**Louisiana Forestry Commission**

**5825 Florida Blvd.**

**Baton Rouge, LA 70806**

**March 13, 2012**

**Minutes**

**Call To Order**

The Louisiana Forestry Commission meeting was called to order by Chairman Sam Pruitt at 10:00 a.m.

**Roll Call**

The roll was called by Scarlet Arceneaux

**Members Present:** Chairman Sam Pruitt, Vice Chairman Scott Poole, Dr. Allen Rutherford, Tina Mainers, Mike Wolff

and Kenny Ribbeck.

**Not Present:** Mike Merritt

A quorum was present.

**LDAF Staff Present:** State Forester Wade Dubea, Dr. Mike Strain, Epney Brasher, Scarlet Arceneaux, Don Smith,

Charlie Greer, Mark Singleton, Randy Rentz, Gus Rowland, Kirk Casanova, Roy St. Pierre, and Paul Blair.

**Others Present:** Janet Tompkins and George Ramsey

**Approval of Minutes**

**Motion**: Dr. Allen Rutherford made a motion to approve the minutes of the meeting for Dec 12, 2011.

Vice Chairman Scott Poole seconded the motion. All were in favor.

**Budget**

Epney Brasher presented the budget issues and said that to date we are doing well. Our fuel bill is in good shape because of the rains we are having. We have cut back considerably. The districts have kept costs down to a minimum which has helped considerably.

Dr. Strain reported that at mid-term overall the department’s budget was cut by $1,133,000.00. As he left a meeting with the Division of Administration three weeks ago, the bottom line was the cut would be annually and there would be no further major reductions. Two weeks later it was presented to the appropriation committee with a budgetary cut of $4.7 million. Three million dollars of which were taken from the employees’ salaries and benefits and a three percent tax increase going from eight to eleven percent on their direct salaries and put into the general fund. They overestimated the gasoline taxes by $1.7 million dollars. Dr. Strain said he went before the Appropriations Committee and gave them a detailed explanation of the cuts that they have placed into the executive budget. He then broke it down by agency. Then he broke down the detailed cost of health, safety and commerce: What are the true costs? The Office of Forestry has $977,000.00 in the general fund. Our total state general fund this year is $10,441, 213.00. If not placed back in the budget, this will result in a loss of 14 firefighters, 2 foresters, 2 pilots, 4 aircraft, closing 29 remote offices, and an estimated economic cost (not looking specifically at the human risk) of increasing the loss in the forestry industry from $36 million a year to at least $76 million a year in timber. That is reality and that is the bottom line. There is nothing left to cut. Nothing left anywhere else that we can cut. There will be an impact to Forestry of over $36 million. We are looking at an average burn going from 13 acres to 36 acres. The current plan is, if the retirement bills pass, those cost would be borne by the employees. If the retirement bills do not pass, then the agencies will have to come up with that money, hence these cuts. There is no indication that these funds will be returned to the department. He stressed again that we must find a permanent non-general source of funding for the agency. It is most certain that we will be cut again. He urged everyone to contact your legislators. Discussion Followed.

Dr. Strain also gave an overview of each of the house bills for this fiscal year concerning Forestry. He stated that these bills are actually being updated and/or edited mostly for technical changes and to modify the bills to agree with the laws. Discussion followed on each one of the bills.

**Division Reports**

Due to time restraints Wade Dubea asked that the division reports be limited to any questions that the board may have.

Discussion followed.

**Public Comments**

Mr. George Ramsey, Chairman of Society of American Foresters came by to address the LFC. He spoke of some of the history of the SAF and previous members. He stated that their roots are in the forest and their goal is to make sure that the forest is managed for the good of society. Every acre does not have to be for production. We know and accept that there are other reasons for the forest whether in production for fiber and woods or other reasons. As far as the Office of Forestry and the Forest Commission every acre needs to be protected no matter the reason they are being used. So we all have a common goal. He wants to encourage everyone who is a member to please renew your membership. If you are a forester and not a member, please consider joining. He stated that they are not a political organization and their by-laws prohibit them from lobbying for any specific bills. We do have policy statements that we produce and we will continue to do so, we will revise our statements about biomass, property taxes, severance taxes, and inheritance taxes. Those policy statements are sent to the legislators, the governor and various people and they see them. What he wanted was to commit his organization in partnering with you and in offering our assistance to you in any way we can to promote forestry in the State of Louisiana. We have a vast depth of expertise abiding in the Society. He said that he felt that sometimes they are working in a bubble. We have a lot of good things going on now like the Forestry Awareness Program. He encouraged everyone to join us in the Society of American Foresters. You would bring experience, expertise and professionalism. On a personal note the SAF needs to get it over to our legislators that we don’t need any more cuts in Forestry. The Commissioner needs to lean on the legislature more and let them know just how important forestry is in the state to bring about some funding that we desperately need. I think the LDAF had the highest percentage of cuts in the state. It’s just terrible to know that with what we are producing in the state, forestry is half of the total commodity production of agriculture including the animal and the plant side of it. We hold a very important part in this state and in the industry. We deserve better than what we receive. We need to somehow get our message over to these legislators and to the people on of these certain committees that provide funding that we do not need any more cuts, we need more money. Wade Dubea as the State Forester needs to take a stand by letting people know how important forestry is to our state and the people of this state. Our forestry industry is important and it needs to be protected.

**Old Business**

**FPP Audit**

Dr. Strain stated that the report from the audit determined that there is no way to find out where the $3.4 million deficit in the fund went to, because the fund was scooped by the Division of Administration several times. The bottom line is that the $3.4 million dollars from severance tax is not in the fund. Dr. Strain asked, how do we pay that money back and where? Either we get an appropriation from the legislature to pay it back or we could use any “end of the year savings” from an agency with permission from the legislature to pay it back. Dr. Strain stated that he has no mechanism to pay it back without causing a deficit in another fund. Wade Dubea said that the legislative audit report verified the amount and their recommendation was that it be paid back but, they offered no mechanism to pay it back. Scott Poole asks if we could put a category on the budget to where this money will not be forgotten in years to come. Wade said he would ask our accountant to input a category on the budget sheet to reflect the amount of money when it is being paid back and when we can get money to put back into the account. It will be a slow process, unless we can find some money somewhere.

**Vision Committee**

Ms. Tina Meiners stated that they have been working since early in 2011 with a group of stakeholders and a large number of landowners; large, medium and small, with regards to the goals of the Department of Ag and Forestry. Not just today under the financial constraints that we face, but also moving forward into the future. We have been working on what we think would be our vision for the department and what it would look like in the future, assuming that the funding would be available to meet its mandates required by state law.

She stated that they have just added a cover letter to the report that was given to the LFC back in December. The body of the report basically has not changed since December 2011, when Dr. Strain and Wade Dubea were given a copy. Ms. Meiners then went over certain points of the cover letter in regards to meeting the mandates required by law with the budget cuts proposed at this time. She said that they are aware that the state is struggling to meet the financial needs with fewer funds. But the department cannot carry out its mandated responsibilities under the current budget levels and the recurring mid-year reductions. Leading then into the Vision Committee, Ms. Meiners stated that the group broke into subgroups and they identified six top priorities of the department as they identified them through their many discussions: Fire Protection, Law Enforcement, Forest Inventory, Compliance Monitoring, Education and Training, and Landowner Assistance Programs. We realize it is a large to-do list. We recognize that under the current funding levels it is impossible to meet all of these needs. So we tried to set up these priorities and look beyond the fiscal constraints we are under and try to look at some minimums we thought were appropriate by going through each of the six topic areas: What is the primary function? What is the statutory mandate? What are the key duties? What, as a Vision Committee do we feel are the minimum resources we need to be effective in that area? We didn’t get too detailed; we will leave that up to Wade Dubea. As far as wildfire size acres, we would like to see that stay at ten acres or less as landowners. What would it take to keep the average wildfire size at ten acres or less? We think under the current resources that would be very difficult to do. What are your key measures of success in each of these six areas? How do you know that you’re doing what you hope to do and meet your goals? What is your current measure based on your current resources to get that done? This is the body of the report. We have asked Wade Dubea and Dr. Strain to give this some serious consideration and lets lay out a path forward of where we are going with this information and each of these six key areas and how we are going to get there both today and in the future. Dr. Strain asked if the report could be given to the legislature and Ms. Meiners stated yes, absolutely. Discussion Followed

**Status of improving quarterly forest product reports**

Wade Dubea reported that they have made a couple of changes in practices. The reporting is supposed to come in under an anonymous manner. In some cases we know who the anonymous reporter is. If Pat Aronstein sees something on the report that is totally off the charts, then he will call the reporter and ask if it is correct or not. So Pat Aronstein has been able to correct some of that data. Most of it is just a misunderstanding of what information goes into which of the categories.

This is some of the issues we are dealing with. If the reporting does occur, if we have met our minimum number and then we get something that is way off the chart then Pat Aronstein will just disregard that. That is something that we discussed with you all prior and you all stated that that was fine. This way we are not skewing the report by what is an obvious error or miscalculation or some sort. Discussion Followed.

**Organization Chart Update**

Chairman Sam Pruitt stated that he had called Wade Dubea and wanted him to mention today about the organization chart and how the interaction of the organization chart across the state was going. Wade reported that he has traveled to the Columbia and also the Monroe nurseries recently, and to the Haughton, Monroe and Natchitoches offices. This is something he feels is important and getting to the field office is very important. If he cannot get out to the offices he will send emails out to the employees and make sure everyone is being heard in dealing with the day to day issues and assignments that we have. Discussion Followed

**New Business**

No new business at this time.

**Adjournment**

**Motion:** Motion was made by Mr. Scott Poole to adjourn the meeting. Dr. Allen Rutherford seconded the motion.

All were in favor. Meeting was adjourned at 2:03 p.m.