

Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership

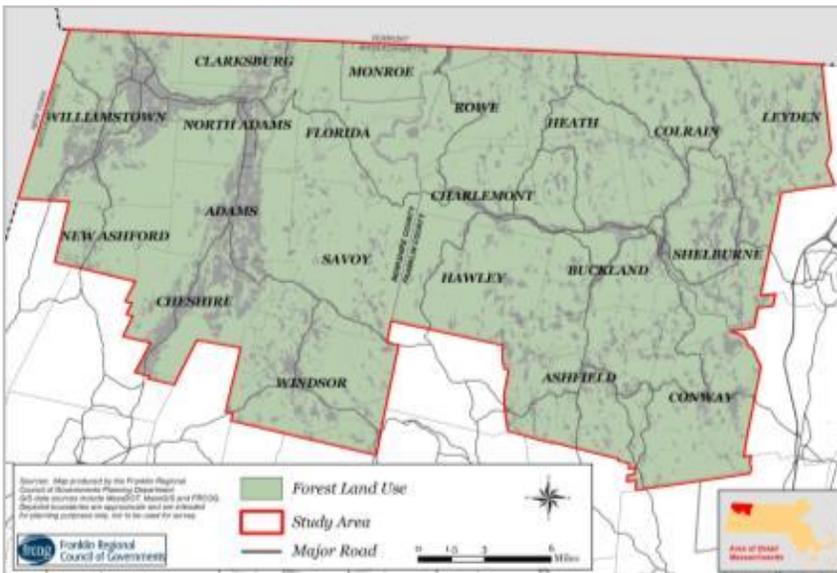
A Forest-Based Economic Development and Conservation Project

December 2014 – Project Update



Project Background

The Northwestern corner of Massachusetts is comprised of outstanding 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 from local wood products to ecological services. 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.



This remarkable forested area is the focus of the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Project, specifically the 20-town area encompassing Adams, Cheshire, Clarksburg, Florida, New Ashford, North Adams, Savoy, Williamstown and Windsor in Berkshire County, and Ashfield, Buckland, Charlemont, Colrain, Conway, Hawley, Heath, Leyden, Monroe, Rowe, and Shelburne in Franklin County. The intent of the Project is to increase forest based economic development and conservation. The Project was brought about in part as a response to public input in recent regional sustainability plans. In Sustainable Franklin County: A Regional Plan for Sustainable Development, protecting forests is identified as one of the public's top natural resource goals and promoting economic development in the forestry sector is a key recommendation. In Sustainable Berkshires, the report calls for improving land conservation and management capacity countywide and recognizes the value of nature-

based businesses, such as forest products and tourism. 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 a 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.

Public input about the potential Federal designation is a key component of the Project. The public process kicked-off in November 2013 with two sub-regional meetings in Berkshire and Franklin County, followed by community meetings in each of the 20 towns in winter and spring 2014. Through these public outreach events, the project team is working to determine the level of interest in the project and potential designation among community leaders, residents, natural resource-based businesses, foresters and private landowners. Throughout the course of the planning process, public input and conversations with key forestry stakeholders is shaping the strategies and recommendations of the project. As requested during the community meetings, a Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Advisory Committee has been formed 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. The Advisory Committee has met in September and November 2014 and will meet next in January 2015. They have four principal responsibilities:

- review and provide comments on the Plan being prepared by the FRCOG, BRPC and the FLT which will include recommended projects and strategies to support forest conservation and economic development;
- review and provide input on the goals of the project and key elements of any federal or state designation;
- communicate the progress of the project to the Select Board or regional organization they represent including the recommended projects and strategies; and
- assist with the drafting of State legislation if enough towns would like to proceed with a Federal designation based upon the key elements developed.

Once a Draft Plan is prepared, subregional meetings will be held in Spring 2015 to present the Plan, its findings and recommendations. The subregional meetings will be followed by meetings with each community's Select Board.

Summary of Purpose and Benefits

The purpose of a Federal forest designation is to bring recognition and additional financial and technical resources to the 20-town region, primarily via the U.S. Forest Service and the Massachusetts EEA. A Federal designation could provide funding to conserve forests, increase economic development related to sustainable forestry practices, forest-based businesses and recreational tourism, and to improve the fiscal stability of municipalities. Potential benefits of the project include funding for specific activities such as a feasibility study for conversion of municipal buildings and schools to renewable energy efficient wood based heat, a feasibility study for a wood pellet manufacturing plant, creation of new hiking trails, technical assistance for expanding local wood products markets, assistance with forestry-related business plans, funding for forest management plans, and payments to willing landowners for conservation restrictions to permanently protect forests.

For more information contact Peggy Sloan, FRCOG psloan@frcog.org or Tom Matuszko, BRPC tmatuszko@berkshireplanning.org.

