

Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership - DECEMBER 2018 UPDATE

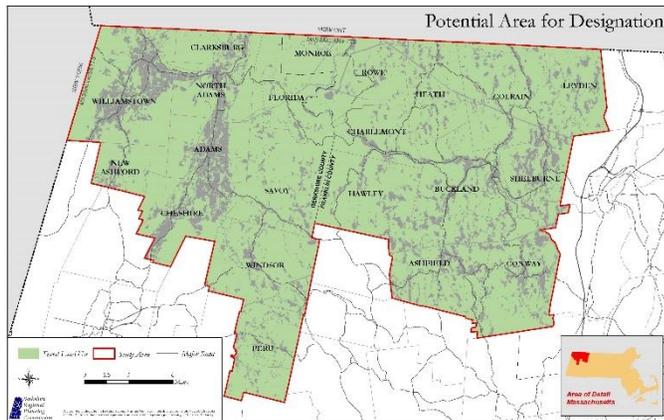
A Forest-Based Economic Development and Conservation Project



Purpose: To bring recognition and additional financial and technical resources to 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 sustainable economic development related to forestry and natural resource based tourism
- Support forest conservation on private lands and use of sustainable forestry practices
- Improve fiscal stability and sustainability of the municipalities

MTWP Study Area: The 21-town MTWP area in the northwestern corner of Massachusetts is roughly 82% forested, and 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.



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. Forests provide critical ecological services including water supply recharge and protection, wildlife habitat and diversity, water and air purification, and carbon sequestration.

MTWP STATE LEGISLATION STATUS

State legislation creating a special designation for the 21-Town region and establishing the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership passed as part of the State Environmental Bond Bill this summer. This accomplishment is the result of four years of work by the MTWP Advisory Committee who collaboratively drafted the legislation with support from the project team.

NEXT STEPS

Communities within the 21-Town region need to opt-in to the partnership through a vote by the Select Board, Mayor, or Town Meeting. At least 11 towns must opt-in before the MTWP Board can be established.

MTWP PROJECT WEBSITE

To learn more about the project, find a copy of the legislation, or contact project team partners, please visit:

mohawktrailwoodlandpartnership.org



A NEW ERA FOR WOOD BUILDING CONSTRUCTION



Photo Credit: P. Clouston

Professor Peggi Clouston from the UMass Amherst Department of Building and Construction Technology presented at the July 17, 2018 MTWP Advisory Committee meeting about the future of building with wood. UMass' Wood Mechanics Lab (above) is testing eastern Hemlock and eastern White Pine for use as Cross Laminated Timber (CLT). CLT is pre-fabricated wood panels that are being used instead of steel and concrete in new buildings around the world. More testing is needed, but Prof. Clouston said it is promising that her lab will be able to design a local species CLT that can compete with other CLT products.

THE BERKSHIRE HIGH ROAD VISION

Berkshire Natural Resource Council's Jenny Hansell spoke to the MTWP Advisory Committee at the July meeting about the Berkshire High Road. Berkshire County has over 240,000 acres of conserved land, but it's fragmented. The High Road is a county-wide conservation and trail vision that would connect open space and town centers, and would be a draw for tourists and residents. BNRC is seeking help with identifying conservation and trail opportunities at the local level.



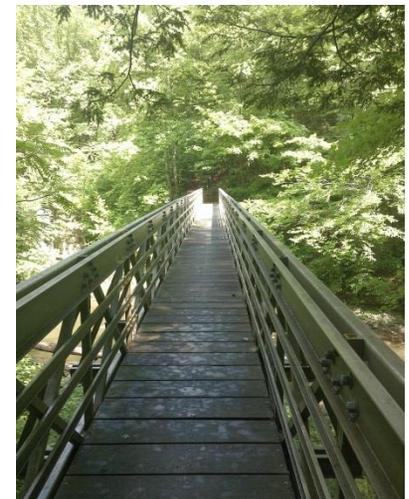
Project Background: Public and stakeholder input about the potential State and Federal designation has been and still is a key component of the Project. **Over 60 community meetings** open to the public have occurred since the start of the project to discuss and shape the project and get feedback. The project team - 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) – initiated the project in 2013 with regional and town-by-town public outreach sessions. Input from these sessions helped shape the project plan and goals.

A key recommendation from the community meetings was the formation of an Advisory Committee to help oversee the creation of a plan and the specifics of any designation. The **MTWP Advisory Committee** has met regularly since 2014 to craft a project plan, the State legislation, and a draft business plan and governance structure. The Committee is currently comprised of representatives from 20 of the 21 towns, appointed by the Select Board or Mayor, and regional appointments representing land conservation, economic development, forestry, and the environment. In 2014, the project team expanded to include a liaison with the U.S. Forest Service.

The MTWP Advisory Committee recommended five (5) programmatic priorities that would be given the greatest level of effort if State and Federal funding is secured:

- Forest Land Conservation
- Municipal Financial Sustainability
- Sustainable Forestry Practices
- Forest Based Economic Development
- Natural Resource Based Tourism

These funding priorities were identified through the public outreach process and research conducted by the project team. Each programmatic priority has specific implementation activities (outlined on pages 3 and 4).



State and Federal Legislation: In 2016, project team members met with 20 of the 21 towns to gauge interest in proceeding with a special designation for the region, to be created through State and Federal legislation. Most of the towns provided **letters of support** for proceeding with the State legislation. The Advisory Committee and project team prepared a draft of State legislation that would create the Partnership according to the goals and framework outlined in the plan. The legislation was filed with the Massachusetts legislature in January 2017 by legislators representing the region. A Public Hearing on the proposed MTWP legislation was held in Boston at the State House on October 10, 2017 by the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Natural Resources and the Environment. Members of the MTWP Advisory Committee attended the hearing to testify in support of the MTWP legislation. Revisions were proposed to the legislation in January 2018 to address comments from the Public Hearing, and in March 2018, the revised legislation was reported out of Committee favorably. In July 2018, the legislation passed as part of the Environmental Bond Bill. Each town now has the opportunity to “opt-in” to formally join the Partnership via a vote of the Select Board or Town Meeting. If at least 11 of the 21-towns opt-in, the MTWP Board can be established (see page 4), and Federal legislation would be pursued based on the State legislation.

Funding and Business Model: By creating a special designation, the MTWP could receive State and Federal funding to support the goals of the partnership. The proposed funding request of \$30 million assumes a total Federal contribution over 4 years of \$24 million and a State contribution over the same timeframe of \$6 million. The intent of the proposed business model for the MTWP is to create a financial structure that can be **self-sustaining** over the long term. The bulk of the initial funding received would be used to establish and capitalize an “Investment 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 needed to supplement some programmatic activities. The State legislation established an MTWP Fund, but did not provide an appropriation.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS OF THE UMASS WOOD HEAT & AIR QUALITY STUDY

At the October 16, 2018 MTWP Advisory Committee meeting, UMass Amherst Professor Rick Peltier presented preliminary findings from air quality testing conducted at sites using commercial-scale modern wood pellet boilers. A truck outfitted with sampling equipment was used at 6 sites in western MA from March 2017 to May 2018. UMass is still analyzing the large amounts of data collected. More complete findings will be available in the spring.

THE IMPACT OF FOREST MANAGEMENT & LAND USE DECISIONS ON FOREST CARBON

UMass Amherst Extension Professor Paul Catanzaro offered preliminary analysis of impacts on forest carbon from different harvest scenarios. Catanzaro provided management considerations to promote carbon sequestration and storage, including: using forestry BMPs to protect soil during harvests; maintaining a balance of large, old trees which store more carbon, and young, fast growing trees which sequester more carbon; and extending harvest cycles to 15-20 years.

Converting forests to other land uses results in a higher reduction of on-site carbon with no return to pre-harvest conditions. With 70% of forests in MA owned by families and individuals, decisions these owners make about their land have a large impact on forest carbon now and in the future.



SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The MTWP has leveraged these grants:

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (USDA): Through the RCPP, MA DCR, the Mass Woodlands Institute, Mass Audubon, and the Mass Forest Alliance assisted 33 landowners in receiving a bird habitat assessment and forest stewardship plan for their land, totaling 4,144 acres. Landowners may receive funding through the Natural Resource Conservation Service to implement items from these plans, including treating invasive plants, patch cuts to create early successional forest habitat, brush management, and forest stand improvement.

Voluntary Public Access / Habitat Improvement Program (USDA): The Franklin Land Trust, in partnership with MA DCR, Mass Forest Alliance, and the Berkshire Natural Resources Council, has launched the Voluntary Access Program, providing funds for temporary (10 year) and permanent easements to allow the public to hunt, fish, hike, or view wildlife on private land. To date, two temporary projects have been finalized - a 177 ft. fishing access trail and hunting and wildlife viewing on 13 acres in Colrain, and a 0.7 mile hiking trail in Shelburne. For more information visit www.franklinlandtrust.org/vpa

Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources (DOER): DOER has engaged the UMASS Clean Energy Extension (CEE) to conduct a study of heat demand in the region and potential air quality impacts of energy efficient wood heat. This study will provide important information to any town considering converting from oil to energy efficient wood heat.

Other proposed expenditures if funding is received are:

1. Design, construction and operation of the Mohawk Trail Forest Center, a multi-purpose facility that would provide: a.) tourism services; b.) technical assistance to private forest landowners and businesses 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 2,100 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 and natural resource based businesses.
4. Creation 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 goals of the Partnership such as road maintenance or tourism-related emergency response.
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 MTWP Advisory Committee. As the program moves forward, a long-term “governance” structure with strong local representation will be responsible for making key decisions and implementing the plan.

If funding can be secured, the MTWP would be staffed by an Executive Director and an Administrative Assistant. As proposed, 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 Mohawk Trail Forest Center. This staff person is expected to be funded by the U.S. Forest Service and would coordinate services and technical assistance with the Executive Director. The U.S. Forest Service could also partner with the State, a Town or a private landowner to establish a “Demonstration Forest” for sustainable forest management practices that would be open to the public.