


CHANZ GREEN
STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 74TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

May 6th, 2025

Testimony on Assembly Bill 181

Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

Thank you, Chairman Mursau and other Assembly committee members, for having a hearing on Assembly Bill 181 related to the county forest administration grant eligibility.

Right now, the DNR makes grants to counties that have county forests to fund 50% of a professional forester for county forest administrator or assistant county forest administrator. For this program, DNR administrative rules require the forester to hold a bachelor's or higher degree in forestry from a school of forestry with a curriculum accredited by the Society of American Foresters or an equivalent degree.

The bill will allow counties a greater applicant pool to hire individuals who have shown they are capable of being an administrator through their combined schooling and work experience. Times have changed since the existing requirements were put into place, and allowing more flexibility will help counties hire and retain high-quality and experienced individuals.

At the end of the day, this bill strengthens Wisconsin's commitment to sustainable forest management by supporting the recruitment and retention of knowledgeable professionals to oversee county forests.

I am grateful for the opportunity to work on this bill with my colleague from the Senate, Senator Quinn. Thank you for your time today, and thank you for your consideration of this bill.



Romaine Robert Quinn

STATE SENATOR • 25TH SENATE DISTRICT

From: Senator Romaine Robert Quinn
To: Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks, and Outdoor Recreation
Re: **Testimony on Assembly Bill 181**
Relating to: county forester administration grant eligibility
Date: May 6, 2025

Thank you, Chair Mursau and members of the Assembly Committee on Forestry for considering Assembly Bill 181 today. This bill makes a change to eligibility for a county forest administration grant.

Current law authorizes the Department of Natural Resources to make grants to counties that have lands designated as county forest to fund 50% of the salary and fringe benefits of a county forest administrator or assistant county forest administrator. Currently the DNR requires the forester to hold a bachelor's or higher degree in forestry from a school of forestry with a curriculum accredited by the Society of American Foresters or an equivalent degree.

AB 181 will allow counties a greater applicant pool to hire individuals that have shown they are capable of being an administrator through their schooling and work experience combined.

Under the bill, the definition of a county forest administrator could include someone who has any of the following qualifications:

1. The current definition (A bachelor's or higher degree in forestry from a school of forestry with a curriculum accredited by the Society of American Foresters or an equivalent degree, as determined by the chief state forester.)
2. A bachelor's or higher degree in natural resources, conservation, or wildlife and three or more years of experience managing a county forest program.
3. An associate degree in forestry and three or more years of experience managing a county forest program.

Allowing more flexibility will help counties hire and retain high-quality and experienced individuals. The goal is not to lessen the professionalism of a county forest administrator, but rather to allow work experience to be considered with some other levels of schooling.

Thank you for your consideration in supporting Assembly Bill 181.



Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

2025 Assembly Bill 181

May 6th, 2025

Good morning, Chair Mursau and members of the Committee. My name is James Warren, and I am the Forestry Field Operations Bureau Director with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, for informational purposes, on Assembly Bill 181, related to county forest administration grant eligibility.

County Forests make up Wisconsin's largest public forest landholding. Currently there are 30 counties enrolled in the County Forest Law Program, covering 2.4 million acres. This program supports these county forests in providing maximum public benefits through multiple use management. As part of this program, counties are eligible for grants that cover up to 50% of the salary and fringe of a county forest administrator that meets certain qualifications.

Assembly Bill 181 expands eligibility for these grants to county forest administrators by providing more flexibility within the education and experience requirements and removing the direct tie to the definition of "forester" or "professional forester".

The immediate impact of this bill would affect a couple counties. Funding for this grant is statutorily authorized and limited in funding and scope. Currently, not all counties apply for or receive the grant. If there is an increase in application numbers or funding requests, it may lead to a reduction of overall funding available. This funding source also funds Sustainable Forestry Grants (ss. 28.11(5r) Wis. Stats.), so potential consequences could include a decrease in both the percentage covered for county forest administrator grants, as well as the amount available for Sustainable Forestry Grants.

One longer-term positive outcomes would be the ability of counties to recruit for their county forest administrator position from a larger applicant pool, while still being eligible for the grant. This is significant considering current workforce challenges the forestry community faces.

While there is a removal of the tie between "forester," "professional forester" and "county forest administrator", we feel that the newly defined qualifications are sufficient to maintain the level of forestry knowledge and background required for this type of position. However, if passed, the department would need to update our administrative rule language in NR 47.70 Wis. Adm. Code. to remain consistent with these statutory changes.

In closing, we do not believe this legislation will have a significant impact on state policies outside of the intent to expand grant eligibility and associated impacts on its funding source; and this legislation will not impact our ability to meet the department's mission.

On behalf of the Department of Natural Resources, we would like to thank you for your time today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Wisconsin County Forests Association

Joe Waichulis
President
Clark County

Phil Schneider
Vice President
Rusk County

Bill Bialecki
Treasurer
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Bill Schradle
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Barron County

Rick Seefeldt
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Marathon County

Hank Novak
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Jeff Olsen
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Mike Beyer
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Oconto County

Henry Sullivan
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Chris Sybers
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Burnett County

Joe Muehlbach
Director
Vilas County

Michael Luedeke
Director-at-Large
Spooner, WI

Jeff Barkley
Director-at-Large
Madison, WI

Henry Schienebeck
Director-at-Large
Rhineland, WI

Rebekah Luedtke
Executive Director

May 2, 2025

Honorable Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today and provide comments on AB181, which would expand the eligibility requirements for the "County Forest Administration Grant" based in [WI §28.11\(5m\)](#). My name is Rebekah Luedtke and I am the Executive Director of the Wisconsin County Forests Association (WCFA). The Wisconsin County Forests Association represents the 30 counties in our State who have a county forest established under state statute. Collectively, these 30 counties are the largest public landholder in Wisconsin, with over 2.4 million acres in active forest and recreation management.

Wisconsin [§28.11](#) obligates the State of Wisconsin to "compensate" the counties for the work and services they provide to the public and for the betterment of the State. One way this is currently done is through the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) who supplies grants to those counties who have a county forest to fund 50% of a "professional forester" for the position of county forest administrator or assistant county forest administrator. For the purposes of this program, the DNR administrative rules currently require the person to hold a bachelor's or higher degree in forestry from a school of forestry with a curriculum accredited by the Society of American Foresters or an equivalent degree.

Back in the early 1990's, when this grant program was implemented, the current requirements made sense given the healthy number of degreed foresters graduating school and the competitive work environment. However, over time it's become increasing more and more difficult to find those degreed foresters with enough experience to run a county forest program and fit the requirements of the grant.

Without the financial assistance of this grant, some counties would not be able to staff a forester to manage their county forest or be able to retain good employees. However, the current narrow restrictions on the grant's eligibility requirements makes it impossible to recognize individuals for their work experience and promote them in place if they do not meet the schooling requirements. This makes employee retention much more difficult. In these times of depressed wood markets and financial stress on county budgets, every little bit of financial support via this grant helps tremendously. In addition, keeping good people in those critical positions is key to any program's success.

The current administrative rules ([NR 1.21\(2\)\(e\)](#)) do allow the chief state forester to grant an exception to the schooling requirements. Multiple attempts to obtain those exceptions from the DNR have been made over the years, the last being in 2023. All requests have been denied by the department.

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Wisconsin County Forests Association

Because of this, WCFA felt it was time to modify the eligibility requirements. The DNR, Chief State Forester Heather Berklund and their legal counsel are fully aware of our request to the legislature regarding this change, and has lent their support of it.

Let me be clear, the goal of expanding the grant's eligibility requirements is not to lessen the professionalism of a county forest administrator, but rather to open the door and allow work experience to be considered with some other levels of schooling to qualify. This should not be looked at as a way for counties to hire less qualified people, but rather to allow counties the opportunity to hire those individuals that have shown they are capable of being an administrator through their schooling and work experience combined. Times have changed since the current requirements were put into place, and by allowing more flexibility, in addition to requiring the counties to have a stake, will help the counties to hire and retain high quality and experienced individuals whether they have a traditional 4-year forestry degree or not. Lastly, if a county would still want to require their forest administrator to have a traditional 4-year forestry degree, that option would still exist, even with these changes.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. We would greatly appreciate your consideration and support in this matter.

Kind regards,
Rebekah Luedtke
Executive Director
Wisconsin County Forests Association.

(5m) County forest administration grants.

28.11(5m)(a)(a) The department may make grants, from the appropriation under s. [20.370 \(5\) \(bw\)](#), to counties having lands entered under sub. [\(4\)](#) to fund all of the following for one professional forester in the position of county forest administrator or assistant county forest administrator:

1. Up to 50 percent of the forester's salary.
2. Up to 50 percent of the forester's fringe benefits, except that the fringe benefits may not exceed 40 percent of the forester's salary.

(am) The department may make grants, from the appropriation under s. [20.370 \(5\) \(bw\)](#), to counties having lands entered under sub. [\(4\)](#) to fund up to 50 percent of the costs of a county's annual dues to a nonprofit organization that provides leadership and counsel to that county's forest administrator and that functions as an organizational liaison to the department. The total amount that the department may award in grants under this paragraph in any fiscal year may not exceed \$50,000.

(b) The department may not make a grant under this subsection for a year for which the department has not approved the annual work plan that was approved by the county board under sub. [\(5\) \(b\)](#). The department may not base the amount of a county's grant on the acreage of the county's forest land.

(c) The department may choose not to make a grant to a county under this subsection if the county board for that county is more than one year delinquent in approving a comprehensive county forest land use plan or revised plan under sub. [\(5\) \(a\)](#).

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May 1, 2025

Honorable Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input through this shared letter today. While I regret that I am unable to be present in person, I respectfully request that this letter be read into the record, or at the very least, distributed to all members of the committee.

After several years of discussion and multiple denials by the Chief State Forester to approve a common-sense exemption to the qualifications outlined in Wisconsin Administrative Code, I am writing to express strong support for the proposed legislation that seeks to expand the definition of "County Forest Administrator."

Since the original definition of "forester" was established in 1989, much has changed—including, admittedly, my own football allegiance. I've gone from cheering for the Vikings to proudly supporting the Packers, a personal reminder that wisdom often comes with time and experience. Recognizing when change is needed is the first step toward progress—and that is precisely what this legislation achieves.

This proposal acknowledges that individuals do not all follow the same academic path to achieve excellence in forest management. It recognizes the value of **real-world experience**, dedication, and leadership—qualities that can be cultivated not only through four-year institutions, but also through Wisconsin's outstanding technical colleges and years of practical service in the field.

The legislation broadens the qualifications for County Forest Administrator to include those with an associate degree and a minimum of three years of experience managing a county forest program. This simple but meaningful change gives counties the flexibility to recruit and retain the most qualified candidates for the job.

In Burnett County, we have a shining example in Jake Nichols, our long-serving Forest Administrator. For 26 years, Jake has dedicated his career to our community and to the stewardship of our forests. He has never wavered in his commitment to service, even while facing unequal treatment under the Forest Grant Administrator Program due to holding an associate degree rather than a bachelor's. Despite this inequity, Jake's service to Burnett County, the Wisconsin County Forests Association, and his professional relationships with DNR staff have remained exemplary.

The practical implications of this change are significant. With this adjustment, Burnett County stands to receive over \$20,000 in additional annual funding. While that may seem modest, it represents nearly 25% of the average annual levy increase our county has experienced over the past five years. These funds could meaningfully support other critical areas, such as public safety or emergency services.

Yet, this legislation is not just about Jake, nor is it just about Burnett County. This is about strengthening forest management across Wisconsin by making space for skilled, experienced individuals who may not fit into a rigid academic mold. It is about ensuring that our rural areas—home to the state's timber production backbone—can continue to recruit qualified professionals amid growing challenges such as an aging population, declining workforce participation, and housing shortages.

As policymakers, you have the responsibility and the opportunity to create frameworks that support workforce development and open doors to meaningful careers—not frameworks that limit them. Expanding the eligibility criteria for County Forest Administrators reflects modern workforce realities, supports local control, and ensures a sustainable future for one of Wisconsin's most vital industries.

I respectfully and strongly urge you to support this common-sense legislation, and I thank you for the opportunity to be heard today.

Sincerely,

Nathan Ehalt



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May 6, 2025

RE: Assembly Hearing
DNR: County Forest Administration Grant Changes

From: Jason Nichols
Burnett County Forest Administrator

My name is Jason Nichols, and I am the Burnett County Forest Administrator. I would like to thank you for considering these changes to the County Forest Administration Grant.

My current situation with Burnett County is one of the reasons we are here today discussing these changes. Just to give a little history about myself and the impacts this particular grant has on Burnett County and other County Forest programs in the state.

In 1997, I was hired by Burnett County as the Assistant County Forest Administrator. They were aware that I had a two-year Forest & Wildlife management Associates degree. In May of 1999, the Forest Administrator at that time took another position. I was offered the Administrator position at that time and have been in that role since, to this point almost 26 years. The county has always required the four-year Forestry Degree for the assistant position. However, in recent years it has been difficult to find qualified applicants, or at least applicants that meet the grant qualifications. Over the last 10 years, it has become apparent when trying to fill positions that things have changed with degrees going to more Natural Resources type degrees or Conservations type degrees and that the number of available Forestry degrees is fewer and there is a need for this grant program to change as well. I can tell you that when we hired my first assistant, we had over 70 applicants for the position. Most recently, when we hired, we had four applicants, and the time before that, the position sat open over a year before we finally received one application from an individual that had the required degree for the grant. That individual had zero forestry experience, but held a master's degree in forestry making them eligible for the grant.

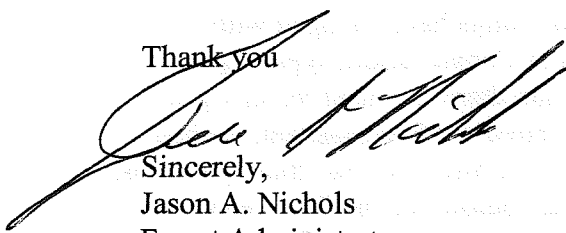
Currently the grant allows the Chief State Forester to determine an acceptable education in place of the four-year degree. Burnett County has made multiple requests to the DNR for an exemption for myself knowing that I have a two-year Associates Forestry Degree and over 20 years of experience in the Administrator position. The Wisconsin County Forest Association Board and Executive Director have supported these requests.

However, the Chief State Forester has been unable to grant an exemption, stating that experience cannot be considered as part of an exemption for the grant.

Knowing that the DNR is unable to grant an exemption, there is no other option but to request changes to the grant that allow other options to be funded under the grant. For this reason, we are here today respectfully asking for your support for these changes. We all know that many degrees have changed in scope and that while one may not have the specific Forestry Degree required under the grant to be eligible for funding, they are very capable of leading a successful program. I am proof of that. Burnett County took a chance on me and I am forever grateful for that. However, I also have proven myself not only to Burnett County, but also my pier and many of our DNR partners. I have participated on many WCFA, County and State committees and adhoc committees helping to guide a strong Forestry Program in the State of Wisconsin for the past 25+ years. I believe my on the job experiences along with my Forestry education do and should qualify someone in my same situation for the grant. Grants such as the County Forest Administrator Grant, play a very important part in our local budgets, and do help offset costs in rural areas like Burnett County where our tax base is small. For these reasons, we are requesting that years of experience doing the job along with other acceptable degrees be eligible for the grant.

I closing, I would like to say that these changes are not an attempt to do away with hiring four-year degree people. I hope that every county would encourage the four-year Forestry Degree when advertising positions. It is just unfortunate that in many rural communities such as Burnett County, it is very difficult to draw that interest at times. So when when we are unable to get applicants with the required Forestry degree for over a year, or we have a person already working in our department that we know is very capable of doing the job but does not have the required Forestry Degree, give the us enough leeway to adapt to our current hiring issues. Allow us to make good sound hiring decisions, not only for the county but also for our local communities. The place where many of these individuals will live, raise a family and support the local community.

Thank you



Sincerely,

Jason A. Nichols

Forest Administrator