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Forests of Tomorrow

To the Editor:

We have all seen the loss of access to land for recreation caused by the recent boom of subdividing and land speculation. When the economy recovers, access will continue to be lost. A new report, just released, argues that we need to band together to ensure continued access and use of the woodlands and waters. The report is called "Wildlands and Woodlands: A Vision for the New England Landscape" (www.wildlandsandwoodlands.org). It offers two fundamental messages. First, after a long period of reforestation following a decline of agriculture in the mid-19th century, forest cover is decreasing. It is not conversion to farms, but conversion to pavement and development that is driving the change. The second message is one of opportunity. We are at a turning point. We still have the chance to keep the working forests that provide timber, jobs, and outdoor opportunities that mean so much to the quality of life.

So where do we go from here? Wildlands and Woodlands sets out an ambitious target of conserving 70 percent of New England as forests over the next half century. Nearly all of this (90%) would be as working woodlands that are actively managed for timber, hunting, and other uses, but protected from subdivision and development by working with willing private landowners who want to retain their forestland. A smaller amount (10%) would be wildlands that are defined locally. These special places can teach us much about wildlife, habitat, and forest healthy by letting nature take its course. This vision would not be achieved through regulations or government ownership. Instead, it would depend largely on the efforts of private landowners and local groups to implement on-the-ground conservation. Expanding the capacity and economic incentives for forest conservation can help. We want to support private forest ownership through federal tax benefits for conservation easements, stronger markets for sustainable wood products, and by developing direct payments to private landowners for

the clean air, climate, water, and other benefits their forests provide.

A recent survey by Ducks Unlimited found that hunters were more than three times as likely as nonhunters to participate in organized wildlife conservation efforts. New England has a long tradition of private land ownership and stewardship. The region's sporting community has been a trusted advocate for access to land, water, and habitat for hunting, fishing, snowmobiling and other outdoor activities.

Whether we can hit the 70 percent conservation target in the next 50 years is uncertain. But if we cannot come together as a community of diverse people to support the forest landscape, nothing will get done. As a community that knows the land and understands the connection between hunting, fishing, and conservation better than most, we hope the sporting community will be a leading force in this effort.

--Lloyd Irland, Forest Resource Consultant