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Development reversing years of forest regrowth

The report by policy specialists at New England colleges calls for stronger conservation programs.

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After more than 150 years of regrowth, forests in Maine and other New England states are shrinking due to housing and commercial development, a new report concludes.



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Brian Donahue, associate professor of American Environmental Studies at Brandeis University, examines an oak tree on protected conservation land in Weston, Mass. He is co-author of a report that says New England forest cover is declining.

The Associated Press

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The report, *Wildlands and Woodlands*, was issued Wednesday by forest science, policy and finance specialists at universities and colleges across New England, including the University of Maine. It calls for conserving 70 percent of the existing 33 million acres of New England forest land through easements from willing private landowners, land acquisitions and economic incentives.

While forests have been on the rebound from colonial times, when they were largely cut down to clear land for farming, that trend has begun to reverse due to development pressures -- especially in southern New England and southern Maine.

"Forest cover is now declining for the first time in a century and a half," said David Foster, lead author and director of the Harvard Forest, a research forest in western Massachusetts operated by Harvard University.

The report concluded that massive conservation of the region's forests is needed because they use huge amounts of carbon dioxide. That is critical to offsetting the accumulating emissions from fossil fuels that are creating global climate change.

But some woodland association and forest products group officials said the 70 percent goal may be unrealistic and there may be more environmentally beneficial ways to preserve the region's forests.

The report recommends that most of the conserved forest continue to be used for timber production, wildlife habitat and recreation, with 7 percent -- or about 3 million acres -- set aside for wildland reserves free from human activity.

The goal would still allow for a doubling of the amount of land available for development, said Foster.

Foster said that the turning point for New England forests came about 20 years ago when the area once again began to lose forest cover.

That shift has happened more rapidly in densely populated southern New England states, but even more sparsely populated Vermont and Maine -- particularly southern Maine -- have seen troubling signs, he said.

The proportions of conserved forest by state and region would vary according to current development and conservation patterns, but in general the report calls for 50 percent of the forest and agricultural areas in southern New England and 80 percent in northern New England to be preserved.

The report identifies three New England regions most threatened with loss of forest cover. They include a band reaching from Rhode Island and Connecticut to coastal Maine that is vulnerable to dense development and sprawl; an area in central New England subject to increasing suburbanization; and a northern tier where rapid turnover in ownership could lead to more fragmented management.

Rob Lillieholm, a professor of forest policy at the University of Maine, said changing ownership patterns in northern New England and Maine and residential and commercial development in southern New England, are driving deforestation.

Fifteen years ago much of the northern woods was owned by a few large forest companies which produced lumber, pulp and paper.

Tax code changes and increased global competition saw two-thirds of the forest, or 7 million acres, change hands since then, with a host of new owners, such as pension funds. Many of the new owners intend to hold on to the land for 10 to 15 years before selling.

That can lead to the fragmentation of large parcels into smaller parcels by landowners who may not allow the same public recreational access or timber management practices that have worked to keep wide swaths of forest land intact in the past, Lillieholm said.

The report says putting 70 percent of the region's forest into conservation easements, which allow owners to retain the land for timber harvesting or recreational use but bar development, is achievable if regional land trusts and other conservation groups work together.

James Levitt, director of the Harvard Forest Program on Conservation and Innovation, said New England has been a global leader in conservation. The tradition was established by the Pilgrim settlers in Boston, who created the first public lands in 1634 when they taxed themselves to raise money to create the Boston Common.

But some forest officials said some of the ideas in the report are impractical and do not reflect what is going on in Maine's forests.

Patrick Strauch, executive director of the Maine Forest Products Council, said the report does not recognize that many of the new landowners in Maine's northern forests have been leaders in establishing an unprecedented 3 million acres of new conservation easements in the past decade.

"There are some good things happening up there as well," Strauch said.

He said that while conservation is one way to preserve forests, creating a stronger and more vibrant forest products industry is also effective.

"You can't have one without the other," Strauch said.

Tom Doak, executive director of the Small Woodlands Association of Maine, cautioned against placing conservation easements on so much of the existing forest, which may bar future uses that may prove environmentally beneficial in the future.

"We are assuming that by putting a conservation easement on land that we know what is best for everybody 200 years from now. We should be careful because that can change. Anything you can make out of oil you can make out of wood," Doak said.

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