

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Forest cover declining across New England



AP FILE PHOTO

Moosehead Lake near Greenville, Maine, is seen in this May 2004 file photo. Maine's Land Use Regulation Commission will meet on Tuesday and Wednesday to discuss Plum Creek Timber Co.'s plans to rezone about 16,000 acres in the Moosehead region. The company wants 975 house lots and has a plan to build two resorts. The plan also includes more than 400,000 acres of land to be conserved through sales and easements that limit future development.

5/20/10 | [77 comments](#)

[By Kevin Miller](#)

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AUGUSTA, Maine — A new study calls for a threefold increase in conserved land in New England over the next 50 years in response to the first regionwide losses in forest cover since the mid-1800s.

The report, titled “Wildlands and Woodlands,” suggests an unprecedented effort by both the public and private sectors to stem the tide of sprawling development and permanently protect roughly 70 percent of the region, or 30 million acres, as forestland.

[Click here to read the report.](#)

Currently, about 20 percent of New England is permanently protected from development.

That preservation would be accomplished largely through conservation easements that keep the vast majority of the land in private hands and as working forests.

As the nation's most heavily forested state, Maine offers both examples of successful large-scale conservation efforts as well as opportunities for additional projects, according to the authors.

But faced with growing development pressure and threats from climate change, New England needs a more robust, collaborative and long-term approach to conservation that protects the environment while allowing for economic growth, the report states.

"Today and in the future these actions will provide vital economic, human, and environmental benefits for the region," the authors wrote.

Under the authors' vision, 90 percent of the 30 million conserved acres would be maintained as privately owned, working forests managed for timber or other objectives. The remaining 10 percent would be "wildland" reserves with minimal human impact.

The forest cover wouldn't be evenly distributed across the region.

In the south, only half the land may remain forested while large regions in northern Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont could remain up to 90 or 100 percent forested.

Although released by Harvard University's forestry and ecology research center, the study was co-authored by 20 academics from institutions throughout New England and the northeast. The authors include two University of Maine faculty: Malcolm Hunter, a professor of conservation biology, and Robert Lillieholm, a professor of forest policy.

After more than a century and a half of extreme deforestation, the acreage of forest cover in New England began to climb steadily beginning around 1850. But that trend shifted again in the late 20th century.

While the acreage of forested areas has been declining in most New England states for decades, that trend has only hit Maine and Vermont in recent years and on a much smaller scale.

Beginning about a decade ago, the amount of land lost to development in Maine began to outpace the amount of agricultural land that had reverted back to forests.

Statewide, Maine lost approximately 96,000 acres of timberland between the late 1990s and 2006, according to an inventory report compiled by the Maine Forest Service. The largest chunk of that land — about 41,000 acres — was lost to development.

The large-scale transition of ownership in Maine's North Woods from large paper companies, such as Great Northern Paper, to investment firms and other landowners has also raised concerns about fragmentation of the land.

But the authors also praised Maine's record of land conservation. During the past decade, nearly 1 million acres of land has been protected in one form, often through conservation easements that keep the land in timber management.

"While there is tremendous development, especially in the southern parts of Maine, the rate of forest conservation ... is very much in line with what we are advocating," Lillieholm said Wednesday during a conference call with reporters.

James Levitt, director of Harvard Forest's program on conservation innovation, specifically cited the Pingree lands agreement that protected more than 750,000 acres of working forests in Maine. The project remains the single largest forestland conservation easement in U.S. history.

"I think that is one of the projects that points the way here," Levitt said.

Maine Forest Service director Alec Giffen, who was not involved in the study, said he believes many Mainers support land conservation efforts that sustain working forests while protecting special areas and providing access to recreation.

Giffen said he and members of a broad coalition have been working on a conservation proposal called the Great Maine Forest Initiative.

The initiative would create a public-private partnership that protects Maine's natural resources while strengthening the forest products industry. The coalition includes timberland owners, environmental groups, paper industry representatives and recreation advocates.

Giffen had not seen a final copy of the "Wildlands and Woodlands" report and could not comment on how it compared to land conservation initiatives in Maine. But he cautioned that large-scale conservation efforts have to be carefully tailored in Maine.

"We continue down that path, working toward a very Maine-specific plan that works for our mills, works for our recreationists, works for loggers and works for the environment," Giffen said.

A copy of the report can be found online at www.wildlandsandwoodlands.org

The Associated Press contributed to this report.