



## Questions and Answers on the National Assessment Tool



### 1. What do we mean by Assessment?

To ensure that federal and state resources are being focused on important landscape areas with the greatest opportunity to address shared management priorities and achieve measurable outcomes, each state and territory will work collaboratively with key partners and stakeholders to develop a statewide forest resource assessment. The state forest resource assessment should provide a comprehensive analysis of the forest-related conditions, trends, threats, and opportunities within the state.

At a minimum, state forest resource assessments will:

- Provide an analysis of present and future forest conditions, trends, and threats on all ownerships in the state using publicly available information.
- Identify forest related threats, benefits, and services consistent with the S&PF Redesign national themes.
- Delineate priority rural and urban forest landscape areas to be addressed by the state resource strategy. States can also identify linkages between terrestrial and aquatic habitat, as appropriate.
- Work with neighboring States and governments to identify any multi-state areas that are a regional priority.
- Incorporate existing statewide plans including Wildlife Action Plans,
- Community Wildfire Protection Plans, and address existing S&PF program planning requirements. States can also utilize relevant national and regional assessments as appropriate.

### 2. What is the S&PF National Assessment tool?

A web based GIS application that provides access to a standard framework which enables the weighting and combining of geospatial layers representing the national themes and objectives outline in the 2008 Farm Bill.

### 3. How is the data strategy team supporting the development and use of the national assessment tool -- and statewide assessments?

The data strategy team is developing a near term and longer term strategy for both the analytical process in the assessment tool and the data that goes into it.

**Analytical Process --** in the near term the group hopes to simplify the process for using assessment tool while making the tool robust enough to handle statewide assessments. In the long term the group hopes to develop a series of guidelines for using the assessment tool from importing data inputs to results that would help standardize national, regional, and state assessments.

**Data --.** In the near term the group hopes to produce a web page that provides access to already existing national data sets and links to other analysis resources. In the longer term the main emphasis of the team is to culture the development of national data sets that support high quality national, regional, and state resource assessments. Currently only a few spatially consistent data sets exist nationally to support these assessments and guidelines on how states should develop their core data are needed.

Development of additional necessary data to support assessments at various scales require substantial but necessary investments of staff and other resources if assessments are to successfully support and drive program delivery as intended by the redesign effort and the 2008 Farm Bill.

**4. Is the national assessment tool intended primarily for use at the national level, or is it being developed to support regional and state assessments as well?**

The assessment tool was originally designed to support national assessments, but can be used to support regional and state assessments with different data inputs. Several of the national data sets currently in the assessment tool are not recommended for regional and state assessments because they are too coarse (it would be like trying to drive through downtown Los Angeles with a Rand McNally national road map). States and regions will have to load finer scale data into the assessment tool in order to use it for their own analysis.

**5. Can the national assessment tool be used to delineate national, regional, and state priority areas? With the same data?**

Well yes, and no. Priority areas are a product of an assessment or the question being asked. An assessment is a function of the data you use and the process you use for analysis. A change in either analytical process or data will yield different results. For example, a national assessment and state assessment may use the same data layers in the assessment tool but a different set of weights yielding different priority areas. For example, fire may be weighted higher than insect and disease (I&D) risk in one model while the other rates I&D risk higher. Also, many of the national data sets available in the tool are too coarse for state assessments, particularly for smaller states.

**6. What is the analytical process used by the national assessment tool?**

A standard weighed overlay framework in which various GIS layers (factors/criteria) representing the national themes and objects are combined. This is accomplished by:

- a) Assigning layers to various themes and objectives.
- b) Identifying high priority areas on each layer.
- c) Aggregating layers by watershed, or some other unit, to produce a more generalized output and thus eliminate artifacts in the final maps.
- d) Weighting each layer to account for its relative importance.
- e) Combining the layers using a weighted linear combination by multiplying the factor weight by each layer, followed by a summation of the results.

**7. How can or should a state assessment inform regional and national assessments?**

If the analysis and data are consistent across state boundaries then a set of state assessments can be combined, generalized and used for a regional or national assessment. If the process or the data are different however, then a state assessment may result in significant differences across state lines making it difficult or impossible to produce consistent results that are comparable regionally or nationally. Ideally national assessments are built from the ground up with regional and state input and hopefully nationally consistent data at a scale suitable for state use. This ensures that the identification of areas with regional importance are consistent and not in conflict with areas identified at the state level.

**8. What is the relationship between national, regional and state priority areas?**

A National assessment is (1) intended to inform State and Private Forestry policy, planning and programming at the national level, (2) Serves to highlight conditions and trends of national significance and identify opportunities for multi-state and multi-agency investment and cooperation, and (3) also serves to communicate the importance of state and private forest landscapes and their relationship to our National Forests and Grasslands and other public lands. The National Assessment is not intended to be used for determining how to allocate Forest Service funds to the states.

State assessments are intended to inform long term statewide forest resource planning and policy decisions and actions and address the state's unique resource management priorities and concerns. The geospatial analyses component of the State Assessment is intended to identify priority landscape areas across the urban to rural continuum where Federally-funded cooperative forestry program outreach and activity can be emphasized and coordinated. Establishment of these priority areas is intended to enable the efficient, strategic, and focused use of limited US Forest Service program resources. The identification of priority areas is important for focusing coordinated Federally-funded US Forest Service efforts where possible and appropriate, but is not intended to replace efforts by state forestry agencies to serve other areas of the state.

State assessments are intended to inform the state strategies, which the state will use to outline the annual actions. At this stage, since there is flexibility in how states conduct their state assessment, the state assessments are not intended to be compiled into regional or national priority area maps for resource allocation or other purposes.

#### **9. Can data be uploaded into the assessment tool?**

The tool is specifically designed for uploading of data by state staff or other individuals doing assessments. The data does have to meet a specific format (GeoTiff), however, and should follow some basic standards outlined by the data strategy team, such as a standard coordinate system and cell size. Getting the data into the correct format could require a significant amount of effort by state GIS staff.

#### **10. How will data/information/access be secured and maintained for this tool?**

A tool administrator will be assigned to maintain the data sets and ensure proper maintenance of the tool. The tool will also meet stringent Federal information system security standards. Several issues still need to be addressed – How will staff log into the tool? Does the tool utilize some sort of e-authorization? Will there be different roles in the tool? Who has access to what information? Does this tool have to go through a USDA C&A process?

#### **11. What will the output look like? What form will it be in?**

Web Browser accessible maps and tables are downloadable in a report format in popular formats such as PDF and Microsoft Word. The maps can also be downloaded from the system in GeoTiff (possibly Arc/Info GRID, and Imagine as well) format for use in a GIS.

#### **12. If a state already has a high level of GIS expertise/data/tools, what will the assessment tool do for them?**

The tool will provide a standard web accessible environment where state assessments can be made available for review along with any regional and national assessments. It also may offer an environment where consistency of analysis can be conducted. This assessment tool, built upon industry standard software, technically will not do much more than "off the shelf" GIS software. It will however, provide an environment, for the less GIS savvy individual to conduct a GIS analysis. Therefore, the tool will be most useful to states with limited in-house GIS capacity.

#### **13. What will future iterations of this tool look like? What is planned down the road?**

This will depend upon how the user community accepts this tool. The assessment tool interface and functionality will be dependent upon the needs of the user community.

#### **14. When will the National Assessment tool be available?**

A prototype version will be available for testing in the 2nd quarter of calendar year 2009.

**15. How does this relate to the WebDET application being developed for Forest Stewardship? Will these applications be able to "talk to each other?"**

The WebDET application is a national web-based data entry and report writing geodatabase application designed to support the Forest Stewardship Program (FSP). The tool allows foresters and program managers to prepare Stewardship plans and spatially track and display program accomplishments for FSP and other S&PF programs without the need for desktop GIS software or software expertise. WebDET is currently in Limited User Acceptance test mode and is expected to be fully deployed by spring of 2009.

Currently, the Assessment Tool and WebDET do not "talk to each other". Once priority area data layers are created in the Assessment tool, they can be utilized in WebDET as a base layer for tracking program accomplishments in those areas. Subsequent versions of WebDET and the Assessment Tool could make this process and the sharing of data between the tools more seamless.

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