

An aerial photograph of a river winding through a lush, green landscape. The river is the central focus, flowing from the upper right towards the lower left. The banks are lined with dense, vibrant green trees and shrubs. On the left side of the river, there are large, bright green agricultural fields. The background shows a vast expanse of forest stretching towards the horizon under a clear sky.

Learning from the

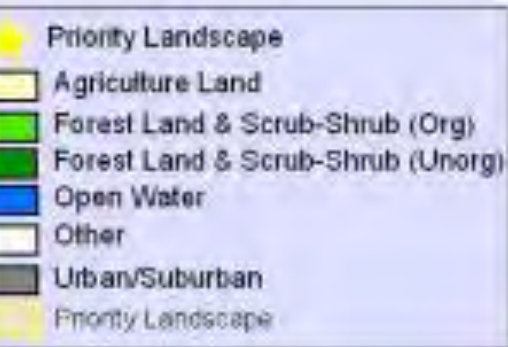
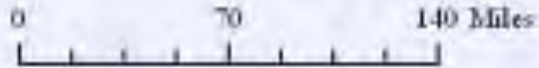
**Southern New England
Heritage Forest**

**Regional Conservation
Partnership Program (RCPP)**

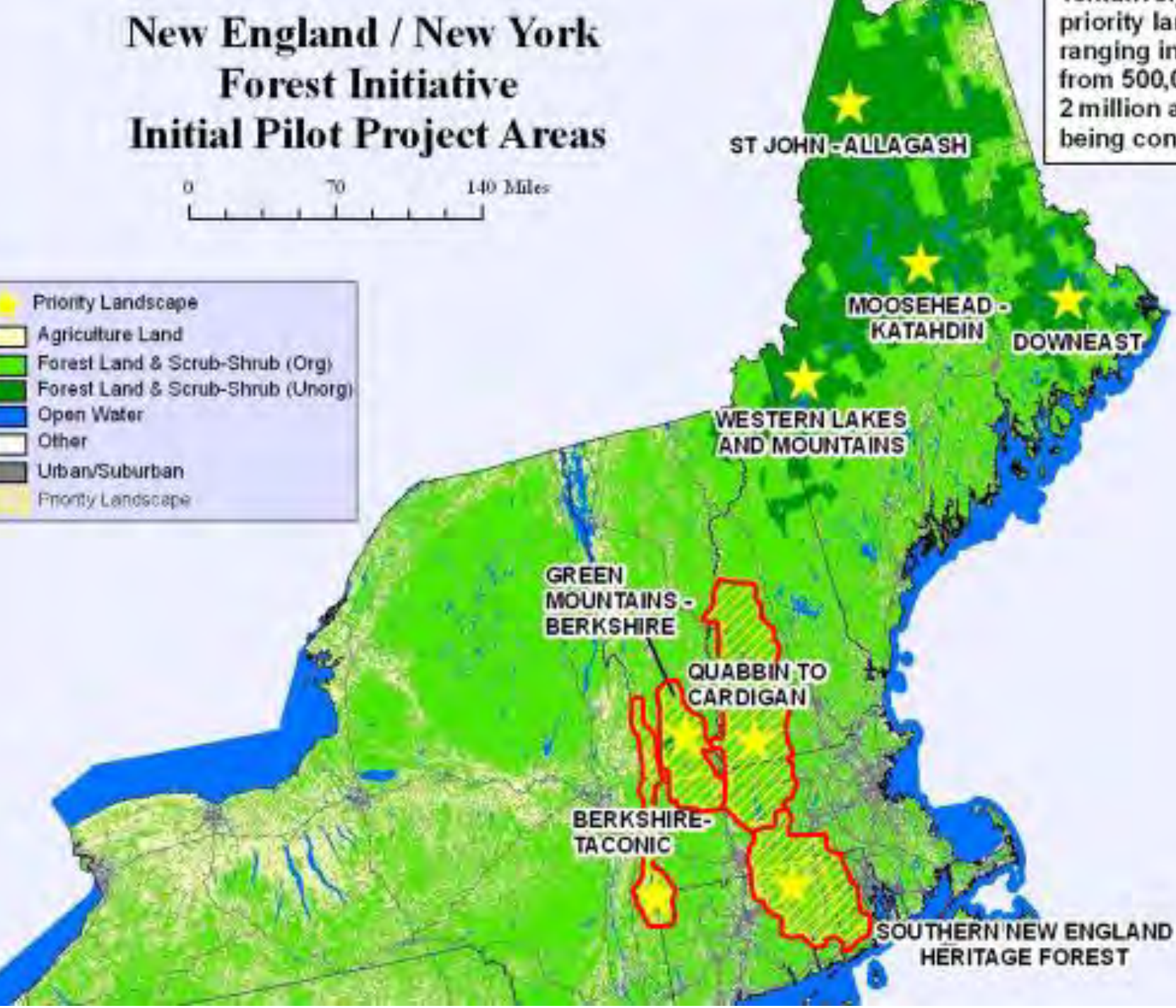
November 9, 2023



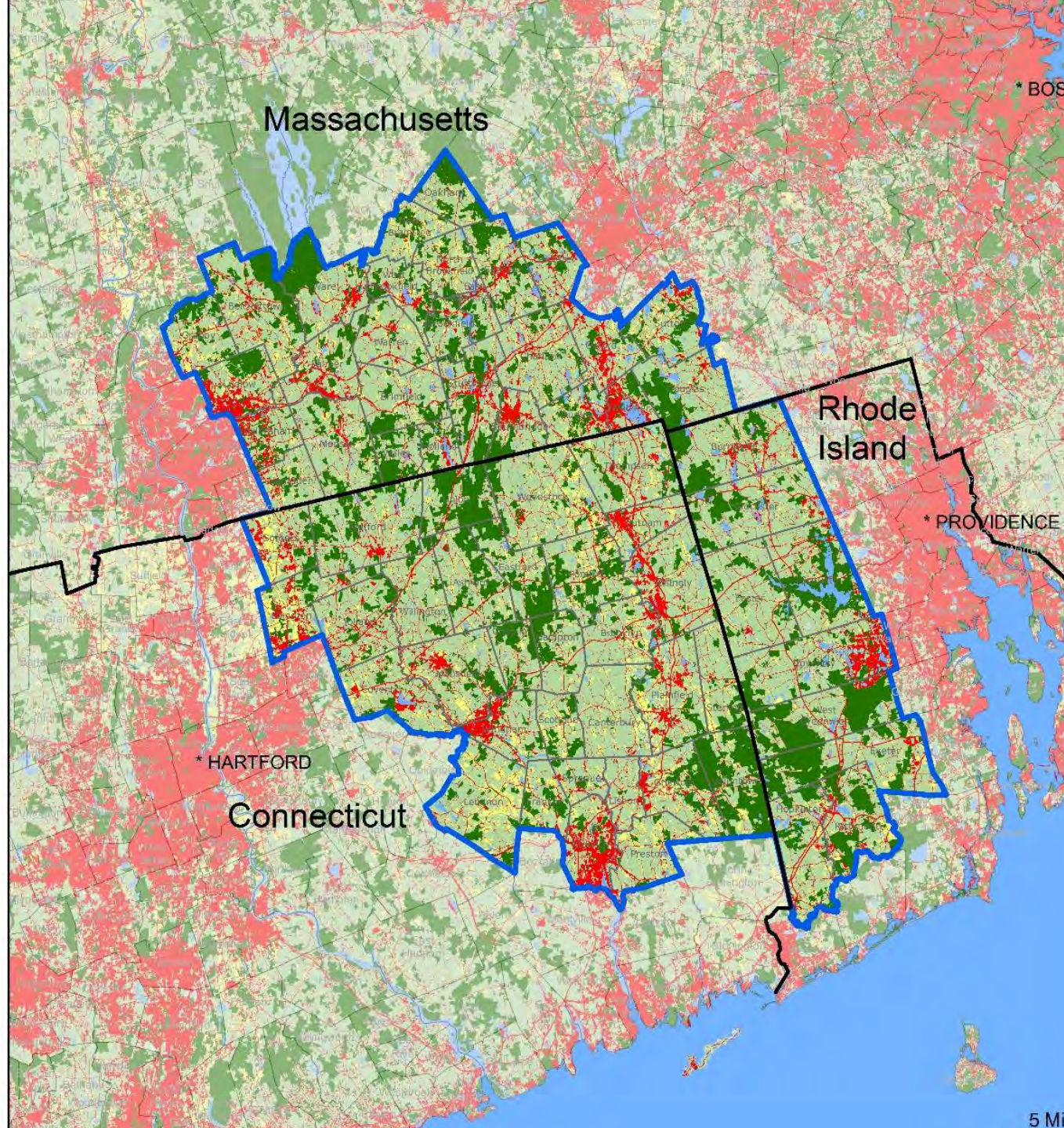
New England / New York Forest Initiative Initial Pilot Project Areas



priority landscapes ranging in size from 500,000 to 2 million acres are being considered.



68 towns
1.49 million acres
Still 76% forest



**The Last Green
Valley, Inc.**

**MassConn
Sustainable Forest
Partnership/Opacum
Land Trust**

**Northern RI
Conservation District**

**Natural Resources
Conservation Service
(NRCS)**

**MA Executive Office
of Energy &
Environmental
Affairs**

Providence Water

**Yale School of
Forestry &
Environmental
Studies**

**CT Department of
Energy &
Environmental
Protection**

Hull Forest Products

**Thames River Basin
Partnership**

**New England
Forestry Foundation**

**Eastern CT
Conservation District**

**Norcross Wildlife
Foundation**

**RI Division of Forest
Management**

**RI Woodland
Partnership**

Harvard Forest

**Yale Sustaining
Family Forests
Institute**

**Audubon
Connecticut**

Audubon RI

Mass Audubon

What is the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)?

Created in the 2014 Farm Bill

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

RCPP is an **innovative** approach to investing in natural resource conservation that **empowers partnerships** to design solutions and deliver specific, measurable results.

RCPP draws on local knowledge and networks to accelerate progress on critical conservation projects. **Partners are in the “driver’s seat,”** with technical and financial help from NRCS.





2017

**Accelerating the Pace of
Conservation
in the Southern New England
Heritage Forest**

**\$6,144,000 in federal funding
over 5 years**

**\$6,144,000 in significant
contributions from
partners**

What gave us the confidence to apply?

- **Priority Landscape**
- **Pilot Project - NY/NE Family Forest Owner Engagement Initiative**
- **Shared Wildlands & Woodlands Vision to Accelerate Conservation**
- **Better Tools for Engaging Landowners Effectively**
- **Better Technology – Mapping**
- **Experience with Soil Health & Long Island Sound RCPPs**





RCPP Project Goals

- **Improve forest habitat for fish, wildlife, & invertebrate species of concern**
- **Support the recovery of endangered or threatened species & improve biodiversity**
- **Protect water quality & quantity**
- **Foster resiliency & stand diversity**
- **Enhance air quality and carbon sequestration**



Keep forest as forest

**Move landowners along the
conservation pipeline**

Targeted “Woodland Retreat” Landowners

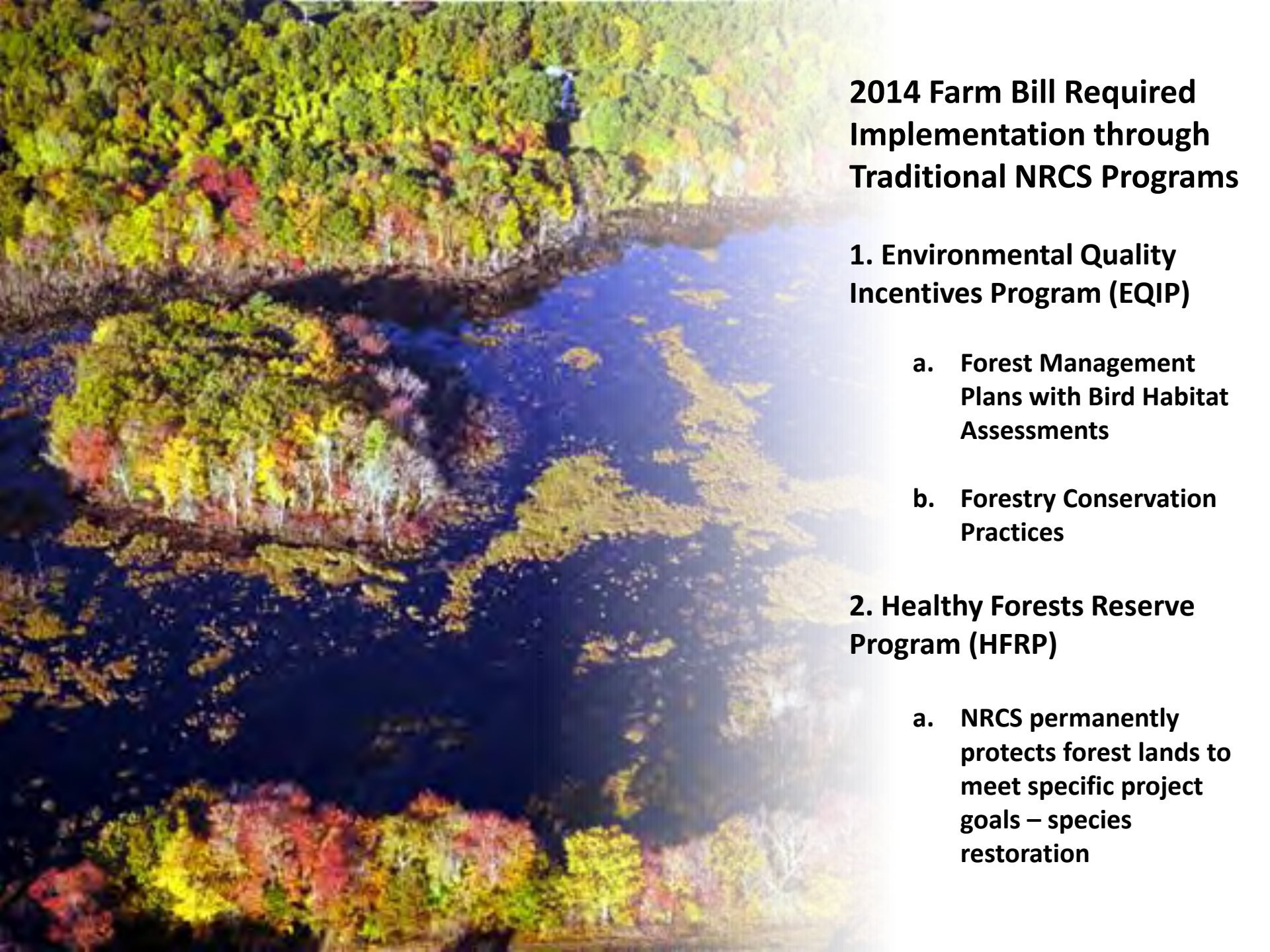
- **Beauty, scenery, privacy, wildlife habitat and enjoyment**
- **Strong conservation and stewardship ethics**
- **Do not actively manage their lands**





RCPP Funded Components

- 1. Forest management (stewardship) plans developed by professional foresters with bird habitat assessments completed or overseen by Audubon CT, Mass Audubon and Audubon Society of RI**
- 2. Implementation of forest management activities and conservation practices**
- 3. Permanent woodlands protection with conservation easements**




2014 Farm Bill Required Implementation through Traditional NRCS Programs

1. Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

- a. Forest Management Plans with Bird Habitat Assessments**
- b. Forestry Conservation Practices**

2. Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)

- a. NRCS permanently protects forest lands to meet specific project goals – species restoration**

An aerial photograph showing a dense green forest with a dark blue river or stream winding through it. The terrain is hilly and the forest appears to be a mix of deciduous and coniferous trees. The sky is a pale, hazy blue.

**Environmental Quality
Incentives Program
(EQIP) - \$1,542,750**

**Spread over 5 years in 3 states
Split 40% CT /40% MA /20% RI**

**Goal = 200 Forest
Management/Stewardship Plans
with Bird Habitat Assessments
(about 6,000 acres)**

**Goal = Forestry Conservation
Practices on 1,480 acres**

Forest Management Plans w/ Bird Habitat Assessments

- Landowner must get Farm/Tract Number from FSA (partners assist)
- Landowner must meet EQIP eligibility, AGI and HEL requirements. FSA collects HU/Beginning Farmer data but will not reimburse at higher rate
- Landowner files application with lead partner for applicable state (TLGV, MassConn, or NRICD)
 - EQIP applications and forms do not need to be filed with NRCS at the same time
- Lead partner confirms forest acreage
- FSA/NRCS will confirm eligibility and notify partners
- Rolling deadline for MA
- December deadline for CT and RI to ensure capacity of CT and RI Audubons to perform field work during short breeding season
- Partners meet in January to review applications and select landowners (randomly) if exceed capacity
- Partners will notify selected landowners to proceed
- Landowner contacts forester and Audubon CT or RI to schedule site visits
- Landowner, forester, Audubon and TLGV sign 4-way contract (3-way in MA)
- Forester and Audubon complete field work & FMP; landowner signs
- Plan submitted to NRCS in applicable state office and to DCR in MA
- NRCS reviews and approves plan per protocols, notifies state lead partner when plan is approved
- TLGV pays forester approx. 75% EQIP payment schedule rate in CT & RI
- TLGV pays forester approx. 75% EQIP payment schedule rate plus premium for bird habitat assessment in MA
- Landowner pays forester remainder of negotiated price, if any
- TLGV pays Audubon CT or RI for bird habitat assessment
- TLGV pays MA Audubon for forester training, site visits and plan review

Forest Conservation Practices

314 - Brush Management

647 - Early Successional Habitat

649 - Structures for Wildlife

655 - Forest Trails and Landings

660 – Tree/Shrub Pruning

666 - Forest Stand Improvement





**Healthy Forests Reserve Program
(HFRP) - \$4,601,250**

**Spread over 5 years in 3 states
Split 40% CT /40% MA /20% RI**

**Goal = 1,140 acres permanently protected via
conservation easements**

**Original budget estimates - approximately 38
projects at 30 acres per project**

**75% of easement value paid to landowner;
landowner donates 25% of easement value as
match**

**Estimated \$30,000 transaction costs per
project for 38 projects**

**Costs for first round of habitat restoration for
1,140 acres included**



Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)

- Assists landowners, on a **voluntary basis**, in restoring, enhancing and protecting forestland resources on **private lands** through **easements**, 30-year contracts and 10-year cost-share agreements.
- Promote the **recovery of endangered and threatened species** under the Endangered Species Act
- Improve plant and animal biodiversity
- Enhance carbon sequestration

HFRP Permanent Easements

- Land must have habitat able to “**restore, enhance, or measurably increase the likelihood of recovery**” of federal or state endangered or threatened species or candidate species, or federal or state species of special concern or conservation need
- **Restoration plan and implementation required for specific species**
- Landowner retains fee simple title to land; NRCS holds and enforces conservation easement
- Sample HFRP Conservation Easement deed can be found on NRCS website



Steps to a HFRP Easement

- **Partners develop pre-screening tools**
- **Partners develop application packet with scoring criteria specific to each state**
- **Objective scoring based upon mapping criteria**
- **Favors large forest blocks contiguous to protected forest blocks**
- **Landowners must be eligible & register with FSA**
- **Private nonindustrial forest land, includes nonprofit but not municipal lands**
- **AGI and HEL don't apply**
- **Landowners submit applications to NRCS and partners in each state**
- **Partners screen applications and provide preliminary scoring to NRCS**
- **NRCS contacts highest-scoring landowners and sends deferral letters to others**
- **NRCS obligates funds for preliminary title work, haz mat due diligence**
- **NRCS/FWS/partners conduct field assessments**
- **NRCS develops preliminary restoration plans**
- **Score/rankings of projects that are still eligible after above steps are reviewed and ranking confirmed**
- **NRCS notifies landowner of tentative acceptance**
- **NRCS conducts title search, haz mat due diligence search, NEPA valuation, appraisal**
- **NRCS sends Option Agreement to Purchase to Landowner**
- **NRCS procures legal boundary survey and baseline property inventory report**
- **NRCS drafts final restoration plan**
- **NRCS obtains title commitment, prepares final documents for closing and closes on easement**
- **Landowner implements restoration plan with NRCS funding for first cycle**
- **NRCS monitors easement**

Project Results –

Tallying Up The Work

- **50+ coordination meetings**
- **35 education & outreach events reaching approximately 2,037 people**
- **4 forester trainings and one-on-one plan reviews**
- **Developed outreach materials: direct mail, e-newsletters, press releases, flyers, web pages, newsletter and magazine articles, social media posts, 20+ PowerPoints**
- **Approx. 750 hours management time**





Project Results – Tallying Up the Work

- **Forest Management Plans with Bird Habitat Assessments**
 - **Created a new 3-state program for the partners to implement this component**
 - **Held 4 signup rounds that were fully subscribed**
- **HFRP Easements**
 - **Created a new ranking and scoring system that was supported by GIS mapping, with different scoring criteria for each of 3 states**
 - **Held initial HFRP application round in all 3 states and 1 supplemental round in MA**



Project Results – Forest Management Plans with Bird Habitat Assessments

- **Initial goal = 6,000 acres (200 plans @ 30 acres)**
- **Final total - 8,905 acres (142 plans @ 63 acres)**

Project Results – Forest Conservation Practices

Initial goal

1,480 acres

Final total

953 acres

All funds expended

24 contracts





Project Results - HFRP easements

- Initial goal = 1,140 acres (38 projects @ 30 acres)
 - 2018 first application round was a short 2-month window
 - Received applications from 30 landowners totaling 2,500 forested acres
 - Large landowners – 2 @ approx. 100 acres 3 between 160-180 acres & 4 greater than 200 acres
 - Status Today
 - CT – 2 signed offers approx. 376 acres
 - MA – 3 signed offers approx. 257 acres
 - RI – 2 signed offers approx. 126 acres
1 easement closed 142 acres
- Total 8 projects approx. 901 acres**



Significant Partner Contributions

\$ 7,623,832.71

- **Easement acquisitions - \$5,166,000 (approx. 2,079 acres)**
- **Forest management plans & practices - \$385,000 (2000+ acres)**
- **Restoration Plan – \$30,000**
- **Resource monitoring – \$1,734,000**
- **Outreach & education, volunteers, administrative and overhead – \$308,833**



Additional Lasting Impacts

- **Strong partner collaboration with breadth of partners**
- **Infusion of federal dollars into region**
- **Many new landowners entered the conservation pipeline**
- **Demonstrated demand for easement programs**
- **Successful 821-acre forest legacy project in CT**
- **NE CT land trust advancement initiative**
- **Conservation “Mega-Mapper” with comprehensive protected open space data layer**
- **RI Forest Health Works RCPP**



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