

FOSTER'S DAILY DEMOCRAT

Study: NH forest loss a 'volatile' problem

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DURHAM — From 1985-2005, New Hampshire lost about 12,000 acres of forest land a year from human sprawl.

While that number decreased recently as the state's population growth slowed and the recession stunted development, the loss of forest cover remains a "volatile" problem in the Granite State and the rest of New England, according to a Harvard University report released Wednesday.

"Each year, thousands of acres of forests and farms are bulldozed for houses and lawns, commercial buildings, roads, and parking lots," the report says. "Meanwhile, in the northern forest region, properties that were long managed under enduring family and industry ownerships are being sold, fragmented and transformed. These dynamics yield uncertainty and threaten the integrity of the landscapes and communities they support."

The report, "Wildlands & Woodlands," was compiled by the Harvard Forest, the university's forest biology research center. Its authors included John Aber, University of New Hampshire's provost and vice president for academic affairs.

The report says from 1600 to 1850, New England's forest cover was reduced from 91 percent to 55 percent as the area was settled. Conservation efforts pushed that number up to 80 percent by the 1960s, but it slid back down to about 77 percent by 2000.

The report calls for continued conservation efforts, while leaving up to 18 percent of New England — twice the area developed now — free for future development.

The environmental impact can be mitigated by "smart sprawl," according to Debbie Goard, the Strafford County Forester at UNH's Cooperative Extension.

That can be achieved by "cluster developments" for housing that retain open space and limit paved roads.

"It's important to keep our lands and forests," Goard said. "It's part of what New Hampshire is."

She said there are strong conservation networks operating in the state, including the Trust for Public Land and Strafford Rivers Conservancy, which recently secured 240 acres of land around Stonehouse Pond in Barrington for preservation.

Jack Savage, spokesman for the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, commended the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership for protecting 5,000 acres around Great Bay over the last 20 years.

He said those efforts must continue.

"We need it to continue the life we enjoy," he said. "If you still want wood to build your houses with ... if you still want to have enough farm land to grow local food ... you need to start protecting more (land) today to have it tomorrow."

The report's authors will discuss their findings at a regional conference in Concord June 4.

The report can be viewed at www.wildlandsandwoodlands.org.