

**Report on the Response of the Virginia Department of Forestry to the Impact of the  
Aging of Virginia's Population.**

**Submitted 11/14/14**

Pursuant to Code of Virginia §§ 2.2-5510 and 51.5-136, the Virginia Department of Forestry submits this report of its progress in addressing the impact of the aging of Virginia's population.



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## **Executive Summary --**

The Department of Forestry (DOF) has always functioned on public safety and customer service delivery which has been senior - friendly, and its approach continues even today. DOF structured its workforce by locating its state foresters in the communities they serve. Our local staff is always available to respond to forest fires as an emergency services provider, like the community police, fire and rescue services. DOF also provides technical services, incentive programs, visual assessments of land, and regular monitoring and follow-up to all landowners direct to their residences and/or forest properties. The basic structure has been in place since the agency's first employees were hired and continues even today.

DOF has undergone changes impacting its workforce in size and capacity and has gone from 400 employees in the 1990s to 228 at present day. Even with a reduced workforce, DOF maintains a structure with its employees principally located within communities they serve. The agency changed from a one forester - one county organization to a team of state foresters serving 3 to 7 counties. In the most modern application of the agency organizational structure, employees utilize their particular skill and knowledge base to accomplish specific tasks within the service area. Staff employees are now more mobile, equipped with laptops and smart phones, and continue to use a state-owned vehicle to provide their transportation making them easily accessible to their clients' homes or convenient places for meetings.

DOF has also invested in technology to provide faster and more convenient transactions between its staff and landowners also using technology. Email, electronic forms, and online services provide a reasonable degree of confidence to reach our clients of all ages and technical abilities. The agency will continue to make investments in technology that serve landowners with more timely responses to their needs.

## **Agency Description --**

One hundred years ago, the Virginia Department of Forestry was founded; the Agency commemorated its centennial in 2014 with a number of special events across the Commonwealth as well as a change in leadership in May as Bettina K. Ring was appointed the seventh State Forester of Virginia in its 100-year history.

At its creation, the Agency was charged with protecting the public and their property from the ravages of wildfire and with reforesting the Commonwealth after 300 years of timber harvesting and development of previously forested land. Those two activities remain at the Agency's core, but the scope and responsibilities have grown to include law enforcement duties, 24 state forests, two tree nurseries, all-hazard emergency response; forest inventory analysis; applied tree improvement research; urban and community forestry; ecosystem services; forestland

conservation; water quality monitoring, and economic development of this \$17 Billion industry through the utilization and marketing support provided to the forestry and forest products industries each year.

As we begin our second century as a public safety and citizen service agency, VDOF has reorganized field operations, consolidated offices, become more mobile, developed specialized IT products and reduced staff as budgets have shrunk; forest industry has divested lands; more and more people have become forest landowners; generational shifts in land ownership are occurring; concerns regarding the sustainability of natural resources increase; emphasis on ecosystem services and the vital role forests play with regards to water quality and quantity grow; federal funding support decreases, and the emphasis on partnerships and grant funding expands.

Forestry is an economic engine that provides employment for 103,000 Virginians and represents an annual impact of \$17 Billion to the state's economy – and when combined with Agriculture, it's the largest industry in the Commonwealth. Protecting the 16 million acres of forestland and serving the 374,000 landowners who control 80 percent of the commercial forestland are 228 dedicated professionals – 155 of whom are first responders – at the Virginia Department of Forestry.

#### **Information Requested-**

1. One of the top issues facing us today is succession planning. The future ownership of Virginia's forests is uncertain considering the fact that the median age of our landowners is over 60. Some may have a desire to keep the land in their family, but their children and beneficiaries may not have the same desires. Or, even if they do, they may not know how to ensure that this happens. Department of Forestry personnel have been offering a Next Gen workshop to help landowners know what they should do to help ensure successful transition of their land. This is the workshop's fifth year, and it is making a difference. DARS may be helpful if it could provide funding for these workshops and technology improvements to connect more with Virginia's aging population.
2. We provide many services to our landowners, but the service used most by the landowners over 60 who are passing their property to the next generation would be our unbiased, third-party, scientifically-based technical assessments and recommendations. In fact, DOF directly impacts the success of the 374,000 landowners who strive to sustainably manage their forest resources for the greatest possible economic gain. We grow and sell more than 25 million tree seedlings each year so that harvested tracts are replanted to become the forests of tomorrow. The Agency ensures that millions of dollars of state and federal cost-share funds get into the hands of landowners who are actively managing their properties. Again, funding is limited to allow the agency to reach all potential clients who may need the agency's services. DOF has no particular funding streams dedicated to Virginia's aging population.
3. Public Safety as it relates to emergency response is a core element of DOF's mission. DOF's employees are mobile and fully equipped to handle all emergency responses to

forest fires (out of control). This valuable service provides important protection to the lives and property of all Virginia citizens, but could be extremely important to aging population of forest landowners. DOF provides a mobile workforce delivering in-person services, too. State foresters examine the property of landowners and can easily meet at the clients' homes or convenient meeting places. Technology aids our mobile workforce to provide reports, documents and information in a prompt, efficient and effective manner. State Forests are investing in walking trails, bike & horse trails, fishing and hunting opportunities for all citizens. These recreational services provide our aging population with healthy and wholesome outdoor physical fitness and conservation.

4. DOF partners with local, state and federal agencies responsible for emergency response; the age of the landowners whose lives or homes were protected due to our efforts is not something that is tracked by us or any of our partners. However, the agency estimates 374,000 forest landowners who could potentially need site reviews and technical services. The agency meets only a small fraction of this number. As our agency has grown smaller in response to the economy, DOF has sought to be more creative and even more effective with its resources.
5. We do not have the demographic statistics available on the number of persons by age and gender who receive services from DOF; however, the median age of our landowners is over 60.
6. DOF is not aware of any variation regarding funding accessibility or availability in different parts of the Commonwealth. DOF's funding is based on forest conservation needs, which may vary in different parts of the state.
7. DOF may expect the same general patterns of service to Commonwealth citizens in the next five or ten years. Ten offices were sold over the last decade as result of savings' strategies and a strategic move to a mobile workforce. Employees of the agency still serve landowners and continue to meet them in their homes or at convenient public locations suitable for all ages. We don't expect any major changes in service delivery. Field inspections will be made on the properties, and meetings will occur in convenient and accessible locations. Fire suppression and emergency work will be performed with trained employees who have equipment and tools to protect property and lives. The agency may predict that more forest landowners over the age of 60 and success in the agency's efforts influencing landowners to maintain working forests could cause demand on its employees to deliver more site inspections, more water quality inspections and increased reporting.
8. Aging citizens could benefit by receiving a highly collaborative service from all levels of government, working together to achieve multiple societal goals. In the case of DOF, forest landowners will need a full array of government services common to any other citizen (i.e. public safety, health care, education, transportation, etc.), while needing current information and data on their forest resources and guidance helping them to continue to make informed management decisions that keep working forests healthy and productive.

9. DOF's website is 508 compliant so that all content is readily available to any and all Virginians. Web pages are scalable so those people with a need for larger text and other content can quickly and easily increase the size of any page to ensure readability. The pages are optimized to work in the most popular browsers (Internet Explorer; Google Chrome; Mozilla Firefox) to ensure everyone can access all information produced by DOF. Because budgets have been reduced significantly, DOF does not produce many printed pieces (brochures, pamphlets, newsletters, etc.) these days and relies on the Agency website to deliver content to all audiences. While some aging adults are heavy users of the Internet, many of our older landowners are not. And they prefer information in a printed format. Since we post our publications in PDF form on the website, publications can be printed "on-demand" for individual landowners. This is not practical for large gatherings, however. Until a greater number of older adults are web-savvy, there will be many in the population who don't have easy access to our publications. DARS could assist us by making available funding to print several of our most requested publications to ensure we continue to deliver this valuable information to the landowners who need it most.
10. The Department of Forestry will continue to serve all of its clients and customers in a manner which provides the highest quality of professional services. DOF will continue to make inspections of forest property and provide personal reporting and guidance to senior citizens in a manner that is consistent with their needs and agency resources, for as long as the agency can maintain a stable workforce with the tools to deliver its services.
11. DOF employees are stewards of the forestland and all field personnel are highly trained in forestry practices and firefighting. The same DOF employee who serves his/her landowners with professional forestry advice is on 24-hour call to respond to wildfires and other emergencies. For that reason, DOF has a presence throughout the Commonwealth networking with local emergency response companies to provide public safety. DOF has an essential, fire-ready infrastructure of special-use equipment. Each field employee has access to a strategically-located bulldozer and transport unit that costs nearly \$300,000 per unit, a 4X4 pick-up truck with a water tank at \$32,000 each, fire tools, personal protective clothing, radio, laptop and cell phone. DOF is experiencing an increase in employees retiring later. Of the 155 responders at our agency, 19 are 60 years old or older and 46 are between 50 and 59 years old; therefore, 42% of our emergency responders are 50 years old and over. Partly because of this trend, the Department reorganized two years ago into multi-county work units in which newer and younger employees are mentored by highly-trained and experienced peers. DOF recognizes the aging workforce emergency responders in its physical fitness requirements. Although all emergency responders are subject to annual physical fitness testing and passage, staff over 50 years of age are required to perform a less strenuous physical fitness testing to remain in their positions. Responders are provided vehicles and allowable commuting to facilitate the mobility of the workforce.