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A Sunset Review of the South Carolina Forestry Commission

August 1998

Pursuant to the sunset law (§1-20-10 *et seq.* of the South Carolina Code of Laws, repealed 1998), we reviewed the laws and operations of the South Carolina Forestry Commission (SCFC) and evaluated its performance. We recommend that SCFC remain an independent agency and have made recommendations to improve its operations.

SCFC is “to protect, promote, enhance, and nurture the state’s forest lands in a manner consistent with achieving the greatest good for its citizens.” Overall, we found that the commission needs to improve certain aspects of its fire and forest management programs. Our review also revealed several possible conflicts of interest involving the agency head and members of SCFC’s governing board. SCFC has resolved problems related to financial accountability which we found in our 1987 review .

Program Issues

Fire Control Resources

As in 1987, we found that the commission has not used historical data on where fires have occurred and the size of fires to allocate staff (wardens and technicians) and fire control equipment throughout the state. Our review indicated that the state may benefit from reallocating fire control staff among the three forestry regions. Although the Coastal and Pee Dee Regions have experienced much larger and more fires, the fires responded to by staff among those regions and the Piedmont Region were comparable. When fire control resources are not allocated according to areas prone to fires, there may be larger and more damaging fires.

Fire Alert System

SCFC has implemented a fire alert system, the computer-aided dispatch system (CADS), which does not meet the state's needs. This system is to pinpoint the location of forest fires so that SCFC fire control staff can be dispatched to those locations. However, CADS has numerous software problems which have resulted in inaccurate and incomplete information concerning forest fires. Also, persons who dispatch fire control staff to fires have not received any formal training on how to use CADS. In addition, SCFC, unlike other state forestry entities with similar systems, did not test CADS before full implementation. It is crucial that problems with this fire alert system be resolved immediately. Delays in fire response could result in the loss of lives and property.

Fire Control Workloads by Region

Region	# of Staff	# of Fires	Acres Destroyed	# of Fire Responses Per Staff
Coastal	60	1,424	8,675	24
Pee Dee	65	1,233	10,305	19
Piedmont	53	964	2,714	18

Data is averaged for FY 94-95 through FY 96-97.

*F*orest Renewal Program

The state forester administers the state's cost-sharing program for reforestation, the forest renewal program (FRP), as a state official and participates in the program as a private landowner. This situation presents a possible conflict of interest. We also found evidence that FRP applications submitted by the state forester have not been processed in accordance with standard practices for the program. Since 1989, the state forester has received \$10,060 in FRP funds for reforestation efforts on his personal property.

State Forester's FRP Payments

Application Date	Date Funded	Amount Received
01/20/89	01/25/89	\$1,900
07/06/94	11/09/94	\$900
11/22/94	01/03/95	\$5,325
09/13/95	10/27/95	\$1,755
09/30/96	09/30/96	\$180
TOTAL		\$10,060

*F*ield Trial and Recreation Area

Field trials are events involving various breeds of dogs to determine the most skilled dog at locating the particular game each breed has been trained to hunt. As of March 1998, over \$554,000 in state funds had been expended or committed for the construction and operation of the H. Cooper Black, Jr., Memorial Field Trial and Recreation Area, a facility located on SCFC property at Sand Hills State Forest. This field trial facility was to be developed for multiple uses and was to be jointly funded by state and private sources.

We found that this area has been used almost exclusively by private field trial clubs. We estimate that in three years less than 1,000 people have used the facility for field trial events. State funds have amounted to \$759,522 while private donations and user fees have only amounted to \$23,940 for the facility. The use of public funds when a public purpose is not promoted is questionable.

Revenue for the Field Trial and Recreation Area

Source	Fiscal Year				TOTAL
	94-95	95-96	96-97	97-98	
User Fees	\$900	\$3,300	\$2,300	\$3,290 ¹	\$9,790
Private Donations		\$14,050	\$100		\$14,150
State Funds	\$90,000		\$469,522 ²	\$200,000	\$759,522

1 Through 4/1/98.

2 In FY 96-97, the South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) spent over \$69,000 for an access road. The remaining state funds were appropriated.

Property Management

The Forestry Commission is authorized to acquire or exchange property with federal agencies. We reviewed a land exchange of SCFC property at Shaw Air Force Base in Sumter for U.S. Air Force property in Horry County. We concluded that this exchange was beneficial to the state since it was undertaken in an effort to avoid the closure of Shaw Air Force Base.

SCFC planned to sell the land it acquired in this exchange and purchase other property. However, the bankruptcy of a developer who purchased land totaling \$3.9 million has prevented the re-sale of a portion of SCFC's Horry County property.

In addition, we found that problems occurred in the purchase of replacement land. Our review indicated that members of SCFC's governing board participated in decisions involving companies that they were affiliated with. In one case, SCFC purchased land from a company which employs the chairman of its governing board. The commission paid \$394,000 for this property. We found no evidence that the chairman abstained from voting on this transaction.

In other instances, a commissioner (who served until 1996) voted on transactions involving a company for which he was an independent contractor. This company provided forestry consulting services to SCFC.

Agency Structure

Merger / Duplication

Based on the economic importance of forestry to the state's economy and the agency's unique mission to preserve and protect the state's forests, we concluded that SCFC should not be merged with another state agency.

We determined that there is minimal duplication between SCFC and the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources and between SCFC and the Department of Agriculture. However, we found some overlap in recreational services provided by SCFC and the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism and training provided by SCFC and Clemson University.

County Forestry Boards

In our 1987 review and in this review, we concluded that the authority of county forestry boards was unnecessary. As provided by state law, the county boards are to consent to personnel decisions concerning county fire control staff and to review, revise, and adopt county fire plans. Disagreements between the boards and SCFC about personnel matters have resulted in delays in hiring and the boards' action on fire plans has been limited. Further, because of the lack of a quorum at meetings, the county boards often cannot take action on issues.

Public Representation

The commission's governing board is composed of five public members. We found that all of these members are affiliated with the forestry industry.

- Two members are registered foresters.
- One member is the past president of the South Carolina Forestry Association and a past president of a timber company.

- The remaining two members each own a tree farm; one of these persons is a former member of the South Carolina Forestry Association's Board of Directors.

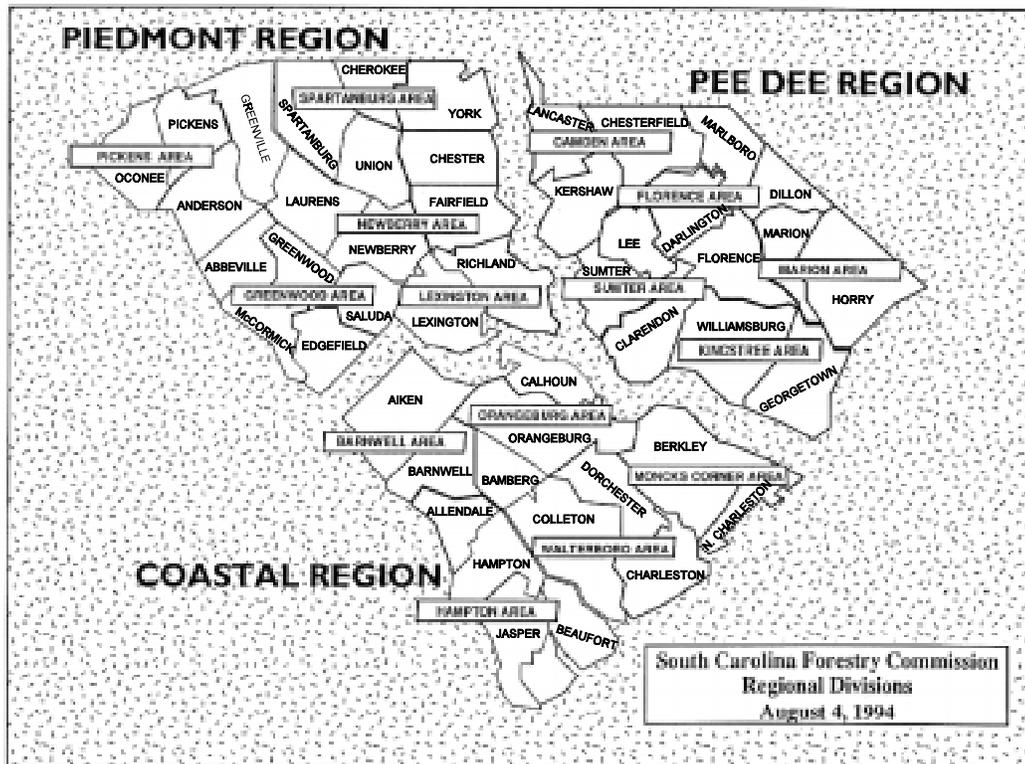
When public members are affiliated with the forestry industry, the public may not be adequately represented.

Administration

In our last review of SCFC in 1987, we found major problems involving the commission's accountability of state and federal funds. For example, we found that SCFC commingled federal grant funds and did not account for funds by programs. The commission also was unable to verify that state and other funds had been expended before receipt of federal matching funds. In this review, we found that the agency had resolved these and other problems related to the accountability of funds.

SCFC has developed policies and procedures to handle complaints. However, complaints among the forestry offices are not handled consistently. Also, smoke complaints are recorded but are not followed up to ensure that they are investigated.

SCFC Regional / Area Map



This document summarizes our full report, *A Sunset Review of the South Carolina Forestry Commission*. Copies of the full report and all LAC audits are available free of charge. If you have questions, contact George L. Schroeder, Director.