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OUR OPINION: Developmental threat to forest can be mitigated

Anyone who has stumbled onto an old stone wall in the woods knows that the way we use land changes radically over time.

Mainers from 1850 would be shocked to see how all the fields and homesteads that were cleared for farmland in their day have been allowed to grow back as forest, making Maine's woods as plentiful and productive as they have ever been.

It is clear, however, that another transition is under way. Development pressure means that the New England forest is shrinking. New kinds of companies that own smaller parcels and that are looking for faster financial returns than traditional industrial owners have the potential to speed up development.

That trend will have economic and environmental damage if mitigating steps are not taken, according to a study issued last week by Harvard University. The study's authors propose putting 70 percent of New England's forest into protection that would permit commercial and residential use.

Maine, which is the most heavily forested state in the Northeast, would seem to have little worry about.

The forest, however, remains a cornerstone of our economy and a vital environmental asset, and this trend cannot be taken lightly.

An ongoing effort, the Great Forest Initiative, has brought landowners, environmentalists and the state Forest Service personnel together to find a uniquely Maine approach to preserve woodlands, while letting commercial forestry and recreation expand.

By keeping large tracts of woodland intact, the Maine woods can remain home to rare and endangered species

The initiative's proposal is to start with a series of pilot projects that would buy development rights from landowners and provide incentives to manage their holdings in ways that maximize their environmental value.

The idea is not to pay the landowners to meet their legal requirements, but to give them incentives to exceed them.

The initiative is seeking the support from the federal government, which would be the source of funding needed to make this happen.

Preserving Maine's forest is an important goal, and it's important to remember that it won't happen on its own. The forest in its current state has not always been here, and it could be lost if we don't take care of it.