

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCALLY-BASED FOREST OWNER ORGANIZATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES: 1998-2003

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ABSTRACT

There has been a significant increase in the number of locally-based forest owner cooperatives and association in the United States since 1998. The purpose of the proposed paper is to review the experiences of over 30 of these organizations to determine the factors that either helped or hindered their development or early stage operation. The primary methodologies used to gather information for the paper will be telephone surveys, in-depth interviews, and documentary materials. This information will be used to generate a set of lessons learned intended to be of practical use to these and future forest owner co-ops and associations.

In research conducted in early 2003, Cooperative Development Services (a regional cooperative development center in the Upper Midwest) and WoodWorks (a national project whose mission is to assist owners of forested land and marginal farmland to improve their incomes and their environmental stewardship by carrying out good forestry practices on their land) conducted research on locally-based forest owner organizations.

We were able to identify only three locally-based, incorporated co-ops or non-profit organizations that were formed before 1998 and that are still in operation. Also in early 2003, we identified approximately 30 of these organizations that had incorporated since 1998. In addition to these organizations, we have identified an estimated 20-30 local groups that are exploring the possibility of forming co-ops or associations.

Ten million farmers and other non-industrial landowners own close to 400 million acres of woodlands in the United States -- almost half of the nation's forested land. According to *Forested Landscapes in Perspective*, published by the National Academy of Sciences in 1998, less than 10% of these landowners actively manage their woodlands.

Locally-based forest owner organizations have the potential to assist landowners in the United States to become better managers of their forestland and to get better economic returns from them. For these reasons, it is important to review the resurgence of interest in these organizations in the US, and, especially, to learn from their experiences during their development and early operation. Lessons from these experiences will provide valuable information to other emergent forest owner organizations – helping them to build on successful approaches and to avoid mistakes.

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