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Harvard Forest Report: Forests, Funding, and Conservation in Decline across New England

Vermont losing 1,500 acres of forest every year; new report outlines strategies for gaining ground

Petersham, MA – New England has been losing forestland to development at a rate of 65 acres per day, according to a new report released today by the Harvard Forest, a research institute of Harvard University, and a team of authors from across the region. Public funding for land protection has also been steadily declining in all six New England states and is now half what it was at its 2008 peak; with land conservation trends following suit.

“The incremental chipping away of forest and farmland by scattered development is hard to see day-to-day but it adds up over time and represents a significant threat to the region,” said David Foster, Director of the Harvard Forest. “If we stay on the current path, we’ll lose another 1.2 million acres of open land by 2060.”

The report documents that public funding for land conservation dropped 50 percent between 2008 and 2014 to \$62 million per year, slightly lower than 2004 levels. The pace of regional land conservation has also slowed substantially from an average of 333,000 acres per year in the early 2000s to about 50,000 acres per year since 2010.

In Vermont, approximately 1,500 acres of forestland are lost each year to development. Twenty-three percent of the state’s land area is currently conserved as forest and farmland. The state ranks first in New England in per capita state funding for land conservation at an average of \$6.70 per person per year for 2004 to 2014. However, annual land conservation rates in Vermont have generally fallen back to early 1990s levels after a period of elevated conservation in the late 1990s, even as groups report that private landowners’ interest in conserving their land remains high.

Despite these trends, the authors assert that the targets outlined in a bold vision for the future of the New England landscape are still attainable and they identify opportunities for gaining ground.

The new report, *Wildlands and Woodlands, Farmlands and Communities*, is the most up-to-date and comprehensive synthesis available describing regional land use trends. It is the third in a series of *Wildlands and Woodlands* publications led by Foster and a team of 30 colleagues. Previous reports defined a regional vision that calls for conserving 30 million acres of forest (70 percent of the region’s land area) and all remaining farmland. The vision proposes that most of the conserved forestland should be managed for wood products and other benefits, with 10 percent managed as wildlands. This third report outlines progress toward the vision; links the protection of forests and farms directly to advancing livable urban to rural communities; and articulates a call to action.

Conversion to development is the biggest near-term threat to forests; bigger even than climate change, the scientists report. “When we look specifically at forests in New England, it is clear that the impacts of land use will be far greater than those of climate change over the next 50 years,” said Harvard Forest Senior Ecologist, Jonathan Thompson. “This may seem counter-intuitive given the major threat that climate change poses to all sectors of society. But climate change slowly alters the health and types of trees that grow whereas conversion eliminates forests altogether.”

Conversion takes land out of production and eliminates the local wood and food, climate mitigation, flood protection and other benefits the land provides. In rural areas where development pressure may be low, fragmentation and perforation of large blocks of land hinder access and effective management for forestry and farming.

The good news is that, despite these trends, that authors say it is still possible to attain the *Wildlands and Woodland* vision by (1) tripling the pace of conservation, (2) reversing trends in public funding, (3) putting more land to work for sustainable farming and forestry, and (4) integrating land conservation with the planning of cities, suburbs, and rural communities to reduce forest loss and promote more efficient use of land for economic development.

The report emphasizes that conserved land is a low-cost natural asset to confront challenges like climate change and support resource-based economies. “Today’s land conservation is about putting land to work to solve problems and provide an economic return to landowners while investing in nature,” said Kathy Lambert, head of the Science & Policy Project at the Harvard Forest.

The report points to hopeful signs including (1) the region’s long tradition of public investment in land conservation; (2) the emerging capacity of regional conservation partnerships that have increased four-fold since 2000; and (3) the expansion of conservation finance strategies such as efforts to increase compensation to landowners for the value of ecosystem services.

The authors identify several near-term policy opportunities for changing course, including:

1. Setting state-based targets for land protection and reporting on them annually;
2. Safeguarding state funding for land conservation by fully funding existing state programs;
3. Incorporating land management and protection into state climate action plans and as an offset to meet new emission targets set by the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative;
4. Integrating the natural infrastructure of land into infrastructure investment plans;
5. Supporting conservation, forestry, and farming programs in the 2018 federal Farm Bill.

The authors highlight that the gains from achieving the updated *Wildlands and Woodlands* vision in the new report would be significant and widespread. Foster concludes, “Investing in land protection and supporting people to steward their land responsibly offers a path to ecological and economic well-being that can benefit all of New England.”

Major partners in the report include Highstead and the New England Forestry Foundation.

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Authors of the report and local experts are available for interview upon request.

Embargoed content including the report, video news release, photos, maps, and b-roll is available at: <http://wildlandsandwoodlands.org/ww-report-press-kit>, password: **WWconserve17**.

About the Harvard Forest - the 4,000-acre Harvard Forest in Petersham, MA has served as Harvard University’s rural laboratory and classroom since 1907. The Forest is protected from development and operates under a long-term management plan with areas designated for forest management, agriculture, scientific experiments, and wildland reserves. Harvard Forest has been a National Science Foundation-funded Long-Term Ecological Research (LTER) site since 1988.

About Highstead – Highstead is a not-for-profit organization that has worked with regional partners since its founding in 1982 to conserve the landscape of New England through science, stewardship, and land protection.