

Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership - MAY 2018 UPDATE

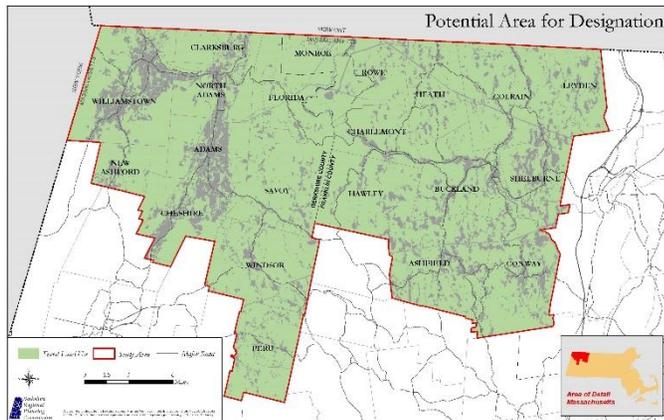
A Forest-Based Economic Development and Conservation Project



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 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.

NEW MTWP PROJECT WEBSITE!

A new website has been created to provide the public with information about the MTWP project:

mohawktrailwoodlandspartnership.org



MTWP STATE LEGISLATION STATUS

With letters of support from most of the towns, State legislation was filed by our legislative delegation in January 2017 to create a Special Designation of the 21-Town region. The legislation was assigned to the Environment, Natural Resources, and Agricultural Committee. After review and revisions the legislation was favorably reported out of Committee in March 2018. Revisions to the legislation unanimously adopted by the MTWP Advisory Committee in January 2018 included:

- More strongly emphasizing the importance of carbon storage and sequestration
- Requiring sustainable forest management practices for any management activities related to the Partnership
- Establishing a minimum threshold of communities (11 of the 21) that must “opt-in” before actions can be taken
- Expanding the Partnership Board to include experts in public health and forest ecology / climate change
- Clarifying that funds will not be used to construct or operate a wood pellet manufacturing plant

OUTDOOR RECREATION & NATURAL RESOURCE BASED TOURISM & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Presenters at the October 2017 MTWP Advisory Committee meeting focused on opportunities and challenges to natural resource based economic development in the region. Visitors who seek rural experiences are a major part of the regional economy according to the first speaker, Whit Sanford, from the Greater Shelburne Falls Area Business Association (GSFABA). The GSFABA works with businesses to provide these types of experiences, and holds a West County Tourism Day for businesses to come together to network.

Berkshire East Ski Area now receives more revenue in the summer than during the ski season according to owner Jon Schaefer. This success is a result of investments made to the business since 2008, including: a mountain bike park -- ranked best mountain bike park on the East coast; three zip line tours; an aerial adventure park; white water rafting; and a mountain coaster. Schaefer noted that the region is accessible to a lot of people in nearby metro areas, but has just been overlooked. Marketing is very important, and with coordinated efforts, the region could pull in much more tourism revenue.



Zip lining at Berkshire East. Photo credit: Berkshire East

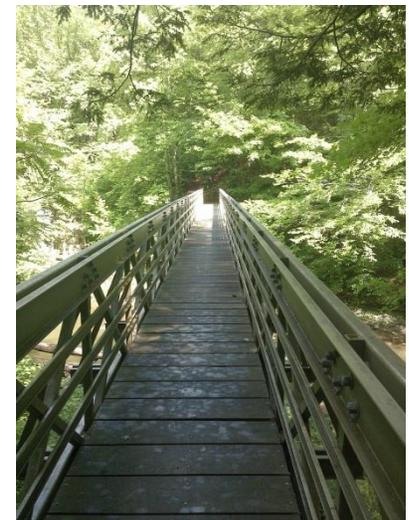
Project Background: Public and stakeholder input about the potential State and Federal designation has been and still is a key component of the Project. **Over 50 community meetings** open to the public have occurred since the start of the project to discuss and shape the project and get feedback. The 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 19 of the 21 towns, appointed by the Select Board, 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 have 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. If State legislation is passed, each town would have the opportunity to “opt-in” to formally join the Partnership via a vote of the Select Board or Town Meeting. If enough of the 21-towns opt-in, Federal legislation would be pursued that would be based on the State legislation.

Funding and Business Model: By creating a special designation, the MTWP could then 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.

Other proposed expenditures if funding is received are:

- I. 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

WILDLANDS & WOODLANDS: A VISION FOR THE NEW ENGLAND LANDSCAPE

David Foster, Director of Harvard Forest in Petersham, presented past and present forest trends and a vision for the future at the January 9, 2018 MTWP Advisory Committee meeting. Foster outlined the history of forests in the northeast, where deforestation reached a peak in the mid 1800s. With industrialization and agricultural expansion to the west, forests began reclaiming the land and have been growing from the 1850s to now. More recently, a second wave of deforestation is occurring due to development. This phase is a “hard” conversion, whereas the first phase was a “soft” conversion of forest that allowed for eventual regrowth.

The Wildlands & Woodlands (W&W) vision is to permanently conserve 70% of forests in New England. The vision calls for 10% of the conserved forests to be set aside as large wildland reserves, while 90% of conserved forests could be sustainably managed woodlands. The vision allows for development to continue, but in a way that avoids forest conversion to development.

Foster noted that we can use our forest resource more than we currently do, placing less environmental pressure on forests elsewhere while supporting local economies. Efforts should focus on being engaged in the process of managing forests well. See <http://www.wildlandsandwoodlands.org/> for more information.



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 the economic feasibility 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.

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 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 MTWP Advisory Committee. If the program moves forward, a long-term “governance” structure would be responsible for making key decisions and implementing the plan. The proposed governance structure contains two key elements: a decision making body responsible for higher level policy and programmatic decisions; and a non-profit organization responsible for the day-to-day administrative, financial and implementation activities. Annual budget and funding decisions for the programmatic priorities would be determined by the “decision making body” which would have town representation to **ensure a strong local voice.**

The non-profit 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 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.