

NEW ENGLAND SCIENTISTS CALL FOR FOREST CONSERVATION

BY CANDACE PAGE, FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • THURSDAY, MAY 20, 2010

A group of scientists from across New England called Wednesday for permanent conservation of 90 percent of the region's 33 million acres of forest, saying the economic, environmental and cultural benefits of a forested landscape are threatened by subdivision and development.

About 27 million acres should be conserved as working woodlands, producing wood products and local jobs. Another 3 million acres should be protected as "wildlands," largely free of human management, the scientists said.

This conservation effort would depend largely on private conservation easements, government incentives and voluntary actions by landowners. The greatest proportion of protected land would lie in northern Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont, where forest cover is most extensive.

"The first time New Englanders confronted a forest landscape they largely cut it down," David Foster, director of Harvard University's Harvard Forest and an author of the report said at a morning news conference. "History has now offered us an opportunity to act differently."

Even with this massive conservation effort, the amount of developed land in the region still could double, according to the report.

While the researchers' proposal is more specific, it echoes the sentiments of a blue ribbon [commission](#) appointed by the six New England governors in 2008.

That commission last year issued a call to "keep forests as forests" and recommended similar public-private partnerships to protect the working landscape.

These calls are driven by growing concern over the loss of regional forest cover. After dramatic deforestation by settlers and lumbermen in the 1700s and 1800s, much of New England's woodlands had grown back by the late 20th century. Vermont, for example, is 75 percent forested.

Today, forest cover is declining in all six states — and that decline is expected to accelerate in coming years.

In Vermont, the scientists said, 30 to 40 percent of private forest land in northwestern and central Vermont is likely to be subdivided for development between 2000 and 2030.

'A wake-up call' for New England

The scientists' report, "Wildlands and Woodlands: A Vision for the New England Landscape," goes beyond the usual academic research and analysis to advocate action and changes in public policy.

Bill Keeton, a forest ecologist at the University of Vermont, contributed to the report. He said he sees it not so much as advocacy, but as carrying out scientists' responsibility to warn the public about the causes and consequences of forest loss.

"We are issuing a wake-up call based on the best available science. There are imminent threats to the forest that the science says should be of concern because they have a whole host of consequences for economic and ecological values," he said.

At stake are benefits that humans may take for granted. Large, well-managed blocks of forest are an important part of the New England economy, providing jobs that underpin some rural communities. In Vermont, the state Forestry Division found that the state's forests contributed \$1.5 billion to the state's economy in 2005.

Forestland provides critical "services" to civilization, from protecting abundant clean water supplies to sequestering carbon that otherwise would contribute to climate change, to providing a place for hunting, fishing and other recreation.

When forestland is subdivided for development — even the large-lot subdivisions that characterize much homebuilding in rural Vermont — fragmentation threatens and sometimes cancels those benefits.

The Harvard Forest report urges residents of suburban areas to keep 25 percent of land in forest cover; residents of rural agricultural areas to set a 50 percent goal. In northern Maine and parts of northern New Hampshire and Vermont, conserving the great blocks of forest land that cover 90 percent or more of the region should be the goal, they said.

'Keep forests as forests'

To keep the region's forests, states and conservationists need a full quiver of tools, the authors said.

One key will be assembling partnerships in which groups of landowners jointly agree to conserve their land, often by [selling](#) conservation

easements. Vermont has seen several such projects, including the Orange County Headwaters, in which more than 30 landowners have pledged to conserve 4,500 wooded acres.

"We have to do something other than conservation one project at a time," Lynn Lyford, executive director of the New England Forestry Foundation, said at the news conference. The challenge is to go beyond protecting one piece of forest here, another over there.

The greatest benefits — and economies of scale — come from protecting large blocks of the landscape, where habitat connectivity and good forest management can go hand in hand, the researchers said.

Vermont has been a leader in forest protection, through work by nonprofit land trusts and the state's current use program, which enrolls 35 to 40 percent of eligible forestland. The program [taxes](#) land for its worth as a working forest, rather than its development value. That helps make it affordable for owners to keep their land in trees, although the protection is not permanent.

While land conservation, even by private individuals, can be controversial among those who fear it limits a landowner's flexibility, Keeton said he has found general support for maintaining Vermont's forests.

"I've worked in this realm for many years and with all different kinds of people. The one thing I always find is that everyone in the forest sector, regardless of their politics, *shares* this desire to keep forests as forests, to keep them working, to keep them as open space," he said.

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