

# **Aitkin SWCD FSC Group Certification Handbook**

This handbook describes the policies and procedures for the FSC group certification program of the Aitkin County Soil and Water Conservation District.

Approved by the Aitkin County SWCD Board on October 18, 2006

Certificate issue date: May 4, 2007  
SW-FM/COC-002337

Funding for this project was provided by the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCMR) and a Conservation Innovation Grant from the Natural Resources Conservation Service-USDA.

Last Updated: April 24, 2008

***Aitkin County SWCD Mission and Purpose***

Our mission is to apply conservation practices to the land and provide educational opportunities to landowners and groups. We strive to develop common sense, cooperative programs to address resource needs. Our purpose is to work with others to achieve sound management of our natural resources.

# CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>5</b>
EXPLANATION OF CERTIFICATION PROCESS.....	5
BACKGROUND ON GROUP ENTITY .....	6
DESCRIPTION OF GROUP SCHEME .....	7
FOREST MANAGEMENT HISTORY .....	7
FOREST MANAGEMENT STANDARDS .....	8
<b>MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION</b> .....	<b>9</b>
ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS .....	9
COSTS .....	9
MEMBERSHIP AGREEMENT.....	9
COMPLIANCE WITH CORRECTIVE ACTIONS .....	10
DISPUTE RESOLUTION PROCESS.....	10
PROCESS FOR RESIGNING OR REVOKING MEMBERSHIP.....	10
<b>FOREST MANAGEMENT POLICIES</b> .....	<b>11</b>
MANAGEMENT PLANNING .....	11
INVENTORY REQUIREMENTS .....	11
NON-TIMBER FOREST PRODUCTS .....	11
CULTURAL SITES AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES.....	11
RARE, THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES AND HABITATS .....	12
INVASIVE SPECIES.....	12
PESTICIDE USE POLICY .....	12
SPILL RESPONSE PROCEDURE.....	13
HIGH CONSERVATION VALUE FORESTS.....	13
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT .....	13
HARVEST AND REFORESTATION PLANNING .....	13
MONITORING AND QUALITY CONTROL .....	14
<b>GROUP MANAGER’S MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY</b> .....	<b>15</b>
MAINTENANCE OF GROUP RECORDS .....	15
SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS.....	15
ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES .....	16
AITKIN COUNTY SWCD EMPLOYEE POLICIES.....	17
PLAN FOR MANAGING GROWTH OF GROUP.....	17
<b>MARKETING OF FOREST PRODUCTS</b> .....	<b>18</b>
REPORTING ACTIVITIES AND HARVEST YIELDS.....	18
CHAIN OF CUSTODY PROCEDURES .....	18
<b>APPENDIX A: FOREST CERTIFICATION BACKGROUND FORM</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: MEMBER AGREEMENT</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>APPENDIX C: MEMBERSHIP CERTIFICATE</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>APPENDIX D: ANNUAL SITE VISIT/FIELD CHECK</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>APPENDIX E: CORRECTIVE ACTION REQUEST FORM</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>APPENDIX F: FOREST MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT</b> .....	<b>25</b>
<b>APPENDIX G: TIMBER SALE CONTRACT</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>APPENDIX H: INFORMATION RELEVANT TO FSC PRINCIPLES</b> .....	<b>31</b>

## **Resources used in developing the FSC Group Certification Program**

Butterfield, Rebecca. 2005. *FSC Forest Management Group Certification Handbook*. Trees Program. Rainforest Alliance.

Nussbaum, Ruth. 2001. *A Practical Guide to Developing a Group Scheme for FSC-Accredited Certification of Forests*. ProForest.

## **Additional Reference Documents and Templates Used to Administer the FSC Group Certification Program**

Application for Forest Resource Management Assistance  
Private Forest Management Consumer Scale Agreement  
Forest Inventory Tally Sheet  
Logger List  
FSC Lake States-Central Hardwoods Standard  
Field Guide to the Native Plant Communities of Minnesota, the Laurentian Mixed Forest Province  
Sustaining Minnesota Forest Resources: Voluntary Site-Level Forest Management Guidelines for Landowners, Loggers and Resource Managers  
Mississippi Headwaters Board Guidelines for Forest Management  
SWCD Supervisor's Handbook  
Conservation District Board Member Recruitment and Community Outreach Guide  
Silviculture and Forest Aesthetics Handbook 2431.5, Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources  
MN DNR Operational Order #59, Pesticides and Pest Control Policies  
Minnesota Invasive Non-native Terrestrial Plants: an identification guide for resource managers  
New Member Form  
Non-Timber Forest Product Harvesting Guidelines  
SWCD Rutting Guidelines  
Herbicides Commonly Used in Forestry

## **Acronyms**

ACLD	Aitkin County Land Department
FSC	Forest Stewardship Council
HCVF	High Conservation Value Forest
MN DNR	Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
SW	SmartWood
SWCD	Soil and Water Conservation District
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture

## **Introduction**

The Aitkin County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) is a participant in the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) forest certification program. The county and state-managed lands in Aitkin County have been FSC-certified since 1997. The group certification program of the Aitkin County SWCD is designed to expand access to FSC certification for private woodland owners in Aitkin County.

To support the administration of the FSC group certificate, the Aitkin County SWCD has developed this handbook to document the policies that conform to the FSC group certification standards and establish procedures for monitoring forest management activities on group member properties.

### ***Explanation of certification process***

Forest certification is a voluntary process of forest management review by an independent, third-party to determine compliance with internationally recognized standards of responsible forestry. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is a non-governmental institution headquartered in Bonn, Germany. The FSC was established to set standards for forestry certification programs worldwide and accredit certification organizations that comply with these standards. Certifiers, forest products businesses, social organizations, and environmental groups created the FSC to monitor certification and prevent a confusing proliferation of standards. In addition, a number of regional and national FSC initiatives have developed standards and policies, based on the FSC Principles and Criteria (P&C), to make the P&C more relevant to the region.

FSC forest management certification is:

- The process of inspecting forestlands or woodlands to verify that they are being managed according to the FSC Principles and Criteria (P&C).
- Designed to ensure that timber harvesting is ecologically sound and socially and economically beneficial to local communities.
- A voluntary program that creates market incentives by providing consumers the power to positively "vote" for good forest stewardship: when they buy certified wood products they contribute to the conservation of forests and biodiversity worldwide.

Group certification:

- Is a process by which multiple landowners or forest managers are certified under one FSC certificate.
- Allows a group entity to be the certificate holder for a group of landowners or managers who agree to participate in the group.
- Requires the group entity to meet all FSC policy and procedural requirements and all landowners/managers to meet the FSC P&C.
- Differs from traditional forest management operation certification in that the group entity often has no legal title or use right to the forest resources.

Group certification was designed to reduce costs and increase opportunities for forestland owners to participate in FSC certification by distributing the costs of certification among a larger number of forest landowners/managers.

Benefits of group certification include:

- Reduced certification costs
- New landowners/managers can be added to the group at any time providing even greater economies of scale
- High quality forest management advice and services
- Access to markets and/or market advantages through cooperative or joint marketing
- Cost savings from joint purchasing and management services
- Access to experienced professionals and lay people within the group
- Flexible program allows a variety of groups to participate

The certification process includes an initial assessment as well as annual audits to review forest management activities. The first assessment of the Aitkin County SWCD was in January 2007. This assessment included a review of the SWCD's administration and record keeping practices, stakeholder interviews, and field visits to view recent and planned management activities. Following this assessment, a forest management certificate was issued to the SWCD on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2007. Certification is a five year contract with annual audits every 12-months to confirm continued compliance with the FSC standard.

### ***Background on Group Entity***

The Aitkin County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) is the group entity for the FSC Certificate (SW-FM/COC-002337) associated with the Aitkin County SWCD FSC Group Certification Program. The SWCD office is located in Aitkin, MN.

Aitkin County Soil and Water Conservation District  
130 Southgate Drive  
Aitkin, MN 56431-7407  
Tel: 218-927-6565  
Fax: 218-927-6014

The staff of the SWCD are:  
Steven R. Hughes, District Manager  
Lori M. Nelson, District Secretary  
Janet L. Smude, District Technician  
Dennis J. Thompson, District Forester

The SWCD Board members are:  
Robert Janzen  
Russell Ruud  
Frank Turnock  
Mike Lentz  
Donna Rae Asp

Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) are political subdivisions of the State established under Minnesota Statute 103C. A board of elected supervisors governs each SWCD. The first SWCD in Minnesota was created in 1938 to encourage landowners to conserve soil and water resources. SWCDs fill the crucial niche of providing land and water conservation services to owners of private lands. Managing private lands in a way that

promotes a sound economy and sustains and enhances natural resources is key to Minnesota's environmental health. Districts are responsible for implementing state, local and federal resource programs. Program responsibilities include Minnesota's Erosion Control/Water Quality Cost-Share Program, Reinvest in Minnesota Reserve Program, Wetland Conservation Act, and various federal programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Environmental Quality Incentives Programs (EQIP), and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP).

The Aitkin County SWCD has several diverse roles and responsibilities related to protecting the natural resources of the county. The service area of the SWCD includes eight minor watersheds. Aitkin County administers Local Water Planning through the SWCD. This responsibility includes coordination of a Water Planning Task Force and collaboration with Riverwatch to monitor local rivers and lakes for total phosphorus, chlorophyll "A", and secchi disk (water clarity). The Aitkin County SWCD also implements and assists with diverse land protection projects such as livestock exclusions, critical area stabilization, and well-sealing. Technical staff are qualified to provide wetland delineation, water sampling and other services. The SWCD maintains equipment such as a digital camera, secchi disks, and water sampling chemicals.

The Aitkin County SWCD and Planning and Zoning for the county share responsibilities for implementation of the Wetland Conservation Act and Local Shoreland Administration. Field site reviews and restoration plans are handled primarily by SWCD; permitting and enforcement are handled primarily by Planning and Zoning.

The Aitkin County SWCD is well and diversely funded, including local funding from the county general fund and property taxes, state funding from the stewardship program, and federal funding through the USDA. The SWCD also raises funds through tree sales and charges fees for site reviews.

### ***Description of group scheme***

The Aitkin County SWCD is the group entity for this FSC group scheme. The group manager and main contact for the program is the District Forester. The group members are woodland owners in Aitkin County that receive forest management services from the SWCD. The contracted certification body is SmartWood, an FSC-accredited organization. The relevant FSC standard is the Lake States-Central Hardwood Regional Standard, an FSC-accredited regional standard.

### ***Forest Management History***

The Aitkin County Soil and Water Conservation District became active in forest stewardship planning in September of 1998 when a full-time forester was first hired to write Forest Stewardship Plans and provide forest management services to woodland owners in the county. With over 500,000 acres of non-industrial private woodlands in Aitkin County, the need to provide an increasing level of forestry assistance to forestland owners was easy to recognize. The primary objective in initiating the forestry services was to provide high-

quality, personalized Forest Stewardship Plans to private landowners in Aitkin County. All plans guide landowners to implement a plan that meets their goals for the property while maintaining and improving the resource. In Minnesota, there are 13 Soil and Water Conservation Districts that are actively involved with Forest Stewardship planning.

Forest Stewardship planning is a voluntary program that has been hugely successful in Aitkin County. Most people will do the right thing when they know how and why it should be done. When looking for programs that go beyond concept and planning to become on-the-ground protection of natural resources, this stands out as a low cost, effective, non-regulatory resource protection.

The Aitkin County SWCD is uniquely suited to provide land management assistance to private landowners. The SWCD offers technical assistance to forestland owners in the forested part of the state the same way other Soil and Water Conservation Districts offer technical assistance to farmers in the western and southern parts of the state. To date, the SWCD has provided Forest Stewardship plans to about 220 landowners in the county representing over 20,000 acres.

### ***Forest Management Standards***

Healthy forests and responsible forest management are important to the economic, social, and ecological viability of Aitkin County. The Aitkin County Land Department (ACL D) has had the forests they manage FSC-certified since 1997. The state-managed lands in the county are also FSC-certified. The Aitkin County SWCD works closely with these land managers on identifying and practicing appropriate forest management for the habitat types in the county.

The Aitkin County SWCD utilizes silvicultural guidelines, best management practices, site level guidelines, and the Mississippi Headwaters Board Guidelines for Forest Management in determining management prescriptions. The SWCD also collaborates with the ACL D, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and the USDA to share GIS resources and data related to natural resources, cultural and historical sites, and other information that is important to determining appropriate forestry practices and protections.

The Aitkin County SWCD has developed model silvicultural prescriptions for the primary forest types occurring on private woodlands in the county. This information is used in developing stewardship plans and subsequent implementation plans. These model prescriptions are available from the SWCD Forester.



## **Membership Information**

A group member:

- May use the Aitkin County SWCD forester or his/her own forestry professional for the management of his/her forestland.
- Can be the owner, leaseholder, or use-right holder of private, public or indigenous forestlands located in Aitkin County.
- Can own natural forests and/or plantations in parcels between 10 and 500 acres in size.
- Can be an individual, community, forest user group, collective or any other group that has ownership or long-term rights to manage a specified forestland.
- Can be added to the group entity's existing certified group at any time after certification.
- Does not hold an individual certificate.

Forest products from member lands are covered by the group's chain of custody certificate and can carry the FSC logo.

### ***Eligibility requirements***

Membership in the Aitkin County SWCD group certificate is offered to landowners with property in Aitkin County. Eligible landowners should have at least 10 acres and not more than 500 acres per eligible parcel. Special circumstances will be considered. Eligible landowners may have the SWCD as their primary resource manager or contract with another qualified service provider. Plans written by service providers other than the SWCD will be reviewed by the SWCD. Group members are required to meet the certification standards in their forest management activities and stewardship goals. Landowners who are or wish to be enrolled in the Aitkin County Soil and Water Conservation District's Forest Stewardship Council Certification Program must verify that they own and have decision-making authority over the land they are enrolling. The Aitkin County SWCD will request a copy of the deed from the courthouse to verify ownership.

### ***Costs***

Any fees for stewardship plan development will follow the guidance from the MN DNR. Currently the Aitkin County SWCD is able to provide stewardship plans for free. The annual fee for certification for group members is \$100. Each landowner will receive a one-day, annual consultation from the SWCD forester as a benefit of membership. The SWCD will pay the direct costs of certification including the assessment fee (estimated at \$6,000) and annual audit fees (estimated at \$2,000).

### ***Membership Agreement***

Landowners participating in the group are asked to sign a Membership Agreement (Appendix B). This agreement outlines the landowner's responsibilities and the services and responsibilities of the Aitkin County SWCD. When the membership requirements are met a member certificate is issued (Appendix C).

### ***Compliance with Corrective Actions***

Landowners participating in the group are expected to follow the guidance of their forest stewardship plan and to meet the FSC Standard. When the certification standards are not being met, a Corrective Action Request (Appendix E) may be issued. The request will explain the change that is needed and describe the steps to be taken to accomplish the change.

### ***Dispute Resolution Process***

Legal disputes involving the Aitkin County SWCD are referred to the County Attorney. Complaints about the forester's performance or other non-legal issues are reviewed by the District Manager and if not resolved, referred to the Board of Supervisors for consideration at the monthly meeting. At each month meeting, the Board is provided a listing of correspondence received by the SWCD.

### ***Process For Resigning or Revoking Membership***

Certification is voluntary and landowners can resign their membership at anytime through written notification to the Aitkin County SWCD. A landowner who resigns his/her membership will not be eligible to rejoin for five years and until demonstrating a commitment to the FSC standard. Membership can be revoked if there is a significant non-compliance with the certification standard that the landowner does not address. A landowner whose membership has been revoked will not be eligible to rejoin for five years and until demonstrating a commitment to and compliance with the standard.

## **Forest Management Policies**

### ***Management Planning***

Landowners who are or wish to be enrolled in the Aitkin County Soil and Water Conservation District's Forest Stewardship Council Certification Program must verify that they own and have decision-making authority over the land they are enrolling. The Aitkin County SWCD will request a copy of the deed from the courthouse to verify ownership. The Aitkin County SWCD follows the requirements of the MN DNR Forest Stewardship Program for developing the management plans (Forest Stewardship Plans) for group members. The MN DNR provides a template for Forest Stewardship Plans. The Aitkin SWCD Forester has also completed training for how to develop forest management plans that meet the requirements of FSC Principles and Criteria.

### ***Inventory Requirements***

The process of preparing plans includes the collection of inventory data following established protocols. The inventory system includes both office and field activities. Aerial photos are reviewed in the office to identify the potential cover types and acreages. The forester arranges a meeting with the landowner on the site to discuss the land use and management objectives. The field inventory includes a systematic traversing of the property and plot data collection using a 10BAF prism. A minimum of two plots are collected for the smallest stands (2 acres) and a maximum of approximately 12 plots for larger stands. Information collected at each plot includes tree species, volume per acre, age, site index, and basal area. The information collected at each plot includes notes on insects and disease concerns, shrub layer components, and understory species. Regeneration data is collected on a 1/500 acre scale where appropriate. Photos are taken of most stands and included in the management plan.

### ***Non-Timber Forest Products***

The SWCD's inventory and management planning process includes addressing the management and use of non-timber forest products for landowners who express an interest in these products. The SWCD tracks and maintains records of harvest volumes for non-timber products and ensures the use of management practices that are consistent with approved guidelines. The SWCD has approved written guidelines for the harvesting of spruce tops, burls, maple syrup, Christmas trees, and balsam boughs.

### ***Cultural Sites and Historical Resources***

Aitkin County's cultural heritage is an important part of our history. The Aitkin County SWCD requires a review of each property for the presence and potential for cultural sites and historical resources. The SWCD utilizes information from the MN DNR regarding known sites or resources. The SWCD Forester is also trained and experienced in the field identification of cultural sites and historical resources. Any identified sites or resources are reported and protected as required by law and following the applicable Site Level Guidelines or Best Management Practices. These protections are documented in the forest management plan and any subsequent harvest or activity plans as appropriate.

## ***Rare, Threatened or Endangered Species and Habitats***

The Aitkin County SWCD requires a review of each property for the presence and potential for rare, threatened, or endangered species and habitats. The SWCD utilizes the MN DNR's Natural Heritage Database to identify known occurrences of RTE plant or animal species and intact natural communities. The SWCD Forester is also trained and experienced in the field identification of RTE species and critical habitats. Any identified resources are protected and reported as required by law and in accordance with the applicable Site Level Guidelines or Best Management Practices. One known habitat concern in the county is sharp-tailed grouse leks. Protections for these habitats and any other identified RTE species or natural communities are documented in the forest management plan and any subsequent harvest or activity plans as appropriate.

## ***Invasive Species***

Invasive species are documented in the Forest Certification Background Form (Appendix A). The Aitkin County Soil and Water Conservation District references the guidance provided by the MN DNR regarding the control of invasive, non-native species and uses the publication "Minnesota Invasive Non-native Terrestrial Plants: an identification guide for resource managers". Buckthorn is the invasive species of most concern in Aitkin County.

## ***Pesticide Use Policy***

The Aitkin County Soil and Water Conservation District's policy is to minimize or prevent the need for pesticides. Through our management plans and the Forest Stewardship Program, the Aitkin County SWCD practices "Ecological Forestry" which contributes to overall forest health and natural ecosystem processes. By matching appropriate species to appropriate sites and leveraging natural patterns of development and species adaptations, this management helps avoid the need for pesticides. The Aitkin County SWCD explores alternatives to pesticides before any are applied. These are site-specific and include alternative silvicultural prescriptions, mechanical, cultural, or other alternatives, and the rationale for using pesticides over other approaches.

When pesticides are the most appropriate management tool, the decision making process for using them follows these guidelines:

- pesticides are used to address an ecological imbalance on the forestlands (e.g. invasive exotic species control) with the goal of reducing and minimizing their use over time, and
- pesticides are applied by fully trained applicators and in accordance with all labeling instructions.

Pesticides are rarely used by the SWCD, and the most common need for pesticides is related to the control of invasive, exotic species. For these treatments, the SWCD reference the guidance provided by the MN DNR regarding the control of these species. The SWCD also references the MN DNR Operational Order #59 that outlines the state agency's Pesticides and Pest Control Policies, Responsibilities and Procedures. The SWCD maintains a list of approved pesticides and keeps records of pesticide use. The SWCD also maintains a reference document, *Herbicides Commonly Used in Forestry* that provides staff and others with a quick reference to herbicide use and decision-making.

## ***Spill Response Procedure***

Minn. Sta. 115.061 requires the reporting and cleanup of spills. Minnesota has a five-gallon minimum quantity for reporting petroleum spills. For spills of all other chemicals or materials, any quantity is reportable. To report a spill of petroleum, hazardous material, or any other material, or to request state assistance with a spill, phone the Minnesota Duty Officer at 651-649-5451 or 800-422-0798 any time, day or night. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency provides guidance on spill containment and cleanup.

## ***High Conservation Value Forests***

The FSC Standard includes the concept of High Conservation Value Forests (HCVF). The standard includes examples of what constitutes a HCVF and a process of assessment, consultation, management and monitoring to identify, protect and enhance high conservation values.

The county and state managed lands in Aitkin County have been FSC-certified since 1997. Both the ACLD and MN DNR have pursued a process of defining HCVFs for the lands they manage. The Aitkin County SWCD models their approach to HCVFs after the approach taken by the ACLD and the MN DNR with the understanding that the application of HCVF to small, non-industrial private woodlands will differ from how the Principle applies to large, public ownerships.

## ***Environmental Impact Assessment***

The Aitkin County SWCD has identified Cost-Share High Priority Areas. These high priority conservation areas include all lands designated as shoreland areas (areas within 1,000 feet of lakes or 300 feet of rivers). The SWCD Board and staff direct cost share funding towards these high priority areas. These areas typically contain a mixture of soils and slopes and are the most impacted by residential development and other land use changes. Many times the priority area is expanded to include an entire watershed. Of special concern are those feedlots, pasture areas, and erosion sites that may impact surface waters.

## ***Harvest and Reforestation Planning***

The Aitkin County SWCD does not generally administer timber sales. Landowners who are harvesting timber are referred to a private consultant. Landowners who are contracting directly with a logger are assisted by the SWCD in developing the contract for these services. The SWCD maintains referral lists of qualified service providers.

Harvests and other management activities planned on group member properties will be reviewed by the SWCD and must be approved before they can begin. The SWCD has rutting guidelines to aid in communicating performance expectations. The SWCD will also determine the need to visit the site during the operations and make arrangements to inspect and close the operations if necessary. Landowners participating in the group certificate are required to communicate and coordinate their management activities with the SWCD to ensure their continued eligibility in the program.

Public notices related to public sales including timber sales are posted in an official Aitkin County newspaper at least one week prior to the sale.

Notices for solicitation of bids on projects are posted in an official Aitkin County newspaper at least one week prior to the close of bids. Included is a description of the project (TSI release, site prep, tree planting, etc.), date of bid closing, and relevant specifications including acres of treatment, contract duration, etc. Project solicitations for bids are also sent out to the mailing lists for project types. Anyone can request to be put on the list.

### ***Monitoring and Quality Control***

Members of the group will be provided an annual day in the woods with the Aitkin County SWCD forester as a benefit of their membership. This meeting and site visit provides an opportunity for the forester and landowner to review any recent management activities, discuss any changes in management goals, and begin planning for any upcoming management activities. A report (Appendix D) of the annual visit and any resulting management modifications are kept with the member's records. Corrective Action Requests may also be recorded during the annual visit and a plan for addressing them documented (Appendix E).

The SWCD is a service provider through the Forest Stewardship Program administered by the MN DNR with funding from the USFS. In May 2006, the USFS began a process of developing monitoring protocols for tracking the implementation and results of Forest Stewardship Management Plans. As the protocol for data collection and reporting for this USFS monitoring process are finalized, the SWCD will implement these procedures as an additional aspect of its quality control policy. The SWCD has also developed a process for assessing and documenting forest management activities (Appendix F).

## **Group Manager's Management Authority**

Landowners voluntarily participating in the group certification program agree to communicate with the Aitkin County SWCD about their land management goals and activities. Landowners should notify the SWCD if they are no longer interested in participating or wish to change their forest management objectives.

### ***Maintenance of group records***

The Aitkin County SWCD maintains records of current group members including landowner name, address and contact information, date of entry into the group, date of exit, and designated manager. The SWCD will inform the certification body of changes in group membership within 30 days of a member joining or leaving. The SWCD has a "New Member Form" that is used to report the addition of new members to the certified group.

The SWCD also maintains a member file for each landowner including a copy of the signed Membership Agreement, a copy of the management plan for the enrolled property, records of management activities, and harvesting records. The SWCD may also request and retain evidence of legal landownership, tax records, or other information as required to demonstrate compliance with the FSC standard. The GIS used by the SWCD includes a map of the location and general property lines of certified areas. Records are kept for at least 5 years.

### ***Socio-Economic Considerations***

Aitkin County is located in the northeastern part of Central Minnesota. The county seat, Aitkin, is approximately 126 miles north of Minneapolis-St. Paul and 87 miles west of Duluth. Aitkin County has an area of about 1.2 million acres of which 113,000 acres is surface water. Land ownership in the county is approximately 46% private, 34% state, 19% county and 1% federal. The county's population is about 15,300 (2000 data).

There are 580 farms (155,000 acres) in the county with an average size of 267 acres. Beef cattle and hay constitutes the largest single source of farm income. Of the 580 farms, approximately 51 are dairy farms, 225 beef, 17 hog, 16 sheep, and 24 poultry. These numbers represent about a 20% overall decline in agricultural activities since 1990.

About 65% of the county is forestland. Of this forested area, approximately 40% are understocked cover types (marsh, bog, brush land). The other major cover types include: aspen-birch, northern and lowland hardwoods, and conifers.

Current socio-economic concerns in Aitkin County that impact forest management decisions include fragmentation, parcelization, lakeshore development and related water quality issues.

In the past 10 to 15 years, Aitkin County has experienced rapidly increasing residential development. Lakes and rivers are being developed for weekend cabins so quickly that demand for riparian lands has forced prices to more than double in the past ten years. The trend is toward larger homes and larger related buildings on existing lakeshore lots. To a much smaller degree, some small lots are being consolidated with adjacent lots to create a

larger building and recreation area. Given current development rates, it is estimated that 90% of the available buildable lakeshore properties will be developed by 2006. Second and third tier development will accelerate as well as development pressures increasing along rivers and wetlands.

The second major development trend applies to recreational acreages. These parcels typically vary between 10 and 100 acres with most parcels averaging about 40 acres in size. These parcels are usually used for seasonal cabins and outdoor recreation. Demand for this type of property has also increased dramatically as evidenced by approximately a doubling of recreational property values. It should be noted that accessibility, location, and other factors influence values.

Current trends are that demand and prices will continue to increase, however possibly at a slower rate than was experienced in the past ten years.

The Aitkin County SWCD is well informed about the current social and economic trends in the county and is an active community partner in a number of ways. The SWCD donates staff time to community events, gives seedlings to third graders in all Aitkin County school districts, provides talks to grade school kids at the School Forest, and 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders are engaged on a range of different topics from different staff professionals. SWCD staff are involved in the Minnesota Forestry Association, Minnesota SWCD Forestry Association, Aitkin County Private Woodlands Committee, Mille Lacs Watershed Board, Big Sandy Lakes Area Watershed Board, and additional local, regional and statewide organizations. The SWCD also helps address local water quality concerns and does water sampling and monitoring for local lakes with about 25 citizen volunteers. The National Association of Conservation Districts has also developed a Community Outreach Guide.

## ***Roles & Responsibilities***

The roles and responsibilities of the group entity and group members are outlined in the member agreement (Appendix B).

### ***Group Entity: Aitkin County SWCD***

The Aitkin County SWCD is responsible for maintaining the records and operating procedures necessary to ensure compliance with the FSC certification standard. The District Forester is the primary contact for the program and liaison to the certification body.

### ***Group Members: Participating Landowners***

Landowners are responsible for meeting the FSC standard and following their management plan. Landowners should also notify service providers, including foresters and loggers, that their land is certified and management activities need to be coordinated with the SWCD to maintain their certification. Landowners will be provided a certificate documenting that their forest is certified. Landowners are encouraged to display this certificate and to also consider purchasing a sign that can be posted outside or at the end of the driveway to convey that the property is FSC-certified.



### ***Service Providers/Independent Contractors***

Foresters, loggers and others providing management services to landowners in the FSC certified group are asked to notify the Aitkin County SWCD before conducting management activities. Service providers are asked to provide the SWCD with copies of the timber sale contract, consumer scale agreement and any other relevant documents or information needed for maintaining the certification standard or meeting the chain-of-custody record keeping requirements. The Independent Contractor shall hire, supervise, pay, have adequate Worker's Compensation, social security, required insurance coverage for labor, provide appropriate safety measures based on relevant OSHA standards, all in accordance with Local, State and Federal laws. Contractor must have a foreman on site (especially during inspections) and transport the crew; this policy includes any and all subcontractors.

### ***Aitkin County SWCD Employee Policies***

The Aitkin County SWCD has established employee policies that outline the operations of the organization. These policies are intended to “promote and ensure a spirit of confidence and cooperation between the Board and its employees.” The policies include the SWCD’s Equal Opportunity Policy, Standards of Conduct and Ethics, and other employee related guidance. This information is available in its entirety from the SWCD. The SWCD also follows the *SWCD Supervisor’s Handbook* and other legal and recommended guidance from the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), and the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD). The SWCD also references and provides employees with copies of the “Health & Safety Handbook” developed by the MN DNR

### ***Plan for Managing Growth of Group***

Aitkin County SWCD currently prepares 2 or 3 stewardship plans per month or 25 to 30 per year representing about 3,000 acres and this has been a comfortable level of work for the forester. It is expected that the SWCD can continue to support this level of work and growth. Work plans are developed on an annual basis and provide an opportunity to review workloads and identify needs for additional capacity. This annual review process will be used to monitor and plan the growth of the certified pool. The SWCD has a “New Member Form” that is used to report to the certification body the addition of new members to the certified group.

## **Marketing of forest products**

Wood and other products harvested from properties enrolled in the group are eligible to be marketed and labeled with the FSC logo.

### ***Reporting activities and harvest yields***

The Aitkin County SWCD maintains records of harvest activities and resulting yields from certified properties. Records include copies of timber sale contracts, consumer scale agreements, scale tickets, and other documentation.

### ***Chain of Custody procedures***

Landowners participating in the certified pool will be expected to have a timber sale contract and a consumer scale agreement (or equivalent documents) prepared and provide copies to the Aitkin County SWCD. The SWCD will provide group members with templates for the timber sale contract and the consumer scale agreement. The consumer scale agreement signed by the logger and landowner verifies that the harvest will be scaled by a third party and verified by the scale tickets returned from the mill. The consumer scale agreement also identifies who is buying the wood.

Landowners interested in marketing their wood or products as FSC-certified will also need to use the load tickets provided by the SWCD that indicate the chain-of-custody number.

# Appendix A: Forest Certification Background Form

## Forest Certification Background Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

How many acres do you own in Aitkin County? \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you owned your property? \_\_\_\_\_

Please describe where your land is located: \_\_\_\_\_

Year Stewardship Plan was written: \_\_\_\_\_

Recent forest management activities:

---

---

---

---

Forest management activities you have planned for the next few years:

---

---

---

---

Do your forest management goals include any interest in non-timber forest products (maple syrup, balsam boughs, burls, spruce tops, etc.)? If so, what type of products?

---

---

---

Are there an invasive or exotic species on your property that you know of?

---

---

Besides the Aitkin County SWCD, who are other foresters, loggers, or land managers that you have worked with?

---

---

---

Please tell us anything else you'd like us to know about your land and stewardship goals:

---

---

## **Appendix B: Member Agreement**

### **Aitkin County Forest Certification Membership Agreement**

*This agreement outlines your enrollment as a member of the FSC Group Certification Program of the Aitkin County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD). This agreement acknowledges your membership, outlines the membership requirements, and defines membership benefits and responsibilities.*

### **Membership Requirements**

#### **Entry into the certified group**

To become a member of the certified group, the Aitkin SWCD asks that you:

- Acknowledge your acceptance of the terms and conditions of being a member by signing this document.
- Verify that you own and/or have decision-making authority over the land you are enrolling in the certification program by signing this document.
- Manage your forest in accordance with the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) Lakes States-Central Hardwoods Regional Standard.
- Adhere to the management plan prepared by or approved by the Aitkin SWCD.
- Allow the Aitkin SWCD and/or the certification auditors to review forestry practices on your land and documents pertaining to the management of your land with due notice.
- Notify the Aitkin SWCD if there are any changes in the ownership or management of your land.
- Pay the annual membership fee (\$25 for pilot group in 2006; \$50 in 2007; and \$100 per year starting in 2008).
- Participate in an annual “Day in the Woods” with the Aitkin SWCD forester to review your management and visit your property.

#### **Exiting the certified group**

Leaving the group of certified landowners can occur if you:

- Request to be removed from the group by contacting the Aitkin SWCD.
- Do not follow your management plan and the FSC standard.
- Sell your property.
- Do not pay your membership fee.
- Refuse access to your land to conduct management activities or certification visits.

### **Membership Responsibilities**

#### **Landowner certification responsibilities**

- Work with the Aitkin SWCD to develop and work toward long-term goals and objectives that are compatible with your needs and the FSC standards.
- Communicate with the Aitkin SWCD about any issues with loggers, neighbors, regulators or others regarding the management of your property.
- Communicate any changes in the management or ownership of your property to the Aitkin SWCD.

**Aitkin SWCD’s certification responsibilities**

- Help you manage your land to meet your goals and adhere to the FSC standards.
- Monitor the management of your land for adherence to the certification standard.
- Monitor harvesting and other activities on your land for quality control.
- Help you market your certified products.
- Communicate with the certifier and represent your interests.
- Notify the certifier of any changes in membership within 30 days.
- Provide information about any changes in FSC requirements.
- Notify you of any changes in the certification program or status.

By signing this Membership Agreement, I agree to the above requirements and want to include my property in the group of certified lands.

Lands to be enrolled

Acres:

Location (address or legal description):

Property Name:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Landowner Signature  
Printed Name:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Aitkin SWCD Signature  
Printed Name:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**“The Aitkin County Soil and Water Conservation District strongly encourages long-term commitment to the Group Certification Program and FSC Standards”**

## Appendix C: Membership Certificate

### AITKIN COUNTY SWCD FSC GROUP CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

## MEMBERSHIP CERTIFICATE

---

MEMBER NAME

*Representing*

---

ACRES

*Located in Aitkin County, Minnesota, USA*

*is hereby awarded membership as an FSC certified property in the group certificate administered by the Aitkin County Soil and Water Conservation District. As a member, the enrolled property is covered by the SWCD's certification (certification code SW-FM/COC2337) and recognized as a well-managed source of wood products whose forest management practices adhere to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards in accordance with the Principles and Criteria of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).*

---

Aitkin County SWCD

Date Issued: \_\_\_\_\_

Expiration: \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix E: Corrective Action Request Form

Name of Group Member:	Date:
Name of person completing form:	
Description of the problem:	
Description of what action is needed to resolve the problem:	
Date by which CAR must be resolved:	
Description of follow-up and how conformance will be determined and verified:	
<b><i>By signing this form, I agree to implement the corrective actions as described and in the manner and following the timeline noted above. I understand that if I don't complete these activities I may lose my certification.</i></b>	
Signature of group member (landowner):	
Signature of person completing form:	

*CAR Verification:*

- CAR Addressed and Closed (Date: \_\_\_\_\_; Signature: \_\_\_\_\_)
- CAR Not Addressed
- Revised/Additional CAR issued
  - Membership Resigned
  - Membership Revoked



**Appendix F: Forest Management Assessment**  
**Aitkin County SWCD**  
**FSC Certification**  
**Forest Management Assessment**

---

Inspector:

Date:

Landowner:

Site Visit is (*circle one*):      Prior to Activity      During Activity      After Activity  
.....

**Forest Management Activity:**

---

---

---

---

---

**Additional Information:** (*species cut, scale method, volume, regeneration, BMP's, site condition, damage to residuals, site prep, planting rates, survival, effectiveness, etc.*)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Concerns:**

---

---

---

---

---

**Follow-up Action:**

---

---

---

---

---

# Appendix G: Timber Sale Contract

## Private Forest Management TIMBER SALE CONTRACT

This agreement is made and entered into this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ between \_\_\_\_\_ hereinafter called the 'Seller' and \_\_\_\_\_ hereinafter called the 'Purchaser'.

'Purchaser' includes Purchaser's officers, employees and agents, and every successor in interest or assignee of the Purchaser.

Seller Name	Address	Phone Number
Purchaser Name	Address	Phone Number

### SECTION I.

Sale Acres	Section	Township	Range	County
------------	---------	----------	-------	--------

Amount Purchaser Agrees to Pay the Seller	
\$	
Down Payment Amount	Refundable Performance Deposit
\$	\$

**SECTION II.** The Seller agrees to sell and the Purchaser agrees to buy, under the terms and conditions hereinafter stated, all the timber marked or designated by the Seller, as estimated in SECTION V, on certain lands held by the Seller in the State of Minnesota as described in SECTION I.

All designated or marked timber shall be cut and removed on or before \_\_\_\_\_ unless extension of time is requested by the Purchaser and granted in writing by the Seller. Date of final scale \_\_\_\_\_.

**SECTION III.** The Purchaser agrees to pay the Seller the amounts specified in SECTION I, more or less, as may be determined by the actual sale at the rate and by the method specified in SECTION V. The Purchaser also agrees to pay the Seller a separate refundable deposit as specified in SECTION I, to guarantee the performance of SECTIONS VII and VIII.

**SECTION IV.** Upon receipt of the down-payment, and the signature of both parties, this agreement becomes effective. The Purchaser agrees to pay the Seller a down-payment in the amount specified in SECTION I when the contract is signed. The balance shall be paid before any cutting begins unless other payment schedules have been approved by the Seller.

**SECTION V.** All timber designated below shall be cut and removed before the date specified in SECTION II. Sale expiration shall occur on this date or before if all products have been cut, removed, and final payment completed. The Purchaser is liable for the full bid price for all timber listed below, including any uncut or not removed at sale expiration. This liability shall continue notwithstanding injury to the timber from natural causes, Acts of God, or human acts including vandalism or theft. All rights to remaining products, cut or uncut, revert to the Seller at sale expiration.

Species	Products	Est. Volume	Units	Method of Scale	Unit Price	Bid Value

Detailed Map  
of Area to be  
Harvested



Section:  
Township:  
Range:  
County:

Harvesting Regulations:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Scale: \_\_\_\_\_ inches  
to the mile


The volumes of timber in the table above, or on other appraisal or cruise documents, are only estimates. Neither party warrants or guarantees the quality, quantity, or volume of marked or otherwise designated timber in the sale area.

**SECTION VI.** Insurance and Liability:

1. The Purchaser shall carry a minimum of \$1,000,000 in liability and property damage insurance, maintain Worker's Compensation in accordance with Local, State and Federal laws, and adhere to relevant OSHA safety standards.
2. The Purchaser agrees to save and hold harmless the Seller from any and all claims, penalties or expenses of any nature, type or description whatsoever, arising from the performance of this contract, whether asserted by itself or any individual, organization or governmental agency or subdivision.
3. Worker's compensation insurance, as necessary, and to at least the minimum extent required by law, shall be bought and maintained by the Purchaser to fully protect both Purchaser and Seller from any claims for injury or death arising from the performance of this contract so as to comply with MN Stat. Chap. 176.
4. The Purchaser and any of the Purchaser's contractors, subcontractors, and intermediaries is covered and protected by all state and federal labor laws regarding discrimination, wages, benefits, and other conditions of employment.

**SECTION VII.** The Purchaser agrees to cut and remove said timber at Purchaser's own risk and in a workman like manner and in accordance with the following conditions:

1. Cutting and slash disposal – All slash will be left on site and evenly distributed throughout the harvest area unless otherwise specified by the Seller. Tree tops, slash and/or un-merchantable timber left on the site must not exceed three (3) feet in height as measured from ground level.
2. Utilization – All trees cut shall be utilized to at least 4" top diameter unless otherwise specified in the harvesting regulations or unless decay or branching limits merchantability.
3. Stump heights shall be as low as practicable, but not exceed one-half (1/2) their diameter in height with a maximum height of 12".
4. Unless sold on area estimate, sawtimber shall be scaled by the Scribner Decimal C rule and Pulpwood according to 128 cu.ft./cord for 8' wood and 133 1/3 cu.ft./cord for 100" wood or State of Minnesota Standards for Weight Scaling as per MN Stat. 239.33.
5. Reasonable care shall be taken to protect residual and neighboring stands from damage.
6. Only timber designated in SECTION V shall be cut and removed. Whenever any un-designated trees are cut or needlessly damaged, the Purchaser shall pay for them at a rate of three (3) times their scale value.

7. The Purchaser shall repair, at their expense, damage by the Purchaser or Purchaser's agents to waterways, trails, roads, gates, fences, bridges, or other improvements on the Seller's property.
8. Locations of roads, skid trails, landings, etc. shall be mutually agreed to by the Purchaser and the Seller or their agents. If needed and approved in writing by the Seller, only designated dead or nonmerchantable wood may be used for construction purposes in connection with the logging operation.
9. The Purchaser shall remove all non-timber sale generated debris within sixty (60) days of sale expiration. This includes machine parts, oil cans, paper and other trash, and Purchaser's equipment and structures. Items not removed are deemed abandoned, become the property of the Seller, and may be removed or disposed of by the Seller at the Purchaser's expense, including but not limited to the performance deposit.
10. Fire – Care shall be exercised at all times by the Purchaser and Purchaser's agents against the start and spread of wildfire. The Purchaser agrees to pay for any and all damages and the cost of suppression of any fires caused by Purchaser or Purchaser's agents.
11. Only merchantable products specified in SECTION V shall be removed by the Purchaser.
12. Immature and unmarked trees shall be protected against unnecessary injury.
13. All Site-Level Forest Management Guidelines and appropriate Best Management Practices must be followed.
14. Leave trees and snags shall be left, where safety permits, at a rate of 6 to 12 per acre. Clumped leave trees and snags are preferred over scattered leave trees and snags (see site-level guidelines).
15. Coarse woody debris, if not already present, will be retained on the harvest site at a rate of 2 to 5 bark-on down logs per acre (see site-level guidelines).
16. Residual damage to reserve trees – Extreme care must be used when felling and skidding so that unmarked trees are not damaged. If over 100 square inches of bark is removed from reserve and unmarked trees greater than 10" DBH, the Purchaser may be assessed a penalty of \$25.00 per tree. At the Seller's discretion, 'bump trees' may be exempt from this clause.
17. Rutting guidelines – See attached "SWCD Rutting Guidelines"

18. Special Stipulations:

---

---

---

Note – Special Stipulations supersede all sections and clauses

**SECTION VIII.** It is mutually understood and agreed by and between the Seller and Purchaser hereto as follows:

1. This agreement shall not be assigned in whole or in part by either party without the written consent of the other party.
2. All timber included in this agreement shall remain on the property of the Seller until paid for in full.
3. The Seller guarantees property boundaries which are marked or otherwise designated. The Seller also guarantees that Seller has full right and title to the timber included in this sale.
4. When cut products are scaled, the Purchaser agrees to pay or the Seller agrees to refund any difference in value from the original payment based on the actual scale at the receiving mill and at the rates specified in SECTION V within thirty (30) days of final scale date. Scale tickets will be kept for each load.
5. The Seller shall refund any performance deposit or notify Purchaser of intent to retain said deposit within thirty (30) days of sale expiration or date of final scale, whichever is earlier. Seller may suspend or cancel all operations for violation of any term of this agreement by the Purchaser, and for cause may retain all monies deposited.
6. In case of dispute over the terms of this contract, an arbitration board of three persons, one to be selected by each party to this contract and a third to be selected by the other two members may be used. Any costs associated with this arbitration will be shared equally between the Purchaser and Seller.
7. Special stipulation, if any, are to be listed in an addendum.

**In witness whereof, the parties hereto have set their hands on these dates shown below. We have read and understand this agreement including any and all attachments, additions, or deletions.**

**Approved and agreed to by the Seller:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Seller Signature Date

**Approved and agreed to by the Purchaser:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Purchaser Signature Date

**The timber on this sale is Certified by the Forest Stewardship Council  
SW-FM/COC002337**

## **Appendix H: Information Relevant to FSC Principles**

### **PRINCIPLE #1: COMPLIANCE WITH LAWS AND FSC PRINCIPLES**

Forest management shall respect all applicable laws of the country in which they occur, and international treaties and agreements to which the country is a signatory, and comply with all FSC Principles and Criteria.

The SWCDs were established by Minnesota Statute 103C, the “Soil and Water Conservation District Law”. This statute governs the creation and operation of the SWCDs. The SWCDs have responsibility for implementing local, state and federal resource programs including the Minnesota’s Erosion Control/Water Quality Cost-Share Program, Reinvest in Minnesota Reserve Program, Wetland Conservation Act, and various federal programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Environmental Quality Incentives Programs (EQIP), and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP). The Aitkin County SWCD operates under all the statutes, codes, regulations, ordinances and other legal authorities of the City of Aitkin, Aitkin County, the State of Minnesota, and the United States. The SWCD has demonstrated a commitment to the FSC Principles through its efforts to become an FSC Group Entity. The SWCD has also collaborated with other public and private FSC-certified forest management and business operations to support the growth and success of FSC certification in the region.

### **PRINCIPLE #2: TENURE AND USE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

Long-term tenure and use rights to the land and forest resources shall be clearly defined, documented and legally established.

The Aitkin County SWCD has established contracts, agreements, and collaborative relationships with the various state and federal agencies with which the SWCD partners, including the MN DNR, USFS, USDA, ACLD, NRCS, MASWCD, FSA, USFWS, MPCA, and NACD. The SWCD works with these partners on a range of projects including the management of recreational uses and public access such as the grant-in-aid snowmobile trails. Because the SWCD primarily provides services to private woodland owners its role in public recreational management is not as significant as the role of the ACLD and other agencies with responsibilities for managing public lands. To confirm legal land use rights, landowners requesting services from the SWCD must complete an application that includes attesting to legal ownership rights. The Aitkin SWCD may also request tax records to verify ownership and current payment of all fees and taxes. The SWCD is able to refer legal disputes and claims to the County Attorney. The District Supervisor and/or Board review non-legal disputes as necessary.

### **PRINCIPLE #3: INDIGENOUS PEOPLES’ RIGHTS**

The legal and customary rights of indigenous peoples to own, use and manage their lands, territories, and resources shall be recognized and respected.

The Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, Sandy Lake Band of Ojibwe, and East Lake Community have lands and treaty rights within Aitkin County and the service area of the Aitkin County SWCD. The SWCD maintains a good working relationship with these Bands. The SWCD

works primarily on private land and has defined protocols for identifying and protecting cultural and historic resources on properties and adjacent areas where services are provided. Correspondence with local tribes or others interested in or impacted by the work of the SWCD is documented, dated, provided to the Board for review, and kept for at least five years.

#### **PRINCIPLE #4: COMMUNITY RELATIONS AND WORKER'S RIGHTS**

Forest management operations shall maintain or enhance the long-term social and economic well being of forest workers and local communities.

The Aitkin County SWCD maintains personnel files including safety records for employees and has a program of periodic performance reviews. The SWCD does not have concerns about staff turnover. The SWCD follows state and federal workers compensation regulations. The Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) coordinates and offers continuing education and training opportunities for SWCD staff and board members. This training includes administrative, technical, and leadership development opportunities. The SWCD Forester is a Certified Forest Stewardship Plan Writer with the MN DNR, which requires 20 hours of continuing education each year. The SWCD is a public agency and therefore operates in a manner that is open to the review and engagement of the general public and any special interest groups. The SWCD is subject to all state and federal laws regulating public agencies including the Freedom of Information Act. The SWCD collaborates with the relevant agencies that have responsibility and established procedures for consulting with the public and giving public notice for various projects such as ordinance revisions. The SWCD has a list of individuals, groups, agencies, and other organizations that may be affected by its forestry operations and can be consulted as a stakeholder group. The staff of the SWCD contributes to several community and civic organizations including the Minnesota Forestry Association (MFA) and the Society of American Foresters (SAF). Staff are also very active in providing environmental education opportunities in local schools including tree seedling donations, classroom presentations, and field exercises such as seed and nut collection with 5<sup>th</sup> graders. The Board and District Supervisor encourage these activities. The SWCD also has model documents for Timber Sale Contracts and maintains a list of well-qualified service providers. Legal disputes and grievances involving the SWCD are referred to the County Attorney who aids in determining compensation in the case of loss or damage.

#### **PRINCIPLE # 5: BENEFITS FROM THE FOREST**

Forest management operations shall encourage the efficient use of the forest's multiple products and services to ensure economic viability and a wide range of environmental and social benefits.

The Aitkin County SWCD does not own or operate any wood product processing equipment. The forester maintains a list of current markets and products sold in each market (customers and specs). The SWCD develops annual work plans and budgets that include any needs for capital improvements or investment in equipment or infrastructure. No significant investments have been needed in recent years. The SWCD is able to receive upgrades in computer equipment and software through the USDA. This equipment is provided in exchange for 40 hours of filing work by SWCD staff for the NRCS. Aitkin County has provided vehicles for the SWCD to use. The SWCD does not generally appraise or



administer timber sales. Private woodland owners are referred to consultants for these services and the SWCD maintains a list of qualified service providers. The SWCD requests and retains copies of documents related to timber sales for landowners participating in the certification program. These records include timber sale contracts, load and scale tickets, and volume summary reports. The SWCD does not charge a fee to the landowner for forest management planning. The SWCD has a contract with the MN DNR Forest Stewardship Program for these services. The SWCD does charge fees for site reviews associated with shoreland ordinance compliance and other regulatory responsibilities. The District maintains records of these fees as well as records of activities such as tree planting, vegetation control, and other land management practices. To minimize waste and damage to forest resources, the Forester references the Voluntary Site-Level Guidelines, Best Management Practices, and the utilization standards of other local land managers including the ACLD and MN DNR. These standards are included in the timber sale contract and other activity planning documents as appropriate. The SWCD records annual production figures by acre, volume, species and product for landowners in the certified pool. The SWCD utilizes inventory data, stocking charts and silvicultural guidelines to determine the appropriate harvesting intensity and retention levels.

#### **PRINCIPLE #6: ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT**

Forest management shall conserve biological diversity and its associated values, water resources, soils, and unique and fragile ecosystems and landscapes, and, by so doing, maintain the ecological functions and the integrity of the forest.

The Aitkin County SWCD has identified Cost-Share High Priority Areas. These high priority conservation areas include all lands designated as shoreland areas (areas within 1,000 feet of lakes or 300 feet of rivers). The SWCD maintains current information and management guidelines for the insect and disease issues that occur in the region, including strategies for addressing gypsy moth, two-lined chestnut borer, bronze birch borer, and the potential for emerald ash borer. The Aitkin SWCD has established a pesticides policy, maintains records of pesticide use, and staff have received training in the handling and proper disposal of hazard materials. The SWCD has established protocols for forest inventory, water quality testing and other types of data collection. The SWCD consults with the MN DNR to identify records of RTE species, species of concern, and critical habitats. Sharp-tailed grouse leks are a known habitat of concern in Aitkin County. Guidance for managing these habitats and other important species or areas are included in the forest management and activity plans as appropriate. The SWCD has developed template management prescriptions for the habitat types generally occurring on properties they manage. The SWCD has policies and practices for operating near riparian areas including use of the Site Level Guidelines and BMPs. The SWCD also had local, state, and federal authority for implementing natural resource protections including shoreland, wetland, and water resource regulation. To assist in developing management prescriptions within a landscape context, the SWCD collaborates with the other land managers in the county and utilizes GIS data and resources to aid in collaborative planning and analysis. To meet the FSC expectations for maintaining representative samples of existing ecosystems, the SWCD collaborates with the large public land managers in the county to ensure that adjacent management on private lands does not conflict with their management objectives. The SWCD utilizes the MN DNR Ecological Classification System (ECS) to help classify forest habitat types, identify appropriate

management objectives and techniques, and thereby help preserve and enhance biodiversity. The SWCD follows the Site Level Guidelines and regional silvicultural guides to help determine appropriate stand level retention of various structural elements such as legacy trees, cavity trees, and coarse woody debris. The Site Level Guidelines also provide standards for road construction, logging and site prep, and visually sensitive sites. The SWCD does not participate in significant road construction or road obliteration activities. The SWCD is active in preventing and controlling the spread of invasive exotic species including both aquatic and terrestrial species. The SWCD does not have a policy for the use of biological control agents, genetically modified organisms, or exotic species. In the region, these three concerns are most likely to occur in connection to agricultural practices rather than forest management practices. Issues related to these concerns can be referred to the USDA office housed in the same building as the SWCD. The SWCD and USDA have a close working relationship given the interface between forestry and agriculture in Aitkin County.

#### **PRINCIPLE #7: MANAGEMENT PLAN**

A management plan -- appropriate to the scale and intensity of the operations -- shall be written, implemented, and kept up to date. The long-term objectives of management, and the means of achieving them, shall be clearly stated.

For internal management, the Aitkin County SWCD has an employee policy that outlines the operations of the organization. This policy “shall promote and ensure a spirit of confidence and cooperation between the Board and its employees.” This policy includes information about the SWCD’s Equal Opportunity Policy, Standards of Conduct and Ethics, and other employee related policies. This policy is available upon request in its entirety from the SWCD. The SWCD also follows the *SWCD Supervisor’s Handbook* and other legal and recommended guidance from the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), and the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD). The SWCD also develops annual operating plans and budgets. Each of the landowners in the certified pool has a property specific forest management plan. The SWCD has developed model silvicultural prescriptions for the habitat types occurring on the properties they manage. The SWCD also has sample harvest guidelines and timber sale contract documents. The SWCD has developed a handbook for the overall guidance and operation of its FSC group certification program. The SWCD Forester is familiar with the forest management objectives and silvicultural guidelines used by the ACLD and other regional land managers. The SWCD Forester is experienced in assisting the ACLD in designing harvests including tree marking, boundary marking, and road layout. The SWCD has established and is expanding a GIS for managing forestry planning and implementation activities. The GIS makes use of data provided by a variety of land management agencies including the USDA, MN DNR, and ACLD. The SWCD utilizes Site Index data and curves as well as the MN DNR’s ECS in determining site productivity and incorporates this information into the silvicultural guidelines for harvest intensity and retention, and regeneration objectives. Best management practices, the Site Level Guidelines, and landowner goals and interests determine the recommended equipment for logging operations.

## **PRINCIPLE #8: MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT**

Monitoring shall be conducted -- appropriate to the scale and intensity of forest management -- to assess the condition of the forest, yields of forest products, chain of custody, management activities and their social and environmental impacts.

The Aitkin County SWCD has established monitoring protocols and data collection sheets. Members of the certified pool are provided an annual day in the woods with the SWCD forester as a benefit of their membership. This meeting and site visit provides an opportunity for the forester and landowner to review any recent management activities, discuss any changes in management goals, and begin planning for any upcoming management activities. A report of the annual visit and any resulting management modifications is kept with the member's records. This visit provides an opportunity for post-harvest reviews and can be scheduled to coincide with recent activities. Corrective Action Requests may also be recorded during the annual visit and a plan for addressing them documented. The SWCD is a service provider through the Forest Stewardship Program administered by the MN DNR with funding from the USFS. In May 2006, the USFS began a process of developing monitoring protocols for tracking the implementation and results of Forest Stewardship Management Plans. As the protocol for data collection and reporting for this USFS process are finalized, the SWCD will implement these procedures as an additional aspect of its monitoring and quality control policy. The SWCD maintains forest inventory data for the members of the certified pool including cover types, acreage, species, age and stand volumes. The SWCD is developing a GIS to map and summarize land uses and management objectives in an aggregated fashion. This information is currently available in the individual landowner records kept by the SWCD. The SWCD has an established forestry inventory method including field data sheets. The SWCD monitors insect and disease concerns and collaborates with other land managers in the county on control. The SWCD Forester periodically works in the field with the ACLD and other land managers on data collection and forest management studies. The SWCD is well informed about the current social and economic trends in the county and is an active community partner in a number of ways. The SWCD also engages in addressing local water quality concerns and does water sampling and monitoring for local lakes with about 25 citizen volunteers. The SWCD maintains records of harvest activities and resulting yields from certified properties. Records include copies of timber sale contracts, consumer scale agreements, scale tickets, and other documentation. Landowners participating in the certified pool will be required to have a timber sale contract and a consumer scale agreement (or equivalent documents) prepared and to provide copies to the SWCD. The consumer scale agreement signed by the logger and landowner verifies that the harvest will be scaled by a third party and verified by the scale tickets returned from the mill. The consumer scale agreement identifies who is buying the wood. Landowners interested in marketing their wood or products as FSC-certified also need to use the load tickets provided by the SWCD that indicate the chain-of-custody number.

## **PRINCIPLE # 9: MAINTENANCE OF HIGH CONSERVATION VALUE FORESTS**

Management activities in high conservation value forests shall maintain or enhance the attributes which define such forests. Decisions regarding high conservation value forests shall always be considered in the context of a precautionary approach.

The county and state managed lands in Aitkin County have been FSC-certified since 1997. Both the ACLD and MN DNR have pursued a process of defining HCVPs for the lands they manage. The Aitkin County SWCD will model their approach to HCVPs after the approach taken by the ACLD and the MN DNR with the understanding that the application of HCVP to small, non-industrial private woodlands will differ from how the Principle applies to large, public ownerships. To further address HCVPs, the SWCD has protocols for reviewing sites for RTE species and habitats or records included in the MN DNR's Natural Heritage Database. The SWCD is able to access this database and get updates through a license agreement with the MN DNR. The SWCD has also identified Cost-Share High Priority Areas. These high priority conservation areas include all lands designated as shoreland areas (areas within 1,000 feet of lakes or 300 feet of rivers). The SWCD Board and staff direct cost share funding towards these high priority areas. These areas typically contain a mixture of soils and slopes and are the most impacted by residential development and other land use changes. Most conservation concerns and related projects occur in these shoreland areas. Many times the priority area is expanded to include an entire watershed. Of special concern are those feedlots, pasture areas, and erosion sites that may impact surface waters. The public land managers in Aitkin County have established reserve areas, conservation zones, and other areas of ecological significance. The SWCD takes these designations into consideration when planning or implementing management activities on adjacent lands to ensure that the management objectives do not conflict.

#### **PRINCIPLE # 10: PLANTATIONS**

Plantations shall be planned and managed in accordance with Principles and Criteria 1 - 9, and Principle 10 and its Criteria. While plantations can provide an array of social and economic benefits, and can contribute to satisfying the world's needs for forest products, they should complement the management of, reduce pressures on, and promote the restoration and conservation of natural forests.

Properties managed by the Aitkin County SWCD are unlikely to fall under the FSC definition of plantations. It is expected that all lands managed by the SWCD will fit the FSC definition of natural forests. Some landowners receiving services from the SWCD do manage planted areas of red pine but these areas are not managed on short rotation or to the exclusion of diverse habitat components such as structural elements and plant diversity. Some landowners in the county have expressed interest in hybrid poplar and are paying attention to plans to develop biomass energy generation in Northern Minnesota. However neither of these issues or management objectives has occurred on any lands currently managed by the SWCD.