

FORESTS: New England groups plot to save their dwindling woodlands

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CONCORD, N.H. -- Small is no longer beautiful for New England conservation groups.

For decades, bands of volunteers and a smattering of full-time employees have worked to stem the tide of development and deforestation, identifying priority projects and working with a small pool of private funders to preserve little parcels of local forestland.

They defined success as a couple hundred acres at a time, and the region's 400-plus land trust groups partnered for projects on a scattered basis. But now, in the region of the country where the conservation movement first sprang to life, they plan to think bigger, work faster and preserve enough **forest** to reverse what they consider to be a dismal trend for the environment and for battling climate change.

Last month, 20 forest ecologists and policy experts sounded a warning in a new report: "For the first time since agricultural abandonment in the mid-1880s, all six New England states are experiencing a decline in forest cover." New England should double its rate of forest conservation to protect the area's wildlife habitat, watersheds and carbon value, the experts urged. They hope to protect 30 million acres of the region's existing 33 million acres of **forest** by 2050.

That would be ambitious, requiring significant collaboration and pooling of resources, Keith Ross told forest experts and landowners who gathered Friday to advance the vision of the Harvard **Forest** publication. Ross, a forester and real estate consultant for LandVest, has been at the vanguard of this movement, urging land trusts to coordinate with one another and also providing advice on the report.

Traditionally, New England has had comparatively tiny land parcels, owned by private landowners. But as these properties change hands, those tracts have been splintered again and again into smaller chunks for development.

That complicates conservation efforts. While groups in other areas of the country can more readily round up a few landowners and ask them to sell sections of their land or the development rights through easements -- collectively yielding deeds for thousands of acres of land -- New Englanders have historically thought more in the scale of tens or hundreds of acres. But that is changing.

"Small land trusts, many of which are 40 or 50 years old, are becoming more savvy to protect as much as possible," said Kevin Case, New England regional director of the Land Trust Alliance. "Deals are complicated, with multiple funding sources that have to be brought to bear, combined with all the background work that is becoming the norm" so these deals make sense, he said.

From Maine to Connecticut, a growing network of these partnerships has emerged, the report states.

Losing ground to developers

An ongoing 5-year-old project in western Massachusetts laid some of the groundwork. Seven land trusts, led by the New England Forestry Foundation, are working to conserve some 12,000 acres of forestlands, coordinating to buy land or cheaper easements from 77 families' forests.

The price tag for that effort totals about \$20 million, according to projected estimates, but currently, the partners are still seeking funding to meet a \$13.5 million shortfall. It's not easy work, they say, but the payoff could be enormous.

New England has been losing **forest** acreage for the last four decades, explained report co-author Brian Donahue, an environmental studies professor at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass. "Until then, we were gaining acreage from agricultural abandonment," he said.

At the current pace, achieving the New England conservation goals seems doubtful. The Amherst, Mass.-based Kestrel Trust, which boasts about a dozen volunteers and two staff members, often works for a year and a half to preserve 40 acres of land in its area. But when the group signed onto the Western Mass. aggregation project, it set its sights on a 300-acre project in its nine-town region.

Part of the attraction of the bigger effort, said Kristin DeBoer, Kestrel's executive director, is the "bragging rights" for the donors that they were part of such a sizable project that helps get the word out about conservation.

Though the community of land trusts has not yet tackled the Kestrel project, which would connect two protected areas in western Massachusetts, DeBoer said she is not worried. "The stamp of the Harvard **Forest** and the track record of success with NEFF [New England Forestry Foundation] campaigns is a lot of reason for our optimism," she said.

Still, the fact that this project is working to secure the majority of its funding after five years highlights the uphill climb New England conservationists have ahead of them. But experts speaking Friday said they hope backing by the New England governors, federal climate

legislation and other funding to subsidize conservation efforts might come from the Obama administration.

Safeguarding the planet against climate change simply cannot be achieved "one parcel at a time," emphasized Leigh Youngblood, executive director of the Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust. When it comes to climate change, she said, trees are valuable carbon stocks.

Groups wary of sharing funders

Coordinating among land trusts that have been quietly competing with one another for funds and are distinct identities is not as easy as picking up the phone. Not all these groups have the same mission, so tailoring projects to overlap and meet joint goals can be a challenge.

Each group is also wary of revealing its funders -- concerned that more groups may inundate the same funders with requests. Hiring a staff member who keeps all funding sources confidential for the western Massachusetts project has been one solution that the coalition of land trusts have used to overcome that obstacle.

That project also crafted a model for how to decide which groups' projects would have priority: It drew straws.

"In New England, almost every town has a land conservation organization and do their projects one at a time," Ross said in an interview. But over time, that can be exhausting, he said.

"Small, individual projects have trouble attracting funding from large organizations or federal or state programs. Plus, if you group projects together, you can get cheaper costs for all the due diligence work -- legal costs, appraisal and the baseline documents. Working together on those things can lower costs."

Failure to achieve the conservation goal could mean the region will be staring down **forest** losses of as much as 63 percent by 2030, with southern New England likely to feel the brunt of the loss as development creeps northward, the report says.

The authors are not trying to stave off all development, however. Their vision would still allow New England to develop twice as much land as it has today, but it urges developers to plan carefully about what lands it taps.

The team of **forest** experts is also not saying 30 million acres should go untouched. About 93 percent of the conserved forests would be woodlands that could still be used for timber and recreation, while 7 percent would be wildland reserves, according to their vision.