

## **INTRODUCTION**

Michigan is a state rich in forest resources. Its 19.3 million acres of forest land cover 53 percent of the State, with 18.6 million considered timberland. Timberland acreage is the fifth largest in the United States. Michigan's temperate forests are an abundant, diverse, healthy, and productive asset providing a multitude of benefits to its citizens. These benefits include, but are not limited to, habitat for flora and fauna, recreational and sightseeing opportunities, filtration for air and water quality, and timber for social consumption. Economic benefits to Michigan's economy are significant. Over \$12 billion of value added and 200,000 jobs are annually supported statewide through forest-based industries and tourism/recreation. Michigan's forests contribute significantly toward the values and quality-of-life shared by its residents.

This document provides an Assessment of Need for Michigan's potential participation in the federally-funded Forest Legacy Program, a matching grant program that works in partnership with states, local government and non-profits. The Forest Legacy Program (FLP) protects private forest lands from being converted to non-forest uses using primarily conservation easements. The Forest Legacy Program is a cost-share program of which the federal government pays no more than 75 percent of total program costs. Landowner participation in the Forest Legacy Program is entirely voluntary.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Forest, Mineral and Fire Management Division is charged with preparing an Assessment of Need (AON) of the State of Michigan in preparation for the Forest Legacy Program. The DNR contracted with the Michigan Chapter of The Nature Conservancy and its sub-contractor, The Conservation Fund, to conduct Michigan's Assessment of Need.

The work conducted by the Michigan Chapter of The Nature Conservancy is the fundamental core of Michigan's Assessment of Need; revisions and edits are based on additional comments that have been incorporated into the current version.

The Forest Legacy Program is a program that resulted from the federal Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act, amended in the 1990 Farm Bill. The Forest Legacy Program was established to protect environmentally important forest areas that are threatened by conversion to non-forest uses. Michigan's rich forest resource base and rapidly changing landscape makes discussion of the Forest Legacy Program both timely and relevant. The development of Michigan's privately owned forest areas poses an ever-increasing threat to maintaining the economic, recreational, and ecological benefits forests provide to our State.

Privately owned forests not only supply timber products, but also provide wildlife habitat, watershed protection, and recreation and aesthetic values. Increasing fragmentation and parcelization of forests across our State is resulting in the loss of these valuable ecosystems and the biological, economic and social values they provide. The Forest Legacy Program is a voluntary program that could help protect Michigan's forests from these and other threats.

The Forest Legacy Program encourages and supports the acquisition of conservation easements on privately owned forestlands. These easements are legally binding agreements that transfer a negotiated set of property rights from one party to another. The property remains in private ownership. There is also the option of acquiring the property through a full fee purchase, though this is used sparingly under the Forest Legacy Program.

A property that is within an approved Forest Legacy Area must meet several Federal requirements to be enrolled in the FLP. The proposed property must:

- Be located within an approved Forest Legacy Area that has been determined to be an environmentally important forest area that is threatened with conversion to non-forest uses;
- Complement Federal lands or Federal investments;
- Provide Public access to the greatest extent practicable;
- Provide opportunities for the continuation of **traditional forest uses**, like timber harvesting and recreation;
- Have a multi-resource management plan for the land prepared and approved.

The Forest Legacy Program is a federal program of which the state can request a grant to operate the FLP in the state, including the acquisition of lands or interests in lands. In order to become a participant in the Forest Legacy Program, Michigan must conduct an Assessment of Need (AON). The AON provides information on specific critical forested areas in Michigan and identifies programs that already exist in Michigan that address these areas. Once the AON is completed and reviewed by the USDA Forest Service and approved by the Secretary of Agriculture, lands within the approved Forest Legacy Areas become eligible for FLP funds.