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April 24, 2020

A message to Vermont foresters and landowners,

At the beginning of the month we wrote to all of you to provide updates on the implications of COVID-19 on our shared work. As you know, the implications are constantly evolving. We have heard input from the Private Lands Advisory Committee, from the [survey](#) on the FPR website, and directly from many of you. Your input has been extremely helpful, not just in identifying challenges but also in identifying potential solutions. Your input is also helping to shape the solutions we develop and advocate for, and how we communicate on [FPR's forest economy](#) page and in emails like this. If you haven't already, please take a moment to fill out the [survey](#) and let us know what is on your mind.

We have heard foresters express concern about markets and their ability to be responsive and quickly adapt management strategies. We have heard concern about landowner assumptions that foresters aren't working, or that hiring a forester could present unnecessary risk of exposure to coronavirus. We don't have control over some of the challenges we face, but with some adaptability, good communication, and collaboration, we can get ahead of many of them.

Below are some important updates that can help us to work through the challenges we're facing, and in some cases, be better on the other side. Below you will find information on:

- [An Update on FPR Fieldwork](#)
- [Prioritization of UVA Plan and Amendment Review](#)
- [A Reminder About Mailing Documents to FPR Staff](#)
- [A **NEW FPR** Policy on Forester Licensing relating to UVA Documents](#)
- [2021 UVA Plan Update Letters](#)
- [UVA Forest Management Activity Reports Submission via eCuse](#)
- [An Update from Property Valuation and Review at the Tax Department](#)

[An Update on FPR Fieldwork](#)

As of April 20th, FPR Forestry staff have increased but still limited ability to return to the field. To protect the public, we will not be able to conduct visits with partners (including foresters) or landowners. We will be taking many critical

precautions to protect ourselves and others from any risk of transmission. Though there is a long way to go, the ability to return to the woods (albeit only for certain tasks and under strict health and safety guidelines) is a major positive step towards normalcy for our staff, and we believe is critical to maintaining good communications and providing good service during this time. Thank you for your patience during any challenges this may have caused.

Prioritization of UVA Plan and Amendment Review

We recognize that timely approval of Forest Management Plans or plan amendments can help foresters and landowners be responsive to shifting opportunities and markets when implementing management activity. This can have positive financial implications for landowners, foresters, and loggers. For this reason, county foresters have prioritized review of forest management plans. They are being reviewed swiftly and all of them that meet standards should be approved very soon.

We have also prioritized amendment review through mid-October. **We have set a goal that when an amendment meets standards and has been submitted with all supporting information and as outlined below, that it should be able to be reviewed and approved within three business days.** The standards against which amendments will be evaluated have not changed, and all amendments must include the required information as defined in the UVA Manual.

We will be best equipped to conduct initial review of amendments in 3 business days when:

- Amendments are sent as a PDF via email.
 - *Email Subject Line:* Amendment: Last Name, Town (summer/fall/winter)*
- Amendments are accompanied by a digital copy of the UVA plan and map currently in effect. (*Currently, county foresters do not have immediate access to files.*)
- The signature of the landowner is included. As a reminder, scanned signatures [are now acceptable](#).
- ***Indicate in the email if the amendment is for summer, fall, or winter activity.** Where we need to triage efforts and will prioritize review of amendments prescribing activity to be implemented in the current season.

For amendments that are not submitted as suggested above, county foresters will still prioritize their review and work to process them in a timely manner, but it will extend the timeline for initial review. We will work to maintain this level of responsiveness to amendments through mid-October and will be considering the need and ability to sustain it beginning in September 2020.

A Reminder on Mail

Because all FPR foresters are now teleworking and offices are closed with limited, intermittent access, if anything is mailed to a county forester, it may not be received for a week or more. We recommend:

- Emailing any remaining plans and maps.
 - Not sending anything certified. We are not able to receive it as there will not be anybody available to sign for it.
 - Phoning ahead to make other arrangements
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NEW FPR Policy Forester Licensing and Filing of UVA Documents

The professional care and accountability that licensed foresters bring to plan development and meeting UVA program standards builds trust and speeds up plan approval by FPR. Forester licensing reinforces this relationship.

In 2016, the forester licensing law passed and the [rules](#) went in to effect on August 1, 2017. The rule requires that a stamp or seal must be affixed to any completed, written forestry work product prepared by or under the supervision of the licensee. This applies to many UVA filings. Most foresters already meet this requirement. As we begin a new round of management plan updates, it is time (and likely overdue) to formally align the licensing requirements with UVA administration.

After May 1, 2020, any documents filed with FPR to satisfy UVA eligibility requirements must be submitted and prepared in a manner consistent with statutes applying to forester licensing, [26 V.S.A § 5201 et seq.](#) and the rules promulgated under this law. With input from the Private Lands Advisory Committee and Office of Professional Regulation, FPR has established a policy on this.

[This policy and guidance](#) on its implementation are posted on the UVA website.

2021 UVA Plan Update Letters

This is the time of year when we send out UVA plan update letters, and we are including some additional information to support landowner confidence in engaging foresters to develop management plan updates. Some landowners are uncertain if they can safely engage foresters right now. We believe that more than most professions, with little reduction in quality of service, forestry services can be readily delivered while practicing social distancing and all health and safety precautions currently required, including wearing of masks. We are including language in the 2021 update letters to:

- Inform landowners that foresters are still developing management plans and it can be done safely.
- Plans need to meet the requirements of the forester licensing law.
- If COVID-19 will delay timely development of their plan, then they should contact the county forester.

A [sample](#) of the plan update letter has been posted on the UVA website. We will be sending these out within the month.

FMAR Submission via eCuse

[eCuse](#) now includes functionality that allows filing of Forest Management Activity Reports (FMAR). FMARs may be filed by landowners or prepared by foresters and signed by landowners in the same way that applications may be signed. Initial reports from consultants who have used the service are positive.

A few major benefits of this method of filing:

- Records of the filing are automatically and continuously available.
 - Many fields auto-populate, potentially reducing work for you and your client.
 - No postage!
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- Reduced administrative work for FPR (we don't need to transcribe data which means we can focus on fieldwork and plan review).

To file an FMAR you will need the SPAN and Owner ID. Owner ID are unique IDs associated with each UVA landowner and are printed on any mailing to landowners from PVR or available by request from county foresters. Give it a try; this is a soft launch of this functionality. We'll follow it up with more instructional resources as things calm down. If you have questions about use of this service, or suggestions for improvement please contact Keith Thompson at Keith.Thompson@vermont.gov.

Property Valuation and Review Update, from Elizabeth Hunt

The Current Use Program with the Tax Department continues to work on processing applications, Notices of Withdrawals, and provide other services. With the exception of one staff person, we can answer phones remotely to help you with any questions that you or your clients may have. The main phone line is (802) 828-5860. Some of them have interesting schedules as we navigate teleworking and caring for kids and family members, so you may find it easier to email us at tax.currentuse@vermont.gov. We are also alternating days in the office which allows access to files, pick up mail, and send mail while not having contact with other staff members. Finally, if you have clients who have not submitted the ag certs that were due November 1, 2019, we are still accepting them until May 1st, 2020.

Conclusion

Many of you have been very responsive to our shift in circumstances, by communicating in new ways, emailing plans and maps, paying close attention to detail in your UVA plans or amendments so they can be quickly approved, and not only sharing solutions to shared problems, but also highlighting the bright spots in some generally difficult circumstances. Thank you.

As you develop new questions, encounter new challenges, or discover new opportunities related to the circumstances resulting from COVID-19, please let us know. This [survey](#) is a quick way to get your ideas in front of an FPR team working on this. Please stay in touch.

Sincerely,

Private Lands Team

Contact information for county foresters:

Addison County Forester

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Bennington County Forester

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Caledonia/Essex County Forester

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Franklin/Grand Isle County Forester

Nancy Patch

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Lamoille County Forester

Vacant

If there are urgent needs, please email:

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Rutland County Forester/

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Washington County Forester

Vacant

If there are urgent needs, please email
or call Dan Singleton:

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