



The Maine Public Broadcasting Network

Report: More Conservation Needed to Halt Decline in New England Forests

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After about 150 years of natural growth, forest land is declining across all six New England states. That's according to a report released today by the Harvard University Forest in Massachusetts, in conjunction with some University of Maine researchers. The report calls for conserving 70 percent of New England, or 30 million acres of forest land over the next 50 years.

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Over the past 300 years, the forests of New England have undergone dramatic changes. Following a history of deforestation and conversion to farmland, forests began to regrow naturally in the mid-to-late 1800s when industrialization replaced large-scale agriculture. Today forest covers more than 80 percent of New England, and about 90 percent of Maine.

"Overall the state is pretty stable -- if you look at the actual decline numbers, I think it's .2 percent. Maine is actually far ahead of the other states," says Rob Lillieholm, a professor of forest policy at the University of Maine, and one of 20 authors of the Wildlands and Woodlands report. "Declines in Maine would be in the southern part of the state, primarily, where we see a lot of residential development. And 95 percent of the state's in private ownership, so what happens on these private forestlands is very important."

For the first time, all six New England states are showing a decline in forest cover. That's been evident in southern New England states for decades, but Vermont and Maine started seeing that trend around the year 2000, according to the Wildlands and Woodlands report.

The report cites commercial development, forest products industry use, invasive species and insects and changing forest ownership patterns as reasons for forest loss.

"Right now, given the age demographics of a lot of forest landowners and agricultural landowners, we're going to be seeing a lot of turnover in ownership across the state," Lillieholm says. "And a lot of people are not really prepared for that and a lot of times there aren't a lot of options or information about how best to do that. A lot of people would like to see their lands protected but they don't really know about how to go about doing it. One thing we would like to see is a lot more information available for people that want to protect their lands, and help in doing that."

The researchers from Harvard, UMaine and other schools concluded that New England has the potential to retain a full 70 percent of its landscape in forest.

"What we're calling for within that 70 percent protection, 90 percent of those lands would be working forest lands, so these would be lands that would continue to be part of that working landscape," Lilieholm says. "Only 10 percent would be wildland reserves. So it really is geared towards maintaining this long tradition we have of working landscapes across New England."

Currently, less than 20 percent of New England's 33 million acres of forest are permanently protected. The report says getting to 70 percent will require a combination of conservation easements by willing landowners, enhanced tax incentives and acquisitions.

"From the inner city to our most expansive forest landscapes, woodlands provide a backdrop to the life of every person in New England," says David Foster, the director of the Harvard Forest, a 3,500-acre experimental forest in central Massachusetts. "These woodlands will provide immense benefits in terms of natural resources and employment in the forestry, tourism, recreation and environmental industries."

The first Wildlands and Woodlands report came out of Massachusetts in 2005 and started a renewed conservation movement there among landtrusts and landowners. According to Lynn Liford, executive director of the New England Forestry Foundation, the regional approach can be an effective selling tool.

"Since January, we've talked and met with 125 land trusts and we're finding that land trusts and landowners are excited to be part of a major effort," Liford says. "What's more in that effort we're seeing that aggregation is causing the land trusts to look at their individual projects in a broader context."

But Patrick Strauch, executive director of the Maine Forest Products Council, says conserving land is the easy thing to do; the hard part is balancing that with the needs of markets and natural resource businesses.

"It's great to say you're going to conserve a bunch of land, but if you don't have natural resources industries, if you don't have markets for hay, if you don't have markets for food products, and if you have terrible wood markets, it's kind of a tough investment to sell to the public," Strauch says.

Strauch also cautions that it should be easier to put land into conservation easements. "We have a lot of experience with conservation easements -- there's a tendency to hang a lot of Christmas tree ornaments on them. If you really want to control development then we ought to think about simple development easements and all the other public benefits that might be added to a conservation easement."

To read the full Wildlands and Woodlands report, [click here](#).