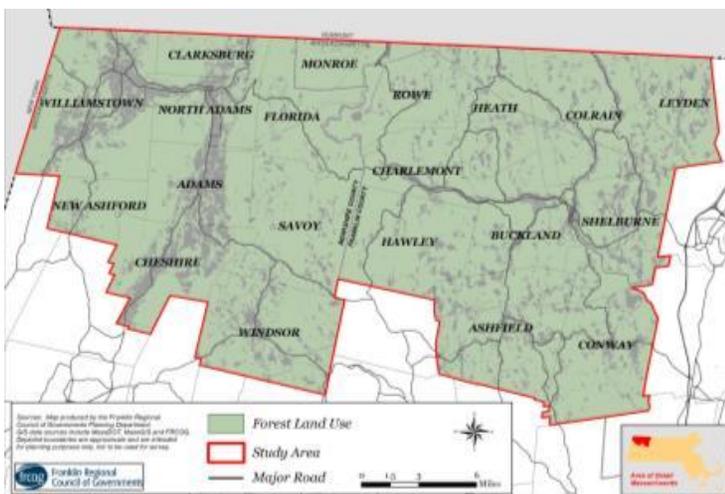


Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership

A Forest-Based Economic Development and Conservation Project

April 2015 – Quarterly Project Update



Project Background

A forested area in the northwestern corner of Massachusetts is the focus of the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Project. This 20-town area encompasses Adams, Cheshire, Clarksbury, 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 Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Project is to increase forest-based economic development, conservation of forest land and sustainable forestry practices. 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 supporting one 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.

Activities – November 2013 – December 2014

Public and stakeholder input about the potential Federal designation is a key component of the Project. The public process started in November 2013 with two sub-regional meetings, one each 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, input from these meetings indicated there was support to keep exploring a "Special" Federal designation. The designation would not result in a National Forest but would create a new model based on private ownership of forests. Public input from community meetings also resulted in 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. The Advisory Committee met in September and November 2014 and approved the overall project goals, provided input to the key elements of any state or federal designation, approved the outline for an accompanying Plan, provided input to a model Conservation Restriction to be used for land conservation and discussed possible economic benefits from a designation.

Activities – January 2015 – March 2015

With input from the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Advisory Committee, which held meetings in January, February and March, the Project Team drafted “A Plan for Forest-Based Economic Development and Conservation”. The Plan 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/publication/view/mohawk-trail-woodlands-partnership-project-draft-chapters/> or <http://www.berkshireplanning.org/projects/working-forest-conservation-program/>



Other significant accomplishments - The Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership has already yielded immediate benefits.

- **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 (RCPP). The funding will support the communities in the region and local landowners by helping to integrate sustainable forestry, enhanced forest habitat and renewable energy practices.
- **Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources(DOER):** DOER initiated its \$350,000 feasibility study to work with the 20-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 20-town region to explain why wood energy is beneficial as well as economical, and will produce web-based marketing materials geared toward residential installations.

Upcoming Activities

- Continued Advisory Committee meetings - approval of the Draft plan
- Subregional meetings will be held in early Summer 2015 to present the Plan, its findings and recommendations.
- The subregional meetings will be followed by meetings with each community’s Select Board in late Summer – early Fall 2015.

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