

The White Oak Initiative

Thinking of a white oak invokes visions of a massive and stately tree imposing itself in the woods. These marvelous trees are renowned for their strength, beauty, and value to woodland creatures and the timber industry. There is a challenge being presented to these giants of the forest, however. When we look into the woods, most of the white oaks are 50 years old or older, and there are very few oaks younger than that to replace them. Without action, this species may disappear from our forests, and the benefits of their presence will go with them. The White Oak Initiative is a group of conservation, research, and industry organizations that are teaming up to meet this threat with direct action.

The White Oak Initiative aims to ensure the long-term sustainability of America's White Oak forests, and all the gifts they provide. Folks from all walks of life formed this coalition after seeing that the future of this species was at risk due to invasive species, disease, climate change, and poor past management of forest land. Together they coordinate a large-scale response across multiple states and industries, from bourbon barrels to boats. Much of their efforts go towards helping private landowners of forestland make sustainable choices in their woods. When it comes to helping oaks on family-owned woodlots, management starts with you!

White oaks in southwest Michigan need better management too! White Oak provides nutritious forage for our native wildlife. Outdoorsmen and women in Michigan undoubtedly know the value of these acorns for keeping the white-tailed deer, turkeys, and wood ducks around. Not only that, but these trees are well-equipped to handle the effects of climate change. Their native range is far and wide, and the white oaks have a good tolerance of extreme temperatures. White oaks thrive when exposed to regular woodland fires and can manage stress from other disturbances as well. If Michigan is going to have a strong forest in this changing climate, oaks must be a part of it.

There are a wide range of activities that keep oak forests healthy and promote new growth. As mentioned previously, fire and oaks have a great relationship with each other. Using fire to promote growth of white oaks could be a great boon for you and your woods. Since European settlement in the 1800s, we have increasingly suppressed wildfires in fear of the dangers they present to property. Unfortunately this culture of fire suppression has hindered oaks' ability to regrow. In order to benefit our woods and stay safe, a trained burn crew should follow a prescribed fire plan. Luckily, Michigan has great resources to either receive your own training or to help you find trained contractors to help you out. Timber harvesting can be a good way to cause similar effects to fire, without some of the nasty side effects. Exposing the soil and getting light to the forest floor is perfect for growing new oak trees. Both actions can be thwarted by invasive species, which can take advantage of the added light and fill in a new space and more quickly than oaks. Treating your woods for invasive species before a fire or harvest can be a great first step to a healthier woodlot.

This can all be daunting to try and do all at once, so coming up with plan with sustainability in mind can help. Forest management plans are useful documents written between you and a consulting forester, that will include your goals for the woods and the prescription to reach those goals. These plans not only help you make wise decisions on your land, but can help future owners make better choices too. The Barry Conservation District can help you get the information you need to make these choices. District Forester Ben Savoie can provide free on-site assistance for landowners in Barry, Allegan, and Ottawa County. Whether you are looking for a consultant forester, need management advice, or just have some questions about the forest, Ben is available to help you. You can reach the District forester at 269-908-4134, or by email at ben.savoie@macd.org.



This month by the numbers:

Site Visits - 10
Site Visit Acreage - 317
Private Sector Referrals - 8
Private Sector Acreage - 275
Public Sector Referrals - 5
QFP Acreage - 80
Media Occurrences - 5

Open Referrals:

08-20-34 - Calhoun County, Leroy Township, woodlot of approximately 2 acres, timber harvest to finance projects on home. Forest is primarily mixed oak, Red Oak dominant.

08-20-35 - Previous forester unable to be contacted for administering planned harvest. Needs new forester to follow through.

03-20-18 - TSP needed for planning Red Pine harvest, focusing on promoting Oak regeneration. Wooded area is roughly 5 Acres

