

# SILVICULTURAL BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IMPLEMENTATION

## 2023 AUDIT REPORT



VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF  
**FORESTRY**





# INTRODUCTION

The Virginia Department of Forestry Best Management Practices Implementation Audit Program is based primarily on the Southern Group of State Foresters (SGSF) published [framework for state forestry agencies](#). This standardized protocol is intended to ensure that data collected by southern states can be combined into one report. That report is periodically compiled, prepared and submitted by SGSF to the USDA Forest Service Southern

Region and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in Atlanta, Georgia. However, this protocol is sufficiently flexible to be applied to each state's individual BMP guidelines. At the direction of the state forester, Virginia is monitoring 240 harvested tracts each year and compiling an independent annual report based on this protocol. These data are submitted periodically for the [SGSF five-year report](#).



## METHODS

Each quarter of every year, 60 tracts are selected randomly from harvests that received a VDOF final inspection two quarters previous to the audit quarter. This allows approximately three to six months between BMP implementation and the audit field visit. This timing allows for an assessment of how BMP integrity changes over time and provides for a modest sampling of silvicultural practices, such as site preparation, tree planting and weed control. VDOF is randomizing within each of the three administrative regions (Eastern, Central and Western) with the number of selected tracts proportional to the number of harvests for each sample quarter. This concentrates BMP audits in areas where most harvesting is occurring. In this, the 16<sup>th</sup> audit cycle (1st – 4th quarter, 2023), there are 240 total audits completed and the regional breakdown is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of BMP audits completed by VDOF administrative region during the audit cycle for the 2023 calendar year.

Region	Number of Audits
Central Region	107
Eastern Region	83
Western Region	50

Each audit tract will result in a “% Yes” score for each BMP category. That percentage describes what proportion of audit questions in that category that were applicable to that tract were positively fulfilled by the operator in the field. The audit questions are evaluated and answered during a field visit by one of three water quality engineers and/or 10 water quality specialists who are full-time VDOF personnel. Every auditor is regularly trained in

a group setting to maintain accuracy and consistency across the state. This enables VDOF to evaluate audit results generally by BMP category or type.

Each of the 240 tracts audited is treated as a discreet unit, and the average and median tract scores are reported as the “harvest average or median score.” Each audit is comprised of 117 questions in 10 categories (See [Audit Questions & Scores](#)). These data are also combined across all tracts, and all question responses are averaged together as a single data set by audit category and reported as the “BMP average.” This is the average percentage of “Yes” responses when all audit questions are considered together without regard for the individual tract audits. This approach attempts to more accurately describe the overall BMP condition in Virginia. This BMP average also assigns greater importance to audits that have more applicable questions. These data consist of 28,080 total questions of which 19,917 were deemed not applicable, 687 were answered “No” and 7,476 were answered “Yes.” These categories and questions relate directly to the major recommendations outlined in the BMP manual entitled [Virginia's Forestry Best Management Practices for Water Quality, 5th Edition](#) (available online.) In most cases, many questions do not apply to the specific tract. Questions or entire categories that do not apply to a tract are given a non-applicable (N/A) status and are not included for calculation of final results. This ensures that calculated averages do not reflect missing items that do not apply to the harvest.

Each individual question in the audit process is also tracked over time to determine which BMP issues in the BMP Manual are in need of improvement. This information is particularly valuable to the [SHARP Logger program](#) – an SFI industry-sponsored logger training program at Virginia Tech – to help guide future educational efforts. These data also will assist VDOF, industry and consulting personnel as they inspect tracts and assist operators on the ground.

The data for the 2023 audit are displayed as a series of tables and charts. Table 2 displays overall BMP average data for the entire state by BMP category. The data is reported as a 95% confidence interval with a 5% margin of error and was calculated according to the SGSF protocol and generally accepted statistical procedures.

While Table 2 shows statewide results, Table 3 shows the BMP average values by VDOF administrative region. These averages (Tables 2 and 3) are the result of combining questions in the categories across all 240 audits as a single complete set and averaging those questions by category. This is the best method to evaluate overall BMP issues across the state. It is important to note that when all individual harvest audit scores were simply averaged together (harvest average) the value calculated is approximately 91.7% statewide. The averages in Tables 2 and 3 address the overall BMP condition as indicated by all audits combined while the average value of the tract audits (91.6%) ignores the fact that not all audits are the same with regard to number of pertinent issues (non-N/A questions) involved and assumes all audits are of the same weight. Both values are useful and correct as long as the user understands the difference as stated above and in the previous “Methods” section.

These data indicate very little site preparation (mechanical and chemical) is taking place up to six months after harvest so caution should be used when considering the importance or value of the site preparation averages. Less than half of all audit tracts (99 of 240) had at least one stream or wetland crossing. It is apparent that three very important categories that often lead to water quality concerns – roads, crossings and skid trails – sometimes lag behind other categories with regard to implementation percentage (Tables 2 and 3). Statewide, all three categories are slightly lower than the previous year.

The histogram (Figure 1) indicates that the vast majority of tracts scored an overall implementation percentage of 81% or greater. While the overall mean BMP implementation for all tracts is 91.6% (Table 2) and the overall harvest average score is 91.7%, the harvest median score is 95.0%. Given the skewed distribution of the overall scores in Figure 1, the median is perhaps a better judge of central tendency of the tract score data. These results indicate a steady level of BMP implementation statewide over recent years, and it should be understood that random sample averages fluctuate over time and small year to year changes may not indicate a real change in BMP implementation. Any real changes will become apparent over the long term as more data are accumulated.

This audit report includes the expectation that all BMPs should be done per the manual regardless of likely impacts on water quality on each harvested tract. In most cases, BMPs that are not done do not directly impact water quality. These BMPs can be considered “luxury” BMPs as they are recommended by the manual but are not necessarily impacting water quality. Any BMP

Table 2. Statewide data for the BMP audit by BMP category. These data represent statewide averages for Virginia for the 2023 BMP audit cycle.

BMP Category	Number of Tracts	Yes (%)	Margin of Error (%)
Chemicals	1	100.0	+/- 0
Crossings	99	95.6	+/- 4.1
Decks	236	94.5	+/- 3
Fires	3	50.0	+/-57.7
Mechanical Site Prep	1	100.0	+/- 0
Planning	239	94.8	+/- 2.9
Roads	181	87.8	+/- 4.9
Skidding	239	88.7	+/- 4.1
SMZs	179	93.3	+/- 3.7
Wetlands	9	100.0	+/- 0
<b>All</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>91.6</b>	<b>+/- 3.6</b>
<b>Logging*</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>91.7</b>	<b>+/- 3.6</b>

\*Includes all categories except chemicals, fires and mechanical site prep.

Table 3. Regional data for the BMP audit by BMP category. These data represent regional averages for all three regions for the 2023 BMP audit cycle.

BMP Category	Central (% Yes)	Eastern (% Yes)	Western (% Yes)
Chemicals	100.0	N/A	N/A
Crossings	97.3	97.7	88.8
Decks	94.5	99.4	88.5
Fires	50.0	N/A	N/A
Mechanical Site Prep	N/A	100.0	N/A
Planning	92.2	99.5	91.9
Roads	84.3	93.5	87.9
Skidding	93.4	95.8	75.9
SMZs	94.9	97.7	81.7
Wetlands	100.0	100.0	N/A
<b>All</b>	<b>92.1</b>	<b>97.1</b>	<b>84.5</b>



failures on the part of the operator that directly impact water quality are noted as significant risk and active sedimentation during the audit. These singular failures are also handled through the VDOF silvicultural water quality law enforcement process according to the [Code of Virginia §10.1-1181.2](#).

The definition of significant risk describes a water quality concern that is observed on an audit tract that, due to a lack of BMPs, is causing or is likely to cause pollution. When a significant risk was noted during an audit field visit, the auditor also determined if active sedimentation was occurring. Audits that indicate a significant risk are isolated and evaluated independently of all other audits. Out of the 240 tracts in this audit cycle, there were no tracts with significant risk or active sedimentation.

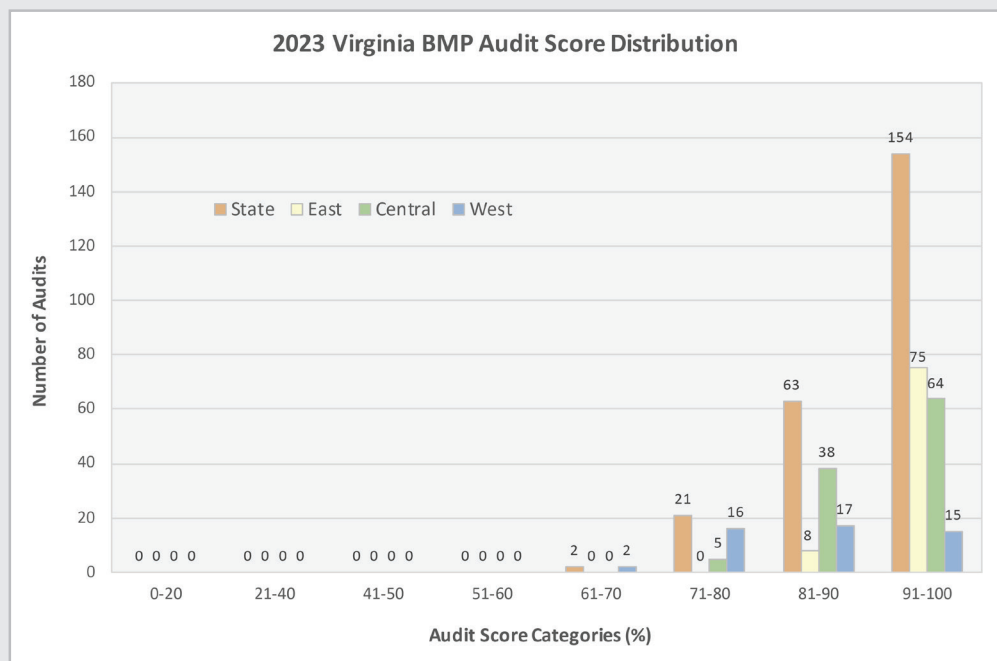
The 99 audit tracts that were located in the Chesapeake Bay watershed were isolated and averages were calculated. The Bay

harvest average score was 94.1%, and the tract median score was 95.6% while the BMP average of all the audit questions combined for all the Bay tracts was 93.4%. This is slightly better than the state as a whole.

Nearly all risks are related directly to un-stabilized, exposed soil near a waterway. Simply avoiding most operations in or near riparian areas would likely reduce risks to water quality. Minimizing roads, skid trails, decks and stream crossings would clearly be beneficial to water quality risk reduction and would also reduce the number of BMP issues that need attention during and after the operation. Specific BMP deficiencies that almost always contribute to sedimentation issues deal specifically with a lack of drainage and stabilization of roads particularly on or near to stream crossing approaches. It is critical that operators use dips, bars and turnouts to guide water off of roads and clean gravel on slopes and approaches near waterways.



Figure 1: A histogram describing the score distribution of all 240 audits for the 2023 BMP audit cycle.





Audit Questions by Category	Response Counts				% Yes
	N/A	No	Yes	Total	
<b>Chemicals</b>	<b>958</b>	<b>–</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>960</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Did applicators avoid mixing chemicals or filling equipment where runoff would likely enter a stream?	239	–	1	240	100.0
Did applicators remove all refuse from the tract?	239	–	1	240	100.0
Did chemical applicators avoid accidental drift into sensitive areas or SMZs?	240	–	–	240	N/A
Did chemical applicators avoid applying chemical directly into streams or SMZs?	240	–	–	240	N/A
<b>Crossings</b>	<b>3,802</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>725</b>	<b>4,560</b>	<b>95.6</b>
Are approaches stable and unlikely to contribute sediment to the stream?	144	1	95	240	99.0
Are culvert pipes installed properly in the channel to avoid undercutting and channel erosion?	215	3	22	240	88.0
Are culverts and bridges of adequate length?	174	2	64	240	97.0
Are culverts covered with adequate and appropriate fill material?	213	3	24	240	88.9
Are culverts covered with gravel to reduce erosion near the stream?	217	3	20	240	87.0
Are culverts properly sized according to the BMP manual Tables 6 and 7 or Talbot's formula?	219	5	16	240	76.2
Are fords used only where a natural rock base (or geoweb) and gentle approaches allow?	229	–	11	240	100.0
Are head walls stabilized with vegetation, rock or fabric to minimize cutting?	216	2	22	240	91.7
Are permanent bridge abutments adequate and stable?	237	–	3	240	100.0
Are stream banks and approaches re-claimed with sufficient vegetation, rock or slash?	154	2	84	240	97.7
Are stream crossings installed at or near to right angles where possible?	141	–	99	240	100.0
Are stream crossings minimized?	141	–	99	240	100.0
Are temporary culverts, pole bridges and bridges removed?	163	1	76	240	98.7
Are water diversion structures present when needed on approaches?	184	6	50	240	89.3
Do all ford crossings avoid restricting the natural flow of water?	229	2	9	240	81.8
Do all ford crossings have a 50-foot approach of clean gravel?	229	1	10	240	90.9
Do all ford crossings have underlying geo-textile where needed (on approaches)?	238	2	–	240	0.0
Is the addition of unnatural materials in the stream to facilitate the use of a ford minimized?	231	–	9	240	100.0
Were pole bridges used only in appropriate circumstances?	228	–	12	240	100.0
<b>Decks</b>	<b>561</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>1,511</b>	<b>2,160</b>	<b>94.5</b>
Are all decks limited in size?	4	2	234	240	99.2
Are all log decks located at least 50 feet from the nearest SMZ.	40	7	193	240	96.5
Are appropriate soil protection measures in place to prevent erosion on the deck?	36	35	169	240	82.8
Are decks reshaped where needed to ensure drainage?	122	4	114	240	96.6
Are fluid spills from equipment minimal?	5	2	233	240	99.1
Are log decks located on relatively well-drained ground with low to moderate slopes?	4	1	235	240	99.6
Are sediment trapping structures present if needed to prevent pollution?	182	3	55	240	94.8
Are water diversion structures installed to prevent water from crossing the deck?	164	26	50	240	65.8



Audit Questions by Category	Response Counts				% Yes
	N/A	No	Yes	Total	
Is the deck free of trash, garbage and other non-slash debris related to the harvest operation?	4	8	228	240	96.6
<b>Fires</b>	<b>3,582</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3,600</b>	<b>50.0</b>
Are command and staging areas located away from streams?	239	–	1	240	100.0
Are large areas of bare soil re-vegetated where slope exceeded 5%?	240	–	–	240	N/A
Are water bars installed properly on firelines, roads and cleared areas?	237	2	1	240	33.3
Did fire crew avoid plowing up and down slopes where possible?	240	–	–	240	N/A
Did fireline construction avoid disturbing existing gullies?	240	–	–	240	N/A
Did the burning crew avoid exposing large areas of mineral soil?	239	–	1	240	100.0
Did the burning crew avoid pushing firelines directly into streams?	239	–	1	240	100.0
Does fireline construction follow appropriate skid trail BMPs?	237	3	–	240	0.0
Does fireline construction divert water away from streams where necessary?	239	1	–	240	0.0
Is all fire-related debris removed from stream channels?	238	–	2	240	100.0
Is all refuse and sewage disposed of properly?	239	–	1	240	100.0
Is vegetation or slash on firelines and cleared areas to prevent erosion as needed?	237	3	–	240	0.0
Were high intensity site-prep burns kept out of the SMZs?	239	–	1	240	100.0
Were prescribed burns on fragile soils and steep slopes absolutely necessary to achieve goals?	240	–	–	240	N/A
Were steep grades and/or fragile soils protected from excessive burn and ground disturbance?	239	–	1	240	100.0
<b>Mechanical Site Prep</b>	<b>3,354</b>	<b>–</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3,360</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Are SMZs maintained with no significant disturbance?	240	–	–	240	N/A
Did all mechanical operations avoid slopes in excess of 45%?	240	–	–	240	N/A
Did all mechanical operations avoid wet or fragile ground?	239	–	1	240	100.0
Did all mechanical operations take place on the contour to the extent possible?	239	–	1	240	100.0
Did bedding contractor avoid tying beds into streams, ditches or drainage structures?	239	–	1	240	100.0
Did machine planters avoid excessive slopes?	240	–	–	240	N/A
Did operators prevent debris or soil in the stream sufficient to degrade banks or impede flow?	240	–	–	240	N/A
Did raking, piling and windrowing avoid excessive movement or exposure of mineral soil?	239	–	1	240	100.0
Did scalping, furrowing and sub-soiling avoid connections to drainages?	240	–	–	240	N/A
Is scalping and furrowing less than 6 inches deep and on the contour?	240	–	–	240	N/A
Is soil disturbance minimized across the site relative to establishment goals?	239	–	1	240	100.0
Was bedding conducted on the contour where possible?	239	–	1	240	100.0
Was machine planting done on the contour?	240	–	–	240	N/A
Was sub-soiling or ripping done on the contour?	240	–	–	240	N/A
<b>Planning</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>563</b>	<b>720</b>	<b>94.8</b>
In the case of severe site conditions (very wet or steep) was the harvesting system modified to reduce damage to soil, site and water?	122	4	114	240	96.6
Is there evidence or knowledge of a harvest plan (painted lines, flagging, delineated hazards, SMZs or decks, engineered roads, etc...)?	3	27	210	240	88.6





Audit Questions by Category	Response Counts				% Yes
	N/A	No	Yes	Total	
Is there evidence that the logger utilized a harvesting system that is generally appropriate for the site and timber conditions?	1	–	239	240	100.0
<b>Roads</b>	<b>2,730</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>1,606</b>	<b>4,560</b>	<b>87.8</b>
Are grades between 2% and 10% except for necessary deviations?	72	2	166	240	98.8
Are new roads located and constructed to allow for proper drainage?	176	4	60	240	93.8
Are new roads located to avoid erodible, wet and sensitive ground?	182	–	58	240	100.0
Are riprap and/or brush dams used where needed to slow water and trap sediment?	218	7	15	240	68.2
Are roads built outside of SMZs where possible?	124	2	114	240	98.3
Are roads daylighted where needed and feasible?	84	7	149	240	95.5
Are roads in SMZs as far from the channel as possible and built to prevent stream sedimentation?	204	1	35	240	97.2
Are roads on the contour where practical?	71	2	167	240	98.8
Are roads outsloped where needed and conditions allow?	116	16	108	240	87.1
Are temporary roads retired with properly constructed water bars or tank traps?	222	6	12	240	66.7
Are turnouts directing water and/or sediment away from riparian areas?	178	7	55	240	88.7
Are under-road culverts installed, spaced and maintained properly?	217	3	20	240	87.0
Is access being controlled with a functional gate or barrier?	77	51	112	240	68.7
Is construction of dips, bars, turnouts and traps adequate to maintain function?	178	13	49	240	79.0
Is gravel or vegetation present to protect water bars from erosion?	155	18	67	240	78.8
Is there rock or vegetation on slopes where needed to prevent erosion?	102	24	114	240	82.6
Is water being “turned out” into surrounding landscape with appropriate structures?	131	22	87	240	79.8
Is water diverted from the road surface at specified intervals using dips, bars or traps?	148	39	53	240	57.6
Was road construction and use minimized?	75	–	165	240	100.0
<b>Skidding</b>	<b>1,353</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>1,568</b>	<b>3,120</b>	<b>88.7</b>
Are all skid trails free from channelized flow that is likely to cause sedimentation?	7	10	223	240	95.7
Are all skid trails located outside the SMZ?	42	11	187	240	94.4
Are appropriate cross drainages installed where springs or seeps crossed the trails?	223	1	16	240	94.1
Are bladed skid trails limited to less than 26% grade unless absolutely necessary?	194	2	44	240	95.7
Are bladed skid trails limited to side slopes less than 60%?	201	5	34	240	87.2
Are un-bladed trails limited to side slopes less than 36% in general?	78	–	162	240	100.0
Are water bars established on trails where erosion is likely at recommended intervals?	141	40	59	240	59.6
Are water turnouts built to ensure drainage of skid trails where needed?	164	18	58	240	76.3
Did the logger avoid skidding logs through intermittent or perennial streams?	64	2	174	240	98.9
Do trails avoid long, continuous grades?	31	18	191	240	91.4
Do trails avoid rutting that will likely cause channelized erosion near a stream?	33	3	204	240	98.6



Audit Questions by Category	Response Counts				% Yes
	N/A	No	Yes	Total	
Is vegetation established where needed on trails to prevent erosion and sedimentation?	141	44	55	240	55.6
Were brush mats used to stabilize trails and prevent erosion where needed?	34	45	161	240	78.2
<b>SMZs</b>	<b>1,579</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>1,438</b>	<b>3,120</b>	<b>93.3</b>
Are all SMZs a minimum of 50 feet wide on each side of the stream bank?	61	31	148	240	82.7
Are SMZ widths modified to accommodate cold water fisheries and municipal water supplies?	237	2	1	240	33.3
Did the logger avoid exposing large sections of soil in the SMZ?	65	2	173	240	98.9
Did the logger avoid partial or patch clear cutting in the SMZ?	63	23	154	240	87.0
Did the logger avoid silvicultural debris in the stream that would warrant a law enforcement action under the "debris in the stream law?"	98	–	142	240	100.0
Did the logger avoid silvicultural sediment in the stream that might endanger public health, beneficial uses or aquatic life as stated in the "silvicultural water quality law?"	88	–	152	240	100.0
Do all intermittent and perennial streams have an SMZ?	71	10	159	240	94.1
Do all sinkholes or karst features have an SMZ?	238	2	–	240	0.0
Does at least 50% of the original basal area exist in the SMZ?	64	20	156	240	88.6
In tidal areas, has a 50-foot SMZ been maintained from the grass or marsh edge?	239	–	1	240	100.0
Is SMZ width relatively consistent along the entire length?	64	9	167	240	94.9
Is the SMZ free of roads and landings where possible?	78	3	159	240	98.1
Was exposed soil in the SMZ re-vegetated or covered with organic materials?	213	1	26	240	96.3
<b>Wetlands</b>	<b>1,872</b>	<b>–</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>1,920</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Are landings located on appropriate ground?	232	–	8	240	100.0
Did operations in wetlands avoid altering hydrology of the site to such a degree as to convert a wetland to a non wetland?	233	–	7	240	100.0
Did the operation avoid activities during particularly wet weather?	231	–	9	240	100.0
Is water movement maintained on the site?	231	–	9	240	100.0
Was low ground pressure equipment (LGP) utilized where needed?	235	–	5	240	100.0
Was the harvesting system appropriate for the site conditions?	231	–	9	240	100.0
Were the 15 mandatory road BMPs followed for wetland roads?	239	–	1	240	100.0
Were the six mandatory site-prep BMPs followed as needed?	240	–	–	240	N/A
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>19,917</b>	<b>687</b>	<b>7,476</b>	<b>28,080</b>	<b>91.6</b>

For more information about services or programs in your area, contact your local VDOF office:

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