

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As directed in 2SSB6144, the Commissioner of Public Lands Doug Sutherland assembled the Forest Health Strategy Work Group (FHSWG or “Work Group”). (For a list of members, see Appendix 1 of the Report). The Work Group met for one to two days each month from May to December, meeting at various locations across the state.

The report describes the FHSWG’s findings and recommendations for a desirable forest health program for Washington’s forests. It addresses forest health needs on public and private ownerships with the goal of protecting a wide variety of public benefits. It describes current opportunities and barriers for improving forest health. The recommendations made in this report are intended to empower landowners, strengthen state government services, and complement current Forest Practices Rules and procedures.

The FHSWG’s vision for forest health in Washington is:

*“The forests of Washington, on all ownerships, are resistant to uncharacteristic, economically, or environmentally undesirable wildfire, windstorm, pests, disease, and other damaging agents, and are able to recover following disturbance.”*

The work group is unanimous in acknowledging that achieving satisfactory forest health outcomes is a shared responsibility between landowners and the public. Healthy forests provide the public with a wide variety of public goods and services, in addition to providing landowners with economic benefits. The public goods and services provided by healthy forests include wildlife habitat, including habitat necessary for the well-being of threatened and endangered species, clean and abundant water for communities, agriculture and industrial operations as well as fish and riparian dependent species, a sense of place for residents in local communities, outstanding vistas and viewsheds for the public at large, and a means of reducing the escalating cost of fire suppression. .

The Forest Health Strategy Work Group has thoughtfully approached developing a comprehensive Forest Health Act. While the Work Group as a whole is supportive of the approach outlined in the key elements of this report and the proposed draft Legislation, the Work Group is mindful that it has been developed over a very short time frame and with limited input. We are also aware that elements of the proposed legislation are likely to be quite controversial, and there may be unintended consequences that need to be discovered and considered. Thus, there is a need for public review and discussion before the proposal is considered by the legislature. We believe that will better inform the Work Group, the public, and the legislature, and provide a much more robust product.

**Recommendation: Workshops should be held across the state in CY 2005 to inform landowners and managers, communities of interest, public officials, and the general public of the Work Groups findings and recommendations, take public comment and input into the legislation, and provide the legislature with a proposed bill, along with a summary of the issues identified in the public process.**

In 2SSB6144, the legislature asked the work group to recommend whether it should be extended beyond the time that the required report has been submitted. Without specific legislation, the work group would cease to exist on June 30, 2005 (2SSB6144 Section 4(3)(i) and (4)).

The work group has worked diligently to meet the legislature's request for a work product by December 30, 2004. On many occasions, discussion on key issues had to be cut short in order to move on and get the job done. The work group believes the report and recommended legislation is really just the beginning of a process that the work group should continue.

We believe it would be useful for the Legislature to continue the work group so it can conduct a series of workshops and public meetings across the state to inform interested parties of the current situation, as we know it, on forest health in Washington, and to explain and take public comment on the draft proposed legislation. In addition, the work group needs to better understand and make recommendations to the legislature on

information needs on forest health, and on proposed program elements and budgets.

There simply was not enough time to fully explore and grasp these issues. Without a full understanding of the needs and issues, there is some disagreement within the work group about which expenditures or investments are the most strategic, with the greatest long-term benefit to the public and forest landowners.

**Recommendation: The Legislature should extend the work group through the 2005-2007 biennium and appropriate funds to the DNR to pay the expenses of committee members who are not state employees, and for expenses necessary to conduct the public meetings and hearings discussed above.**

The responsibility of public agencies, particularly the Department of Natural Resources, federal agencies, universities and university extension systems, is to continue to provide the basic information on, and monitoring of, forest health conditions across the State.

Where forest health problems exist, the State must provide information, coordinate mitigation programs and pest control activities, and provide technical assistance to forest practitioners, landowners, and land managers, particularly those without the knowledge, expertise or resources of their own. Public agencies would focus on providing information and assistance to forest landowners so they can manage their forests to reduce susceptibility to forest insect outbreaks, disease infections, and fire. Where possible, the state and federal government should provide incentives or financial assistance to achieve the desired outcomes.

Landowners and land managers are responsible for on-the-ground prevention and treatment through a wellness approach. Landowners and managers must have access to the necessary tools and support of public agencies so that they can take actions to control native pests, and respond to disturbance events that have the potential to spread insect attack, increase forest diseases, or augment wildfire potential.

The Work Group recognizes there is severe competition for public funding, both state and federal and that this may appear to be a major impediment to correcting forest health problems. However, investments in prevention provide the opportunity to reduce the many future costs associated with fires, disease and other health breakdowns. Over time, the cost of suppressing fires that occur in these managed stands will be less than suppressing fires in unmanaged areas. Good ecologically and economically balanced forest health across the state is a good investment for the public.

The FHSWG believes the keystone to achieving forest health across all ownerships in Washington is that well managed forests are healthy forests. In areas where forest health issues are a problem, landowners and land managers at all levels need encouragement to practice active management on their forests that incorporates forest health maintenance within their forest management objectives. To achieve this vision, the Work Group believes an effective forest health program must have many elements.

Key elements of an effective program include:

- Comprehensive data and information are available so landowners, policy makers and the public can understand existing and developing forest health conditions, identify areas of greatest treatment need, and effectively communicate practical remedies to forest managers, policy makers and the
- Easily understandable measures of success exist, and there is effective monitoring for the program.
- An effective legal construct that recognizes landowner objectives and obligations and the role of government and educational institutions along with an effective, efficient program structure with sufficient funding to achieve desired results, including the ability to respond immediately to the detection of exotic insect or disease invaders
- A tiered approach to ensure an appropriate and effective response based on the severity of forest health conditions, with an emphasis on landowner response for keeping forests healthy

- Strategic plans and operational programs at appropriate levels to achieve the desired results on all ownerships.
- A focused program, including technical and financial assistance or incentives when appropriate, tailored to family forest owners to increase their understanding of forest health concerns and take action appropriate to their ownership objectives
- A cooperative atmosphere across ownerships on forest health and a collaborative approach among private, public, and tribal landowners, forest health professionals, community wildfire protection planning groups, and other interested parties to achieve cross-boundary results.
- An effective communications plan that informs landowners and managers, forest practitioners, decision makers and the general public on the importance of healthy forests, and the practical ways of achieving healthy forests.
- Forest products processing infrastructure, markets, or market substitutes are in place to partially compensate landowners for the costs involved in undertaking appropriate control activities.
- Improved coordination among regulatory programs so that the key objectives of each can be realized without adverse effects on others.
- Recognition that appropriate funding/investment today will avoid increased costs in the future while at the same time providing many non-market benefits to society.
- Sufficient and stable funding to successfully implement the Forest Health Strategy.

The Report details major barriers and opportunities to achieving healthy forests and makes a series of recommendations for each of these issue areas. For more detail on the specific recommendations, please go to the appropriate section of the Report.