



Backgrounder: Key Blandin Foundation public policy initiatives and Northeast Minnesota

Vital Forests/Vital Communities

VFVC has helped increase the competitiveness of the region's forest products industries, improved the economic vitality of the region's forest-dependent communities, and improved the long-term ecological health of the forests on which both depend. Specific examples include:

- Ensuring the economic, recreational and environmental vitality of more than 245,000 acres of intact forestland through three major working forest conservation easement projects of 1,600; 56,000; and 189,000 acres. This translates into support of forest industry related jobs in manufacturing, logging, equipment, and related businesses, as well as jobs in other sectors tied to the resource such as tourism, hospitality, recreation, and special forest products. These projects also ensure sustainable forestry, protect wildlife habitat and water quality, and guarantee public access on private forestland in northern Minnesota.
- Bringing additional acres of private forest land under sustainable management (through enhanced landowner engagement).
- Creating constituency and policy recommendations that resulted in the creation of the new 2c tax class of rural vacant lands, to create incentives to reduce the pace of land parcelization.
- Increasing the availability of third-party certified forest products for region's mills (whose clients demand a certified resource), including county lands (five counties now have dual group certification as a result of a collaborative certification process we made possible) and private lands (in Aitkin County, which saw the first ever group certificate for private forestland owners.)

Broadband

The goal of Blandin Foundation's broadband work is to increase access to and use of by rural Minnesotans "to increase the quality of life and economic competitiveness of Minnesota's businesses, communities and citizens."

Broadband is a critical infrastructure for economic development. USDA's Economic Research Service, for example, shows that rural communities that have greater broadband Internet access have greater economic growth. Rural counties with broadband Internet in 2000 had greater subsequent employment and income growth than similar rural counties without service. In general, ERS finds that broadband is less commonly used in rural than urban settings due to higher provision costs and more limited availability.

Northeastern communities participating in the Foundation's "Get Broadband" program include: Hibbing, Ely, Bois Forte, Bigfork, Marcell, Effie, International Falls, Moose Lake, Grand Rapids, Cohasset.

In addition, a group of Range communities formed a joint powers agreement around a failed attempt to bring an open access network to the region. The attempt, supported with financial and technical assistance from the Blandin Foundation, was disbanded in 2008 when Hibbing voted to step out.