

Summary of MFPC's position on arming Maine forest rangers

The debate about arming forest rangers has reached a new low. Some are saying that rangers are the only force holding back a host of evils, from polluted brook trout habitat to a dramatic increase in posted property. Some see Maine's landowners, state officials and co-workers at the Maine Forest Service as their enemies.

Rangers insist that guns won't damage their relationship with others in the forest community, but that's already happening and it saddens us all.

For decades, rangers, landowners, loggers, foresters and many others have been partners in the statewide effort to protect our forests. It's a success story of which we can all be proud. Maine has roughly the same amount of forestland as when Europeans arrived in the 1600s. We have more forestland certified as sustainably managed – 9.4 million acres – than any other state. About 93 percent of our forestland is privately owned and the vast majority is open to the public.

By working together, we've kept our forests healthy and available for recreation, while supporting a forest products industry that has an \$8 billion economic impact annually and supports nearly 40,000 jobs.

The Maine Forest Products Council, a not-for profit trade association formed in 1961, speaks for logging contractors, sawmills, paper mills, biomass energy facilities, pellet and furniture manufacturers, and on behalf of more than nine million acres of commercial forestland. Sustainable forests are essential to MFPC members, so they strongly support all three divisions of the Maine Forest Service, including

- Forest Health and Monitoring, which protects against insect and disease.
- Forest Policy and Management, which monitors compliance with the Forest Practices Act, provides technical assistance and educational services, reports on forest resources and responds to policy issues.
- Forest Protection, which includes the rangers, where the mission is “to protect Maine's forest resources and homes from wildfire, respond to disasters and emergencies and to enhance the safe, sound, and responsible management of the forest for this and future generations.”

MFPC members don't think guns will help rangers accomplish that mission. In fact, we believe arming rangers would create a new branch of law enforcement, diverting limited time and resources away from forest protection and in some cases altering the relationship between rangers and the forestry community.

Rangers are needed to fight forest fires, which they do exceptionally well. But fire acreage is decreasing with wetter seasons, and there are other growing threats posed by insects and diseases. Spruce budworm is attacking Quebec's forests and soon will be here. Communities across Maine are under quarantine because of the hemlock woolly adelgid. New Hampshire is already besieged by the emerald ash borer. The Asian longhorned beetle, which has claimed thousands of Massachusetts' maple trees, is a threat to Maine's hardwoods and its maple syrup industry. The forest health division will need more funding to deal with these issues.

We also see a growing need for resources in the policy and management division as the need to educate a new generation of small woodlot owners about forestry grows and salvage operations from the coming budworm epidemic require greater oversight.

Before we rush to arm 74 rangers with guns, the MFPC will continue call for the discussion about the current and future role of the MFS and how it should be configured to deal with the modern day threats to Maine's forest resources. What is the best investment of limited state funds in protecting Maine's forest resource?

Of course, we want rangers to be safe, but they already are. In the 20 years for which the state has reliable workers comp records, not one forest ranger has suffered an injury caused by violence. Although rangers already carry a weapon – pepper spray – it has only been used once, against a dog. The only forest ranger to be shot (in 1989) was backing up a sheriff's deputy. Lack of a gun wasn't the issue – the ranger was holding the deputy's shotgun when he was shot. He recovered and is still on the job. But we never want that scenario to be repeated.

MFS Director Doug Denico is determined to minimize rangers' risk. They're under orders not make arrests or venture alone into any area or situation in which they feel unsafe. He's even offered to change their uniforms, so they're not mistaken for sheriff's deputies. Walt Whitcomb, commissioner of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, has offered to create a new position, Conservation Law Officer, so some rangers can be armed and trained to handle higher risk situations, such as issuing citations or investigating arson and timber theft.

MFPC supports those efforts and hopes that rangers will continue to remain safe and to focus on protecting Maine's forests. We agree with former Conservation Commissioner Ron Lovaglio, who said, “It's not our mission to be a strike force. We have been unarmed since our beginning and we have done our job exceedingly well.”