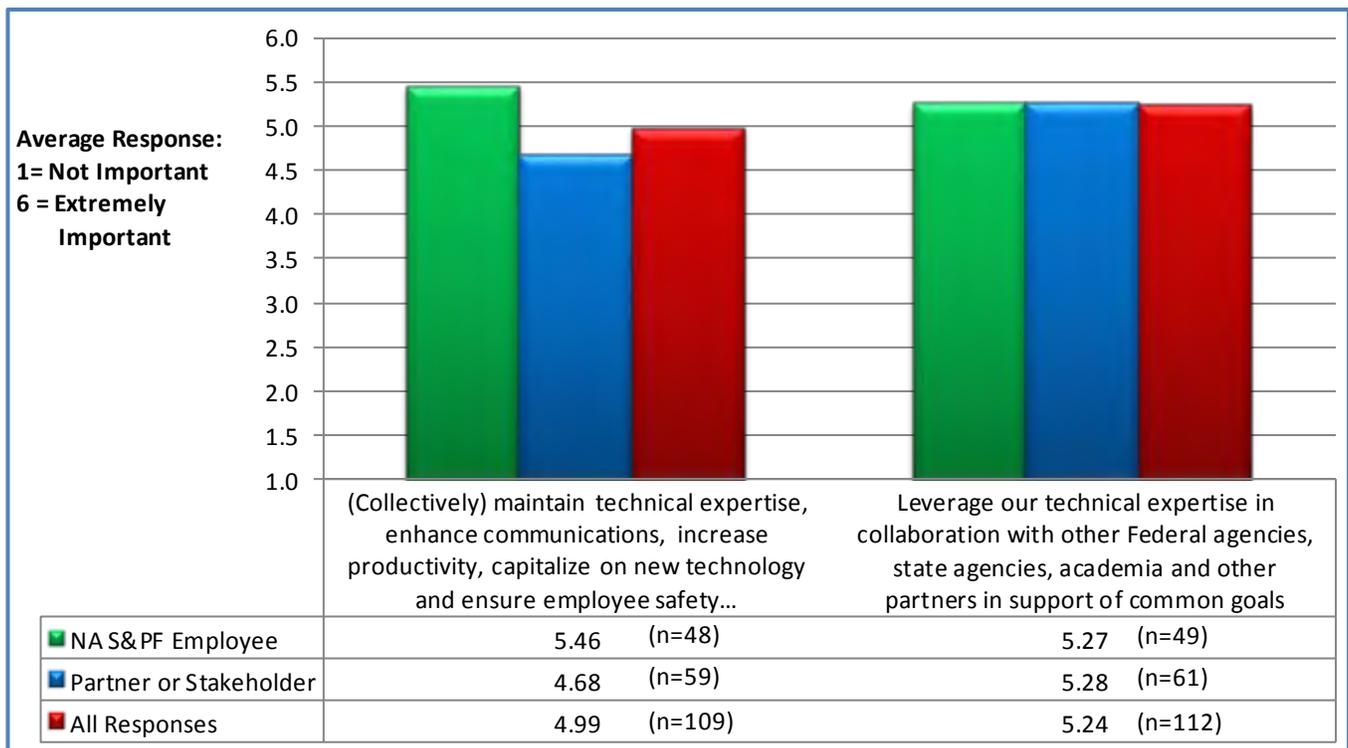


Figure 8. Average rating, by respondent type, for *Organizational Effectiveness* priority area.



Common Themes in Comments Received Across All Issue Categories

For each of the four priority categories, roughly half of respondents provided input to the open-ended question: “How is NA S&PF uniquely positioned to help address these issues? Please include any practical alternatives or suggestions that we might pursue to address these issues.” The following are common themes in the comments provided across all of the priority categories²:

- **Regional perspective and coordination across scales:** Respondents said that NA S&PF is uniquely positioned to address issues from a regional perspective, acting as a catalyst among States and across political and property boundaries. NA S&PF can also connect efforts at multiple scales, from national to local. E.g., “By maintaining a regional perspective, looking beyond State boundaries, NA can direct efforts, funding and technologies in a strategic and collaborative way to achieve the greatest good.”
- **Collaboration and partners:** NA S&PF collaboration with partners, including Federal agencies, State forestry agencies, universities/cooperative extension, Indian tribes, and non-profit organizations was cited as critical across all issues, including our ability to convene partners and work collaboratively. E.g., “NA has the ability to bridge interagency partnerships at higher levels while also encouraging the same at local levels”; “It is imperative that all agencies work together to serve the common good.”
- **Communications and conservation education:** Communications and conservation education programs were recognized as critical. E.g., “Mass communications, including media relations, social media and communications products helps to communicate and enlist public support for these important issues.” “A robust education program (not just information) is needed to ensure that people of all ages are engaged in forest stewardship.” “Conservation education can play a role in helping to educate citizens of these issues, in part, by engaging people/students in citizen science projects.”

Summary of Comments by Priority Category³

In addition to the common themes outlined above, respondents shared input for the draft strategic issues and in particular a wide variety of solutions and actions to address the issues. This section provides a brief summary by priority category of the hundreds of comments received.

Conserve & Manage Working Forest Landscapes for Multiple Values and Uses

Draft Issue Questions for this Category:

- *How can NA S&PF support conservation of important forest landscapes across the urban to rural continuum?*
- *In the face of change, how can NA S&PF support sustainable forest management and biodiversity while ensuring the greatest level of benefits to people?*

Summary of Input Received for This Issue Category:

- Regional perspective and coordination for landscape conservation.
- Identify important forest landscapes for conservation efforts across the urban to rural continuum.
- Leverage opportunities across the landscape.
- Collaboration with State and Federal agencies.
- Assimilate and share information and techniques.
- Support partnerships across State and local boundaries to protect critical working landscapes.

² For these common themes, at least 12 respondents had similar comments within at least one issue category and there were high numbers of similar comments across the four issue categories.

³ There were many strategy and solution suggestions in addition to the common themes and summary of comments for each priority category. The NA S&PF Strategic Planning Team will consider all comments while drafting the strategies.

- Allow for flexible, locally-driven solutions to State-identified priorities.
- Allocate funding to high priority forest areas where there is lack of National Forests.
- Bridge similarities across the 20 states and function as a clearinghouse for best practices.
- Increased focus on planning at multiple scales.
- Communications about silvicultural practices and forest management so urban residents understand the need for and support forest management.
- Lead on communications efforts at broad scales and conservation education to engage people.
- Focus less on infrastructure projects in urban areas (which are very expensive and more appropriate for other Federal agencies) and work more with reforestation, protection, and conservation in brownfields, suburban, and rural lands.

Suggestions for Wording of the Issue Questions and Descriptions:

- Difficult to understand the issues in the way they are presented as questions.
- Managing for multiple values includes managing for resilience to threats and for water quality.
- “In the face of change” (2nd question) applies to just about every issue.
- As storm water issues force a more urban focus it will become increasingly important for the Forest Service to make the linkage between rural and urban land uses, and the role forestry can play in green infrastructure networks.
- Linkages between forest conservation, forest health, and forest industry need to be strengthened.

Protect Forests from Threats

Draft Issue Questions for this Category:

- *How can NA S&PF help support management of trees and forests for resilience to natural and human-caused disasters and threats associated with invasive insects, pathogens, and plants?*
- *How can NA S&PF encourage management of forests for resilience to, adaptation, and mitigation of climate change?*
- *How can NA S&PF reduce wildfire threats to people, communities, and natural resource?*

Summary of Input Received for This Issue Category:

- Funding through grants and technical assistance.
- Provide technical assistance to connect private landowners to foresters and local forest industry to make it easier to achieve their identified forest management objectives.
- Messaging, e.g., on forest health threats, to communicate and enlist public support.
- Target educational programs to establish networks of citizen scientists.
- NA S&PF act as a go-between for organizations, agencies and the public/landowners.
- Address white-tailed deer overabundance.
- Leadership in technology development.
- Need to monitor, prevent, slow the spread, mitigate impacts, and assist in response and recovery.
- Manage forest genetic resources: identify invasive pest & disease resistant trees and genotypes to address climate change resilience.
- Coordinate with other Federal agencies on roles and priorities, e.g., closer working relationships with APHIS to address invasives (mindful of APHIS reductions).
- Addressing forest parcelization and fragmentation is critical.
- Climate change resilience and adaptation efforts are greater priority than mitigation.

- Climate change can be difficult for States due to the political environment. S&PF involvement with projects like the climate change response frameworks gives concrete examples to build on or imitate.
- Climate change is a huge issue but we have limited ability to have major influence so efforts should be focused on education, fact finding, and broad recommendations.
- Continue to promote Firewise and greater public education about wildfire threats.
- Focus wildfire dollars proactively on critical areas rather than spread broadly.
- Continue to stress the need to support volunteer fire departments in the national arena.
- Wildlife threats are less prevalent in the region; education and preparation are key.
- Shift the wildfire message from “prevention” to the role of forest management in preventing wildfire.

Suggestions for Wording of the Issue Questions and Descriptions:

- The description for the 1st issue in this set includes several forest threats in addition to invasives— either take “invasives” out of the issue title or list more of the threats out in the title.
- NA S&PF can foster “human community” resilience to disasters and threats and strengthen cultural connections to trees and forests in urban and rural communities.
- One aspect that doesn’t seem to be addressed in the suggestions for actions is developing and supporting markets for damaged wood and thinnings.
- Climate change is important as a stand-alone issue, however is also part of "manage for resilience to disasters and protect from threats." Comments from 19 respondents about the climate change issue ranged from viewing this as a critical issue for NA S&PF to address to uncertainty over the role for NA S&PF. E.g., “We may not be able to actually "manage" for threats or climate change, rather we can inform, build shared awareness, and create opportunities for discussion and dialogue on the impacts.”

Enhance Public Benefits from Trees and Forests

Draft Issue Questions for this Category:

- *How can NA S&PF advance conservation and sustainable management of trees and forests for water quality across urban and rural landscapes?*
- *How can NA S&PF support a diversified and competitive forest industry, increase local markets, and ensure woody biomass is harvested sustainably?*
- *How can NA S&PF better engage communities and urban residents in the stewardship of trees and forests?*

Summary of Input Received for This Issue Category:

- Programs are too “stove-piped”: addressing these issues requires better integration of efforts and tools available across S&PF programs to maintain functioning forest ecosystems and working forests.
- An important role for NA S&PF is to work with partners across the urban to rural continuum.
- Public-private partnerships are the primary avenue for achieving this goal, including with current partners and targeting new urban and non-traditional partners.
- Work to make people understand the connection between the role trees play in reducing stormwater run-off and the role forests play in protecting and improving water quality.
- Importance of NA S&PF technical transfer and assistance role.
- Coordinate with Fish & Wildlife, water, climate, and economic development interests and stakeholders.
- Work with EPA to require trees in storm water regulations and to accept iTree data.
- Use WERC (Wood Education & Resource Center) to assist States with woody biomass utilization, diversifying and maintaining wood businesses, and increasing local markets; work with industry.
- Utilization and marketing expertise at all field offices to target assistance to keep industry vital.

- Information campaign to help with the disconnect between consumption of forest products and where those products come from; improve understanding about forest management.
- Show the environmental value of wood compared to steel and communicate this information to consumers, architects and others.
- Use appropriate and modern communications channels.
- Focus on leadership and communication to share lessons learned, specifically with water and water quality derived from forests.
- Strong conservation education program across program areas; improve environmental literacy.
- Continue to focus on broad urban forestry issues including better utilization of urban wood.
- “Engaging urban residents” is a huge opportunity—need to partner with urban groups.
- Support State urban forestry programs.

Suggestions for Wording of the Issue Questions and Descriptions:

- Emphasize the marketing and business aspects for 2nd question (an area the USFS has decreased).
- Mention in the solutions that improving environmental literacy will be a key objective of investment for engaging communities.
- Build support across all sectors for green infrastructure as a solution to ecological, social, and economic needs in cities and communities across the region.

Organizational Effectiveness

Draft Issue Questions for this Category:

- *How can we (collectively) maintain technical expertise, enhance communications, increase productivity, capitalize on new technology, and ensure employee safety in the face of declining budgets, retirements, and increasing administrative requirements?*
- *How can NA S&PF leverage our technical expertise in collaboration with other Federal agencies, State agencies, academia, and other partners in support of common goals?*

Summary of Input Received for This Issue Category:

- Partnerships! Strong emphasis on collaborating with partners and working with new groups. A strong common theme within this area was more coordination across USDA and with other Federal agencies. Consider doing a partnership assessment.
- Better internal communication and coordination within NA S&PF and across the USFS for more seamless program delivery (both vertical and horizontal awareness).
- Identify and develop applications and internet, intranet and other technological tools that support staff and cooperators in implementing forest management ideas and projects.
- Citizen engagement is critical for expanding capacity. There is a need to work with our partners to develop stronger local networks and champions.
- Institute a "pathways" philosophy to address technical expertise—involve young people by the time they are in middle school and offer opportunities to remain involved in environmental stewardship.
- Maintain technical expertise.
- Grant administration staff in field offices to reduce administrative responsibilities for technical staff.
- Focus expertise and assistance to improve capacity at the State level where it is deemed critical.
- NA S&PF as convener for efforts that transcend State boundaries (NA can be effective at this).
- NA S&PF engage more with the Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) and help inform State Foresters about them (to collaborate and leverage funding).

- Understand and support priorities in the 2010 State Forest Action Plans.
- Cross training for employees across the S&PF programs and on what other agencies are doing.
- Involve staff in the development, review, selection, and implementation of technical and financial assistance to projects, such as for the Competitive Allocation process.
- Be more formal about providing review comments related to competitive ranking of proposals.
- Be proactive and do a few things well (make hard decisions about what stays and what goes).
- Complete redesign of both the NA S&PF website (by professionals) and Intranet site.
- Office ergonomics and emphasize safety across all grade levels and types of jobs.

Suggestions for Wording of the Issue Questions and Descriptions:

- Add American Indian tribes to the list in the second question. NA S&PF has specific trust responsibilities with tribes and this warrants (if not its own question) specific recognition.
- These two questions seemed to be linked; the second is an answer to the first. The way to collectively maintain and enhance NA capacity is to collaborate with non-traditional partners.

Additional Miscellaneous Comments

There were two open-ended questions at the end of the poll for respondents to provide input on any important issues they felt were not captured in the draft document and for additional suggestions to address the strategic issues. Much of the input in these categories re-iterated comments made in the prior open-ended questions. Several respondents noted that all the important issues were captured in the draft. This is a summary of the type comments received for these questions:

- Importance of working in priority geographies as identified in the State Forest Action Plans.
- Consider operating at two scales: regional and state. NA S&PF already operates pretty effectively at the regional level. You could join resources (all FS) and have a USFS point person for each State who would report to all three USFS units. This would provide more seamless service.
- It is important to maintain focus on supporting private landowners (private forest conservation and sustainable management). NA S&PF is one of the few organizations that can focus on this.
- As we look at potentially smaller budgets and staffing, we need to do an inventory of knowledge and skills remaining and where the gaps are in relationship to strategic priorities.
- We have problems that need an “all hands” approach; maybe it’s time that partnerships of State, county, private, industry, and Federal managers collectively create management plans that have regional acceptance and coordinated funding.
- Set up a steering or advisory committee of partners to collaborate and check in with often.
- Support landscape planning which leads to collaboration and addressing all issue areas.
- Reductions in budgets and lack of funding for training and travel are big challenges.
- NA S&PF needs to re-assert its role to get ALL forestry assistance programs back under its umbrella.
- Assistance to backyard forests is needed (they can be reservoirs of invasives but are not big enough to qualify for some landowner programs). Focus in this area is also a means to gain public support.
- Inventory of forest lands across ownerships is needed.
- Taxation on land management and tenure is a big issue that will grow as land is passed on.
- Support efforts for “Right to Practice Forestry” legislation.
- Incorporate agro-forestry as a solution to address multiple issues.
- Recognize the strong social component of our work (building partnerships, etc.).

Draft Issue Questions Re-Framed as Objectives⁴ for NA S&PF to Address Over the Next Five Years

Notes:

The draft issues below are organized according to the three S&PF National Priorities from the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act and one additional “organizational effectiveness” category.

The statements below in bullets were originally presented as issue questions. In response to comments, they are now phrased as objective statements and slightly modified.

These objectives may be further modified as we draft the strategies and review them holistically.

Conserve & Manage Working Forest Landscapes for Multiple Values and Uses

- NA S&PF will support conservation of important forest landscapes across the urban to rural continuum.
- NA S&PF will support sustainable forest management and biodiversity while ensuring the greatest level of benefits to people.

Protect Forests from Threats

- NA S&PF will support management of trees and forests for resilience to natural and human-caused disasters and threats.
- NA S&PF will encourage management of forests for resilience to, adaptation, and mitigation of climate change.
- NA S&PF will reduce wildfire threats to people, communities, and natural resources.

Enhance Public Benefits from Trees and Forests

- NA S&PF will advance conservation and sustainable management of trees and forests for water quality across urban and rural landscapes.
- NA S&PF will support a diversified and competitive forest industry, local markets, forest-related jobs, and sustainable use of woody biomass for energy.
- NA S&PF will engage communities and urban residents in the stewardship of trees and forests.

Organizational Effectiveness

- NA S&PF will maintain technical expertise, enhance communications, increase productivity, capitalize on new technology, and ensure employee safety in the face of declining budgets, retirements, and increasing administrative requirements.
- NA S&PF will leverage our technical expertise in collaboration with other Federal agencies, State agencies, academia, Indian tribes, and other partners in support of common goals.

⁴ *No priority or ranking is implied by the way the priorities and objectives are listed.*