

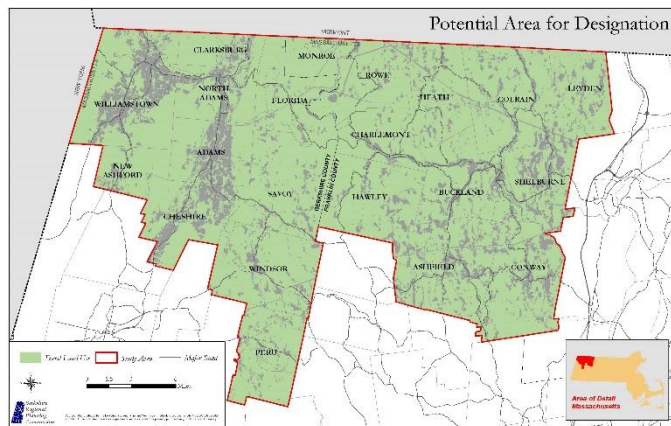
Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership

A Forest-Based Economic Development and Conservation Project

November 2015 Update

Purpose: The intent of the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Project (MTWP) is to bring recognition and additional financial and technical resources to the 21 municipalities in northwestern Massachusetts, primarily via special designation by the U.S. Forest Service and the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs to:

- Increase economic development related to forestry and natural resource based tourism
- Support the expansion of sustainable forestry practices and forest conservation on private lands
- Improve fiscal stability and sustainability of the municipalities



MTWP Study Area: The forested area in the northwestern corner of Massachusetts is the focus of the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Project. The 21-town area encompasses Adams, Cheshire, Clarksburg, Florida, New Ashford, North Adams, Peru (added October 2015), Savoy, Williamstown and Windsor in Berkshire County, and Ashfield, Buckland, Charlemont, Colrain, Conway, Hawley, Heath, Leyden, Monroe, Rowe, and Shelburne in Franklin County.

This area contains extensive natural resources. The Deerfield and Hoosic Rivers flow through expanses of northern hardwood forests, with farms and homes interspersed along mostly rural roads. The woodlands of this area provide a variety of opportunities and benefits. People are drawn to the area for its natural resource-based tourism activities such as hiking, skiing, camping, fishing and snowmobiling. A significant number of people make their living off the woodlands, whether running recreation-based businesses, cutting and selling firewood off their woodlots, harvesting timber for furniture or flooring, working as foresters or tapping sugar maples and selling maple syrup. In addition, forests provide critical ecological services including water supply recharge and protection, wildlife habitat and diversity, water and air purification, and carbon storage.

MTWP Project Team

In 2013, the Project Team, including the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG), the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC) and the Franklin Land Trust (FLT) in partnership with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) began to explore the possibility of leveraging one the region's strongest assets—its extensive mostly privately-owned woodlands—to obtain State and Federal designation. Such a designation would recognize the region's outstanding forestry resources and could bring with it economic and environmental benefits to the region, while keeping land in private ownership. In 2014, the Project Team expanded to include a liaison with the US Forest Service.

Participation

Public and stakeholder input about the potential State and Federal designation has been and still is a key component of the Project. The public process started in November 2013 with two sub-regional meetings in Berkshire and Franklin County. These meetings were followed by community meetings in each of the 20 towns in winter and spring 2014 along with meetings with key stakeholder groups. In addition to shaping the key aspects of this initiative, these meetings indicated there was support to keep pursuing this designation. The community meetings requested the creation of a Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Advisory Committee to oversee all aspects of the project. Each town has a representative appointed by the Select Board and there are eight regional appointments representing forestry, land conservation, economic development and the environment. Through regular meetings in 2014 and 2015, the Advisory Committee approved the overall project goals, provided input to the key elements of the potential State or Federal designation, and approved a project Plan.



Goals

Primary goals for the project, developed through the public participation and planning process include:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conserve forest land in private ownership to protect the region's rural character and ecological resources and to support forest based economic development• Increase sustainable forestry practices and support energy efficient renewable wood heat to reduce fossil fuel use and greenhouse gas emissions• Increase research on sustainable forestry practices and marketing and use of local forest-based products• Increase natural resource and tourism-based jobs and sustain and expand forestry and tourism businesses• Increase funding for flexible Conservation Restrictions for private landowners for sustainable forestry, habitat protection, and/or passive recreation• Increase public education about all the services that forests and forest management provide from wood products to clean air and water | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support the financial health and sustainability of communities by increasing tax revenues or other payments to towns or reducing operating costs while maintaining or improving municipal services• Provide technical assistance to private landowners to improve forest management, climate change resiliency, and to address invasive species and other threats to forest resources• Improve tourism infrastructure, including the establishment of a visitor center and/ or a technical resource center• Support local foresters who provide technical assistance to private landowners to increase forest productivity and to address invasive species and other threats to forests• Conserve forests for the ecological services they provide including water quality protection, flood control, air quality improvement, carbon sequestration, and habitat protection |
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Plan

With input from the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Advisory Committee the Project Team drafted “A Plan for Forest-Based Economic Development and Conservation” which includes the following sections:

1. Introduction and Project Background
2. Study Area
3. Public Participation Process
4. Economic Development Impacts
5. Municipal Service and Tax Impacts of Forest Conservation and Federal Designation
6. Benefits of Partnership with U.S. Forest Service and the State
7. Framework
8. Projects and Recommendations

The Draft plan can be viewed at <http://frcog.org/program-services/land-use-planning-zoning/> or <http://berkshireplanning.org/projects/working-forest-conservation-program>



Framework - The following key elements form the Framework of the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• All towns would be eligible for participation but would need to “opt in” in order to receive incentives and to allow private landowners to access funding for Conservation Restrictions (CR).• Forest land remains in private tax-paying ownership to generate revenues for the municipality.• State and Federal incentives or payments for forest Conservation Restrictions with willing sellers only – no eminent domain & no Federal right of first refusal.• Flexible Conservation Restrictions based on a model CR that allow for forest management, habitat protection, passive recreation, agricultural activities, or a combination of activities with CRs held by the State, town and/or local land trust.• Provision of tax incentives or technical assistance programs for sustainable forestry practices to private landowners and towns including preparation of forest management plans.• Promotion of forestry, forestry-related manufacturing (e.g. wood pellet facility) and/or research for new technologies related to forest-based products by providing State and Federal incentives (e.g. tax credits, grants, etc.).• Provision of incentives/funding by the State and/or the U.S. Forest Service to improve tourism infrastructure (recreational trails, access road, campground facilities), collaborative marketing of the region, tourism business training and other initiatives.• Land for a Demonstration Forest would be leased from the State, a town or private landowners. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provision of financial support by the State and/or Federal agencies for conversion of oil based heating systems in municipal buildings, schools, and other institutional facilities to wood chip or pellet based energy efficient heating systems to increase the market for low grade wood and to decrease municipal and school operating costs.• Development of a Visitor/Education/Technical Resource Center to provide: (1) public education about forest management and the ecological services that forests provide; (2) technical assistance to private landowners to increase sustainable forest management practices; (3) research and development for wood products and to address climate change and invasive species; and (4) a showcase for local wood products.• The Visitor/Education/Technical Resource Center building would be staffed and maintained by a partnership of the U.S. Forest Service and/ or the State under a long-term lease. The building and associated land would be owned by the State, a town or a private individual.• Creation of a notification process to municipalities for new Conservation Restrictions on forested land funded by the U.S. Forest Service and/or State agencies and an approval process for Towns where the amount of permanently protected open space exceeds 40% or more of the land area of the town.• Establishment of “Municipal Cooperative Agreements” that provide annual grants to participating towns to support municipal services or operations related to the MTWP program such as road maintenance, conversion to energy efficient wood based heat, or emergency response related to tourism. |
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Priorities

As recommended by the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Advisory Committee the five (5) programmatic priorities that would be given the greatest level of effort and funding are:

1. Forest Based Economic Development
2. Forest Land Conservation
3. Municipal Financial Sustainability
4. Sustainable Forestry Practices
5. Natural Resource Based Tourism

<p><u>1. Forest Based Economic Development</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interpretive Center (Public Education; Research & Development; Visitor Services; Local Wood Product Marketing)• Technical assistance to business owners (i.e. business planning)• Financial assistance to business owners (i.e. low interest loans via a revolving loan fund)• Forest Viability Program (grants provided to forest-based businesses in exchange for a temporary restriction on the development of forest land)• Cooperative marketing• Technical and financial assistance for Research and Development & new business start-ups• Renewable wood heat initiative	<p><u>2. Forest Land Conservation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Permanent Conservation Restrictions• Restriction monitoring	<p><u>3. Municipal Financial Sustainability</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Annual grants to towns for support of municipal services related to the MTWP program• Cost avoidance / reduction measures (i.e. renewable wood heat, energy efficiency, cooperative purchasing)• Recreational infrastructure maintenance
	<p><u>4. Sustainable Forestry Practices</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grants to property owners (private and municipal) for forest management plans• Grants to property owners (private and municipal) for land stewardship activities (e.g. invasive species management, climate change resiliency, habitat preservation or creation)	<p><u>5. Natural Resource-Based Tourism</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recreational infrastructure development (i.e. new trails, access points)• Recreational infrastructure maintenance• Recreational infrastructure management• Cooperative promotion• Coordination of recreational opportunities

Business Model

The intent of the proposed business model for the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership is to create a financial structure that can be self-sustaining over the long term. The proposed initial funding request of \$25 million assumes a total Federal contribution over 4 years of \$20 million and a State contribution over the same time frame of \$5 million. The bulk of the initial funding received from appropriations would be used to establish and capitalize a “Trust Fund” which would generate sufficient income by Year 5 to sustain key elements of the program over the long term. After the initial appropriations, funding via grants, donations and other income generating activities would be more heavily relied on to sustain and supplement programmatic activities.

In addition to establishing the Trust Fund, the other major expenditures during the first five years would be:

1. Design, construction and operation of a multi-purpose “Center” that would provide: a.) tourism services; b.) technical assistance to private forest landowners to implement sustainable forestry practices; c.) opportunities for research and development to address climate

change, invasive species or to develop new wood based products; d.) a marketing program and gallery to promote the sale of local wood products; and e.) public education about the ecological benefits of forest management.

2. Protection of approximately 1,800 acres of forest land via conservation restrictions with willing landowners with land remaining in private ownership and on the tax rolls.
3. Capitalization of a Revolving Loan Fund to support forestry businesses.
4. Creation and implementation of a Forest Viability Program with grants provided to forest-based businesses in exchange for a temporary restriction on forest land.
5. Establishment of “Municipal Cooperative Agreements” that provide annual grants to participating towns to support municipal services or operations related to the program such as road maintenance, conversion to energy efficient wood based heat, or emergency response related to tourism.
6. Grants or technical assistance to private landowners to prepare forest management plans and implement recommendations.
7. Grants for natural resource-based recreational development or promotion.

Decision Making

Currently this effort is under the direction of the Mohawk Trail Advisory Committee, which has representation from 20 of the 21 towns and 8 regional members representing forestry, economic development, conservation and regional planning. If this program is adopted by the towns, the State and the Federal government, a long-term “governance” structure will be necessary that would be responsible for making key decisions and implementing the business plan. The intent of the governance structure is to emphasize local participation and decision making for municipalities that “opt-in” to the program while at the same time fully engage the other partners, including the U.S. Forest Service, State agencies, and other regional organizations. The proposed governance structure is being developed and several models are being considered. It is likely the governance structure will contain two key elements: a decision making body which would be responsible for higher level policy decisions; and an implementing organization which would be responsible for the more day-to-day administrative activities. For example, it could be organized as a non-profit agency created by Special Legislation that would enter into a Partnership agreement with the U.S. Forest Service and the State.

The structure ultimately created would be staffed by an Executive Director and an Administrative Assistant. As proposed, the staff would also be supported by at least one (1) high level staff person from the U.S. Forest Service that ideally would be located at the Center. The staff person’s salary would be funded by the U.S. Forest Service and they would coordinate services and technical assistance in coordination with the Executive Director. The U.S. Forest Service could also partner with the State or a private landowner to establish a “Demonstration Forest” for sustainable forest management practices that would be open to the public. Annual budget and funding decisions for the programmatic priorities identified above would be determined by the “decision making body” of the entity established by Special Legislation which would have town representation to ensure a strong local voice.

Upcoming Activities

The ultimate success of the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership depends on the evolving partnerships that have been developed through the initial planning process. The next steps are intended to continue to strengthen those partnerships:

- Continued MTWP Advisory Committee meetings
- Continued meetings with U.S. Forest Service officials
- Subregional meetings – Fall – 2015 to present the Plan, its findings and recommendations to the general public
- Community meetings with each municipality's Select Board / City Council in Winter – early Spring 2016 to determine support for the special designation. Communities can opt-in by having the Select Board, Mayor, Town Meeting or City Council vote to opt-in.
- With support from a substantial number of the 21 communities, seek State legislation creating a State designation
- With the approval of State legislation, seek Federal legislation creating a Federal designation



Significant Accomplishments

The Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership has already yielded immediate benefits and has leveraged these grants.

- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (US Department of Agriculture): In January 2015, Massachusetts DCR was awarded \$637,860 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP). The funding will support the communities in the region and local landowners by helping to integrate sustainable forestry, enhanced forest habitat and energy practices.
- Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources (DOER): DOER initiated its \$350,000 feasibility study to work with the MTWP-town region to evaluate the potential for expanding the use of energy efficient renewable wood heating systems and the feasibility of a establishing a wood pellet manufacturing facility to support demand for this wood heat.
- United States Forest Service: The Massachusetts Forest Alliance was awarded \$250,000 from the U.S. Forest Service to create a Wood Energy Action Team. The program will reach out to potential users of wood energy in the MTWP-town region to explain why wood energy is beneficial as well as economical, and will produce web-based marketing materials geared toward residential installations.

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