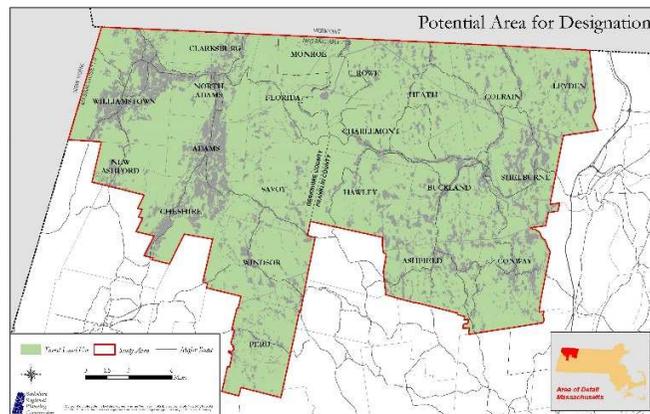


Purpose: The intent of the locally driven Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Project (MTWP) is to bring recognition and additional financial and technical resources to 21 municipalities in northwestern Massachusetts, primarily via special designation by the U.S. Forest Service and the Massachusetts Executive 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 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 and is roughly 82% forested. 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 of the region's strongest assets—its extensive mostly privately-owned woodlands—to obtain a 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 U.S. 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. 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 initial community meetings requested the creation of a Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Advisory Committee to oversee all aspects of the project. Twenty of the 21 towns have a representative appointed by the Select Board and there are regional appointments representing land conservation, economic development, forestry, planning and the environment. Through regular meetings from 2014 to 2016, 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. In addition to a Plan that was completed in December 2015 (updated October 2016), a Draft Business Plan, Potential Governance Structure and Draft State legislation have been developed.



In 2016, project team members met with 20 of the 21 towns and to date nineteen towns have provided a letter of support for proceeding with the special 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 below. The legislation was filed with the Massachusetts legislature in January 2017 by legislators representing the region.

Goals: Primary goals for the project, developed through the public participation and the 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 explore energy efficient renewable wood heat to reduce fossil fuel use, retain rural jobs, and keep more fuel dollars in the local economy • 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 the Mohawk Trail Forestry 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 completed in December 2015 (updated in October 2016) “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 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 technical assistance programs for sustainable forestry practices to private landowners and towns including preparation of forest management plans. • Support of sustainable forestry, forestry-related businesses and research for new technologies related to forest-based products by providing economic incentives (e.g. low interest loans, 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 and other initiatives. • Land for a Demonstration Forest could be leased from the State, a town or private landowners. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study of the economic feasibility and potential air quality impacts of converting oil based heating systems in municipal buildings, schools, and other institutional facilities to wood chip or pellet based energy efficient heating systems to decrease municipal and school operating costs. • Development of Mohawk Trail Forestry 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 Mohawk Trail Forestry 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 an approval process by a town for any new Conservation Restrictions on forest land funded under the MTWP program for towns where the amount of permanently protected open space exceeds 40% or more of the land area. • Establishment of “Municipal Cooperative Agreements” that provide annual grants to participating towns to support municipal services or operations related to the MTWP program. |
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Priorities: The Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Advisory Committee recommended five (5) programmatic priorities that would be given the greatest level of effort and funding. They are:

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| 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"> • Mohawk Trail Forestry 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 • Study of renewable energy efficient wood heat 	<p><u>2. Forest Land Conservation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent Conservation Restrictions • Restriction monitoring <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>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 studies (e.g. renewable energy efficient wood heat, energy efficiency) • Recreational infrastructure maintenance <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
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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 \$30 million assumes a total Federal contribution over 4 years of \$24 million and a State contribution over the same time frame of \$6 million. The bulk of the initial funding received from appropriations 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 more heavily relied on to sustain and supplement programmatic activities.

In addition to establishing the Investment Trust Fund, the other proposed expenditures if funding is received are:

- I. Design, construction and operation of the Mohawk Trail Forestry 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 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 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 Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Advisory Committee, which has representation from 20 of the 21 towns and regional members representing forestry, economic development, conservation, regional planning and the environment. If this program is adopted by the towns in partnership with the State and the U.S. Forest Service, a long-term “governance” structure would be responsible for making key decisions and implementing the plan. The proposed governance structure emphasizes local participation and decision making for those municipalities that “opt-in” to the program while at the same time fully engaging the other partners, including the U.S. Forest Service, State agencies, and other regional organizations. The proposed governance structure contains two key elements: a decision making body which would be responsible for higher level policy and programmatic decisions; and an implementing non-profit organization which would be responsible for the day-to-day administrative, financial and implementation activities.

The structure proposed to be 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 Mohawk Trail Forestry Center. This 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, a Town or a private landowner to establish a “Demonstration Forest” on State, Town or privately owned land 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 planning process. The next steps are intended to continue to strengthen those partnerships:

- Continued MTWP Advisory Committee and community meetings
- Continued meetings with U.S. Forest Service officials
- Support State legislation creating a Special Designation of the region
- Once 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



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 in partnership with the Franklin Land Trust was awarded \$637,860 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). The funding is supporting the communities in the region and local landowners by helping to integrate sustainable forestry, enhanced wildlife habitat and renewable energy.
- Voluntary Public Access/Habitat Improvement Program (US Department of Agriculture): In September 2015, Massachusetts DCR in partnership with the Franklin Land Trust was awarded \$836,000 to offer incentives to private landowners in the MTWP region who are implementing wildlife habitat projects to open their land to fishing, hunting and wildlife viewing for these private demonstration forests. The public access rights will be for 10 years or more depending upon the incentive offered.
- 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 that may want to consider converting from oil to energy efficient wood heat. The UMASS research also includes a feasibility study of the economic, environmental and land use impacts of a community scale wood pellet manufacturing facility.

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