WILDLIFE HABITAT COUNCIL℠

Forest Project Guidance

Stakeholder Informed

Introduction

Forests are an ecosystem type dominated by trees that form a continuous stand or are composed of many stands grouped together. A healthy forest habitat is composed of several layers:

- Ground layer – herbaceous vegetation, tree seedlings and leaf litter
- Understory – shrubs, tree saplings and herbaceous vegetation
- Subcanopy – trees and tall shrubs
- Canopy – trees
- Overstory – trees growing above the main canopy layer; may not occur in all forests

In a typical forest, most or all the habitat is under tree canopy cover. WHC Conservation Certification defines a forest as having 50-100% tree canopy closure.

Forests contain approximately 80% of the world's plant biomass. Forests provide essential habitat to a wide variety of species such as predatory mammals, small mammals, raptors, cavity nesting birds, snakes, salamanders and toads. Protection, restoration and management of forest ecosystems are vital for conserving biodiversity.

Forest projects can include a variety of on-site and classroom educational projects that build awareness for forested habitat, forest-dependent wildlife, forest ecosystems, forest transitional stages, carbon sequestration, nutrient cycling, climate change, and water issues. *Please see the Project Guidance documents for Formal Education, Training, and Awareness and Community Engagement at* **wildlifehc.org/pg**.

Building Your Program

Projects are divided into four categories: **Habitat**, **Species Management**, **Education and Awareness** and **Other Options.** You can build a program with more than one of each category but you must associate your program with at least one habitat. This Forest Project Guidance is in the **Habitat** category. You will be able to associate your forest project with **Education and Awareness** projects, as well as with **Species Management** projects like those focused on mammals and birds.

Habitat – Projects that focus on conservation actions to protect, restore and manage different habitats.

Species Management – Projects addressing the conservation needs of targeted wildlife species or groups of species.

Education and Awareness – Projects to improve awareness, understanding and skills relating to conservation and the environment.

Other Options – Specialized projects that add value to your conservation efforts.

Browse the Project Guidance library at *wildlifehc.org/pg*.

What Do Forest Projects Look Like?

Forest projects attempt to manage or enhance existing forest habitat or create new tracts of forested habitat. Common components of forest projects include, but are not limited to:

- Tree plantings
- Understory plantings
- Forest edge plantings to enhance or create transitional habitat
- Thinning or other activities to promote natural regeneration and understory restoration
- Creation or management of hedgerows and wind breaks
- Invasive species control
- Prescribed burns
- Management for snags (standing dead trees)
- Management for coarse woody debris (fallen branches and logs)

Forest projects can vary widely in scale, depending on the amount of land and resources available. The size of a contiguous forest tract, whether located on one property or across neighboring properties, will affect which wildlife species it will benefit. Smaller patches of forest will benefit edge-dependent species and generalist species that can use both forest interior and forest edge, and can provide stopover habitat for migrating species. Large tracts of forest will benefit these species, as well as species that rely on undisturbed forest interior habitat.

Considerations for Corporate Lands

Projects implemented on corporate-owned lands have different circumstances and challenges to those on public lands, protected lands or wild lands.

Which types of corporate lands are best suited for forest projects?

Forest projects can generally be conducted on two types of corporate lands: those with existing forests that need to be managed, and those that can be reforested. These types of properties range in size and scope and may include:

- Corporate campuses and operating sites with existing woodlots
- Large quarries or other locations where reforestation can meet and exceed reclamation requirements
- Sites with land available and suitable for reforestation or aforestation
- Smaller sites with woodland patches or hedgerows that provide pockets of forest habitat or serve as demonstration forest habitat for the community

Addressing challenges

The corporate context presents certain challenges for implementing forest projects. Understanding these concerns and potential ways to overcome them can help your project succeed in the long term.

Concern	Response
Due to the slow growth rate of trees, some forest projects can be long-term. Corporations that experience staff turnover or changes in leadership may have difficulty maintaining forest management efforts.	*It is important to have a long-term forest management plan in place that future employees and leadership can use and understand.*
Companies may have concerns about liability and may therefore be reluctant to allow employees or community members to access the forest or participate in forest management.	*Companies can develop internal agreements or waivers and can offer appropriate personal protection equipment to participants.* *Companies may also wish to limit which activities can be conducted by volunteers, and require certification for other activities.* *Many companies have insurance to cover visitor liability concerns.*

Concern	Response
There is a great deal of regional and even local variation in forest habitat types and their appropriate species composition, maintenance regimes, etc.	*Teams should use reference information about the forest types for their region, as well as local expertise such as professional foresters.*
Some programs may lack the knowledge base or resources to conduct a controlled burn safely (for ecosystems in which fire is an appropriate management tool).	*Work with the forestry agencies, local fire department, a natural resource professional or other experts with experience in using prescribed fire as a safe forest management tool.*

Getting Started with Forest Projects

For a project to qualify toward Conservation Certification, you must be able to answer "yes" to five questions.

1. Is the project locally appropriate?

2. Does it have a stated conservation or education objective?

3. Does it provide value or benefit to the natural community?

4. Have outcomes been measured and is there supporting documentation?

5. Does it exceed any pertinent regulatory requirements?

Conservation and education objectives

It is a requirement of Conservation Certification that forest projects be designed to meet one or more conservation objectives. Objectives can guide the direction of the project, help motivate others to participate and provide a basis for evaluation.

The following are suggested objectives for forest projects. Your team may choose one or more of these objectives, or develop your own relevant objectives.

- Protecting, preserving or maintaining an existing healthy forest habitat

- Managing and enhancing forest habitat on a landscape scale

- Restoring or creating forest habitat (reforestation/afforestation) on lands capable of growing forest

- Restoring the understory layer in an existing forest

- Managing forest habitat to reduce the amount of non-native and invasive species

- Managing forest habitat to reduce or prevent damage from diseases or pests

- Managing or creating forest habitat as movement corridors for wildlife

- Reducing the risk of damaging wildfires (uncontrolled fires) by thinning overstocked stands or removing ladder fuels

- Managing forest habitat to maintain or increase structural diversity

The following objectives are related to management of specific species that may occur in a forest habitat, but may need to be applied for under a species management project:

- Managing forest habitat to benefit a specific forest-dwelling species or suite of species
- Managing forest patches as stopover habitat for migrating species

The following strategies are recommended to strengthen the conservation impact of your project:

- Develop and implement a forest management plan using a licensed forester or other appropriate technical expertise
- Establish a baseline of plant and animal species in the forest habitat, upon which desired outcomes can be based and evaluated
- Demonstrate an understanding of how each species planted or encouraged to grow naturally provides a value to wildlife
- Incorporate sustainable tree harvest or thinning/pruning practices that maintain or enhance forest health over time

- Collect and propagate seeds for champion trees or other desirable forest species
- Provide opportunities for college students, professors or other scientific professionals to conduct research in the forest that is used to inform the project
- Include credible monitoring that contributes to a citizen science program or the database of an established forest stewardship organization and that is used to inform the project
- Include artificial or manufactured structures such as nest boxes that target multiple forest species and meet a conservation or education objective
- Create a space in the forest to be used for recreational or educational purposes
- Use harvested timber or other materials from the forest to construct structures that fulfill a conservation or education objective
- Monitor forest habitat for damaging agents and risks such as invasive species, pest insects, diseases, etc. and employ appropriate and safe control measures when these are identified

- Connect to larger local, regional and landscape-scale initiatives for forest stewardship or forest-associated species

- Implement the project as part of a corporate-wide initiative for forest stewardship

- Be located adjacent to or near an existing protected forest and managed in alignment with that forest

- Track or otherwise ensure the sustainable use of harvested timber on or off site

Partnerships

Forest projects implemented on corporate lands will benefit from partnerships with groups that have established forest conservation or education objectives. A team may use such a partnership to help design, create, or monitor its forest project and provide educational opportunities for employees and community members. Partners may also be able to assist the team with obtaining funding for the project, and identify learning links to other conservation priorities in the region.

Resources

Your project may benefit from online or printed resources available for your region to support the design, delivery, maintenance and monitoring of forest projects.

A search for "forest" in the Conservation Registry returns over 300 projects implemented through WHC's certification program. This is a great place to find inspiration for your project and see what others are doing in and around your location.

The following terms, in any combination, may be useful when searching online for items related to this theme.

forest	**understory**	**coniferous**
woodland	**subcanopy**	**broadleaf**
woods	**canopy**	**hardwood**
hedgerow	**overstory**	**forest pests**
trees	**forest management plan**	**even-aged**
shrubs		**uneven-aged**
coarse woody	**forest inventory**	**selective cutting**
debris	**professional forester**	**thinning**
snags	**saplings**	**regeneration**
ground layer	**seedlings**	**reforestation**

Understanding the Application Process

Documentation

When applying for Conservation Certification, you will provide documentation of the planning, implementation, maintenance and monitoring of your forest project. The following is required documentation for forest projects; however, you may submit additional supporting materials.

Map/image of the project area, showing the relative size and approximate location of the project (other relevant information can be shown in the map as well, but is not required).

Photographs or videos that depict the progress of the project implementation and management.

Maintenance plans that demonstrate appropriate activities that meet the needs of the habitat to fully support forest-associated species and support the conservation and education objectives.

Monitoring logs that show the frequency, type, and results of monitoring of the project, whether in an informal manner or a scientifically rigorous manner.

Examples of monitoring for forest management could include:

- Monitoring change through photos taken from the same vantage point over time
- Monitoring diversity: tree inventories, understory plant inventories, wildlife counts, etc.
- Monitoring forest regeneration: sample plots to count seedlings and species and monitor their survival
- Monitoring forest structure: sampling tree diameter at breast height (DBH) and tree height, stem density, snag and coarse woody debris inventories, estimating percentage of canopy closure

Updated plant list/survey that lists the plant species currently known to occur in the forest, including common and scientific names and whether the plant species is native.

Application questions

As you complete the application online, you will be asked the following questions about your forest project. These questions will help us understand and evaluate your project.

	Question	Why this question is important
Objective	What are the project's conservation objectives?	*Having a conservation objective is a requirement for certification.*
Overview	What is the total size of the forest managed for this project?	*This provides us with a description of your project to allow us to assess it.*
	Describe the habitat in general including plants and structures.	
	Give a brief description of the vegetation types found in the habitat and list several of the common plant species.	
	Briefly summarize activities taking place to manage the targeted habitat.	
	Upload a map showing the location and photos showing the forest.	
	When did work on the ground begin?	
Habitat Creation or Expansion	Give a brief description of the vegetation types found in the habitat and list several of the common plant species.	*For forest habitat, size and location are important factors that determine success and ecological benefit.*
	Upload a dated list of current plant species in the habitat including common and scientific names and whether the species is native to the region.	
	Is this a new project not presented in previous applications?	

	Question	Why this question is important
Habitat Creation or Expansion	Does it replace a habitat with less ecological value?	*For forest habitat, size and location are important factors that determine success and ecological benefit.*
	Describe the habitat prior to your project.	
	Describe any design or plant selection considerations that were part of this new project.	
	Upload documentation of the specific considerations.	
	Since the last application, have you expanded the size of your forest or the area being managed?	
	What is the size of the forest that has been added since the last application?	
	Does the forest expansion replace a habitat with less ecological value?	
	Describe the habitat present prior to your project.	
	Describe any design or plant selection considerations that were part of this project expansion.	
	Upload documentation of the specific considerations.	
	What is the size of the area that is being newly managed since the last application?	

	Question	Why this question is important
Management	How is the area maintained as a forest?	*Appropriate management policies and practices are also important to the target species*
	Describe the steps taken to maintain the forest.	
	Provide a timeline of maintenance and other completed activities.	
	Upload documentation of these activities.	
	Do you have a current forest stewardship management plan for the forest habitat?	
	Please upload a copy of the forest management plan.	
Monitoring	Was baseline data collected for this project?	*Monitoring is essential to understand the impact of the project and to be able to adapt the project develops.*
	Describe the types of baseline data collected.	
	Upload the baseline data.	
	Select each type of monitoring that is being carried out.	
	List each type of monitoring, including the frequency and list any plans or protocols used.	
	Upload the monitoring protocols, if applicable.	
	Upload the monitoring data and any analysis, if applicable.	
	Provide a brief summary of results from monitoring.	
	Evaluate the success of the project. If there were any concerns, what are the plans to address them in the future?	

	Question	Why this question is important
Employee Participation	Do employees actively contribute to the forest project?	*Employee participation can strengthen a project and secure its future.*
	How many employees participate in the project on a regular basis?	
	Describe how employees are involved in this project.	
	How many employee hours were spent on the following activities each year? Planning and Implementation	
Other Participants	Do any groups or individuals outside of your company actively contribute to the project on a regular basis?	*It is not always possible to recruit outside groups to a project. Conservation and education partners can strengthen a project and provide different audiences to use it for lessons or recreation, thus broadening its reach.*
	Select the types of groups.	
	List the names of the groups you work with.	
	Describe their involvement in this project.	
	How many hours were spent by the groups on the following activities each year? Planning and Implementation	
	If you work with a forest specialist and have a current letter of support from them, upload it here.	
	List additional sources of technical advice (e.g. website, guidebook, etc.) and describe how they were used.	
Regulatory Requirements	Are any aspects of the project done in relation to regulatory requirements?	*Going beyond compliance is a requirement for certification.*
	Explain how the project exceeds requirements.	

	Question	Why this question is important
Connectivity	Does the project connect with other forest habitats on neighboring land?	*Connectivity on site and across fence lines helps to decrease fragmentation, one of the leading causes of habitat loss.*
	Describe how the project connects with the other forest habitats.	
	Describe any coordinated management efforts with other forest habitats.	
Alignments	Does the project align with any larger scale initiatives? (e.g. corporate strategy, regional conservation plan, migratory pathway, watershed plan, etc.)	*Aligning conservation efforts with large-scale conservation plans and other regional conservation initiatives allows a site-based activity to support a landscape-scale objective.*
	Is the project part of a corporate level commitment to forest habitats?	
	Upload documentation of your corporate commitment to forest habitats.	
	Does the project align with an existing conservation plan or other large-scale initiative?	
	List the conservation plans or other large-scale initiatives the project aligns with and provide website links, if available.	
	How does your project align with these large-scale initiatives?	
Existing Certifications	Does this project have third party forest related certification?	*Other certifications or recognitions illustrate strong efforts and commitments.*
	List the certifications and provide a website link if available.	

Content development for Conservation Certification

To inform the development of Conservation Certification, WHC analyzed the projects it was recognizing through its certification program to assess whether they were aligned with contemporary conservation and education priorities.

Following this assessment and using information from it, WHC convened Advisory Committees around conservation and education themes to develop the content that would guide practitioners and applicants in the future. This content is the basis for the Project Guidance and the online application process.

The following provided feedback on the initial draft of the Forest Project Guidance:

Matt Brinckman, The American Chestnut Foundation
Brian Hughett, Tennessee Division of Forestry
Jon Klischies, New Jersey State Forestry Services
Bobby Maddrey, Georgia-Pacific Corporation
Kathy McGlauflin, Project Learning Tree
Jim McGlone, Virginia Department of Forestry
Jennifer Moore, Arizona Public Service Company
Chip Murrow, ITC Holdings Corp.
Mike Neal, Arizona Public Service Company
Jerry Roppe, Iberdrola Renewables

More information can be found about this process in the "Our Impact" section of *wildlifehc.org* under "Commitment to Transparency."

WILDLIFE HABITAT COUNCIL℠

The WHC Strategy and Planning team can help you build a successful project by identifying needs, making connections with partners and resources, and providing strategies that meet business and conservation goals. Contact us today.

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Every act of conservation matters.