

Report: Development is reversing years of New England forest regrowth

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

The report, *Wildlands and Woodlands*, was issued by forest science, policy and finance specialists at universities and colleges across New England, including the University of New Hampshire. 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 Petersham, Mass.

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 forests 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 land available for development, said Foster. He said 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: a band reaching from Rhode Island and Connecticut to coastal Maine; an area in central New England subject to increasing suburbanization; and a northern tier where rapid turnover in ownership.

Rob Lilieholm, 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 that 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 including 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, Lilieholm 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.

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

Patrick Strauch, executive director of the Maine Forest Products Council, 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.

— Portland (Maine) Press Herald

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