

# **Funding Regional Conservation Partnerships to Increase the Pace of Land Conservation in New England**

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Woodland Council Working Group - Wildlands and Woodlands Partnership

## Introduction

Preliminary research on 22 regional conservation partnerships provides compelling evidence that additional funding will cultivate the grassroots activity needed to achieve the Wildlands and Woodlands Vision in Massachusetts and across New England over the next 25 years.<sup>1</sup> Regionally-focused conservation partnerships share resources, information, and strategies among the groups most committed to protecting the area's natural and cultural resources. They also provide effective outreach to the most critical partner in conservation: the private landowner. Even greater gains in conservation are expected in the future as regional conservation partnerships collaborate across New England sharing lessons and best practices and attracting resources for the entire region.

## The Wildlands & Woodlands Vision

The Wildlands and Woodlands (W&W) Vision (2005) calls for the protection of half of Massachusetts as forest (1.5 million more acres) over the next 25 years. A New England-wide W&W report in spring 2010 will advance this vision even more broadly. Reaching these ambitious goals will require tripling the rate of land protection. Consequently, any meaningful response to either vision must include new approaches to land conservation.

The W&W authors argue persuasively and, in our minds correctly, implementation of this vision must proceed through a proliferation of grassroots activity engaging forest landowners. The authors suggest that the primary vehicle for this effort are "Woodland Councils", which serve primarily as 1) sources of information on land conservation and management for private and public landowners and 2) catalysts for accelerating land protection activities. The Wildlands and Woodlands Partnership, the informal collaboration of 55 groups and agencies seeking to realize the W&W Vision, believes that existing conservation organizations can increase their efforts on these two activities and create new regional conservation partnerships to provide this capacity. Why? Existing regional conservation partnerships have proven to be the most effective avenue for providing woodland council functions.

Achieving bold visions for New England will require more collaboration within and among regional conservation partnerships. Within the region of a partnership, there is a need to make landowners and town leaders more knowledgeable about conservation and management options as these individuals have the greatest impact on land use change. Cities and towns impact the landscape via their land use codes (how they say they want their town developed over time) and through their conservation expenditures; landowners' impacts come when they decide how to manage their woodlands and whether to conserve or develop their lands. Among the best ways to inform town policies and landowner decisions is through their peer leaders. For example, forest extension specialists in western Massachusetts note that landowners learn best from other landowners who have already conserved their own land or have hired a consulting forester to oversee a harvest. Partnerships can work together to cultivate peer to peer networks of citizen-leaders and

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the experience of the authors and their interpretation of the results of an on-line survey of 22 regional partnerships administered by Highstead in the spring of 2009.

landowners that champion land stewardship ideals as reflected in new open space bylaws and in landscape-scale land protection projects like aggregation.

### Regional Conservation Partnerships

A regional conservation partnership is a multi-stakeholder collaboration of organizations and individuals that holds and implements a conservation vision over time. The principal or strong partners often represent private environmental groups and/or public governmental boards and agencies. The private groups represented can be land conservation trusts, environmental advocacy groups, and/or watershed associations. Public groups can include federal, state, regional, and local agencies, boards and commissions. Partners can be landowners and foresters, business owners, and interested community members. Partners can represent interests from conservation, forestry, agriculture, outdoor recreation and hunting, to land use planning. Partnerships typically include member groups with overlapping territories. Some partners can have an international, national, or state-wide mission. Often, the most invested partners have missions that are directly tied to the region, like regional land conservation trusts.

At least twenty of these regional conservation partnerships exist in New England today (see Appendix) and they vary greatly in structure, size, resources, capacity, age, and track records. Most partnerships focus on conserving both natural and cultural resources and recognize the importance of both to the character and quality of life defining their region. Some have a paid coordinator, a steering committee, and/or working groups. Especially in Southern New England, some partnerships consider themselves woodland councils, explicitly advancing the Wildlands and Woodlands Vision.

A few older partnerships have solid track records including the North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership, Mt. Agamenticus to the Sea Conservation Initiative, and the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership. Other, younger groups are building momentum including the Litchfield Greenprint Collaborative, the Mass-Conn Sustainable Forest Partnership and the Taunton Watershed Coalition. Our research and experience indicates that these regional conservation partnerships can produce greater conservation results than could otherwise come from working directly with a land trust alone.

Preliminary research on 22 partnerships (20 participating in second phase of our research) supports our claim. Regional conservation partnerships attract more people and resources to the long-term cause of conservation in a region. Partnerships can create value from new alliances among diverse partner groups and between them and the institutions, agencies, and funding sources located within and outside of the region. In particular, partnership efforts have greatly increased:

- Money raised for land conservation;
- Public recognition and visibility for the partnership and the member land trusts;
- Support for local bond initiatives that enable towns to invest in regional land protection campaigns;
- Smart-growth planning with build-out analyses and land use change maps for each town in a region;
- The number of conservation easement donations;
- The number of landowners educated in conservation and management;
- The number of citizen leaders advancing local natural resource conservation zoning and other policies; and,
- The number of farmers, forest landowners and foresters sharing ideas on a conservation vision for their region.

Regional conservation partnerships can increase conservation success over time for each individual partner as well as the region as a whole. Their efforts build trust among partners and between the partnership and the public. The partnership

helps its members build excitement for their shared mission in ways that engage a larger and more diverse group of supporters than they believe they would otherwise receive by going it alone. Partnerships often:

- Create a shared vision for conservation in their region;
- Facilitate regional conservation planning among groups;
- Advance shared management and stewardship;
- Use consensus-based decision making, a precursor to ecosystem based management;
- Enjoy consistently high-levels of staff and organizational investment by principal partner groups;
- Attract leaders in the region in the fields of conservation, planning, land use law, financing, etc.;
- Cultivate a spirit of camaraderie and shared responsibility among conservation groups;
- Become a strong voice for legislative support for conservation priorities in the region; and,
- Develop regionally-appropriate model policies. Examples include right-of-first-refusal, local open space zoning, subdivision regulations, right to farm and forestry bylaws, conflict of interest policies, model criteria for limited development conservation, land protection value assessment tools, etc.

Most successful groups have a designated coordinator and/or an active steering committee. A coordinator can encourage sharing of information and resources and leverage value from the activities of different groups. In addition they can:

- Coordinate a network of previously disparate organizations, achieving solutions that work for most or all;
- Convene joint fundraising activities e.g. proposing and facilitating regional Forest Legacy Project applications;
- Create a database of conserved lands, update GIS data layers, produce maps for other groups to use; and,
- Build the capacity of local all-volunteer land trusts.

The coordinators of some of these partnerships could organize and administer a land protection aggregation project. In turn, a successful aggregation project requires strong, trusting relations between partners and would accelerate the evolution of these partnerships. Following a successful regional aggregation project, groups may be better positioned to solve other conservation and stewardship challenges as well as larger aggregation campaigns. Collaboration in overcoming challenges would help to build stronger working relationships between the partners.

#### Case Study: How Funding Regional Conservation Partnerships Will Increase the Pace of Land Protection

Seven regional conservation partnerships in Massachusetts developed a joint fundraising proposal in 2009. These groups proposed that with modest funding, they could increase the state-wide rate of land protection across the Commonwealth by 25%, from 24,000 acres to 30,000 acres by limiting activities to what worked best. Their methods would focus primarily on engaging and educating landowners and town opinion leaders about land conservation and management.

In designing their proposal, the coordinators of the four more seasoned partnerships tabulated the results of the previous years' efforts. Among the wide variety of activities that each regional partnership funded, direct outreach to landowners and town officials were thought to be the main cause for their successes. Each partnership protected on average 700 acres of land and helped two towns pass the Community Preservation Act (CPA) per year. They also realized that to reach their 25% target, they would need to refocus their efforts on these two types of outreach activities. Their plan rests on each group greatly increasing outreach to: 1) 115 more landowners per year who are interested in conserving their land, 2) 15 more towns per year to pass the CPA, and 3) 25 more towns interested in acquiring donations of land and conservation restrictions as well as in applying for state and federal conservation grants. The four partnerships estimate that these activities would result in increasing the number of acres protected from 700 to 1,400 acres per year per group. In addition, their plans include collaborating with three emerging regional conservation partnerships in Massachusetts so that

each conserves on average 1,000 acres a year. Together the increases would amount to their target of nearly 6,000 acres, a 25% jump in the number of acres protected annually in 2008. As the number of regional conservation partnerships serving woodland council functions increases, additional gains would be seen. With future federal and state investments in land protection aggregation projects, the 40,000 acre and 60,000 acre targets could be met in Massachusetts, and much larger gains would be seen New England-wide.

The regional conservation partnerships believe that the above outcomes will result from building the capacity in three main areas:

- Funding a coordinator's position in each partnership to coordinate, support and manage these outreach activities as well as to facilitate regional aggregation phases, fundraising, and future ecosystem service payments (e.g. carbon credits);
- Increasing the availability of targeted funds for pre-appraisals and due diligence costs; and in,
- Maintaining a revolving loan fund of at least \$25,000 in each region for appraisals.

### Conclusion

Any bold conservation vision or initiative like Wildlands and Woodlands needs local "buy in" and support from municipalities and landowners for the vision to become reality. By working together through regional conservation partnerships, public and private groups and agencies can engage landowners and municipalities to join their efforts and help promote the conservation of the woodlands, wildlands, farmlands and wetlands in their region. These partnerships "grease the wheels" and ensure that the land conservation funds, grants, incentives, and policies can be understood and utilized by the local landowner and municipal official. By resourcing regional conservation partnerships to focus on woodland council functions, more landowners will be educated and inspired to protect their land, and receive the necessary support to do so. In addition, more municipal officials will understand the positive financial results of land conservation and support grant writing, zoning, and local bonding or self-taxation efforts to conserve their local and regional landscapes. Even further gains will be achieved when these regional conservation partnerships coordinate their activities to achieve bold conservation visions for New England and beyond.

## APPENDIX

### List of 22 Regional Conservation Partnerships involved in Highstead's Research

Rensselaer Plateau Alliance, Inc. (NY)  
Fairfield County Regional Conservation Partnership (CT)  
Litchfield Hills Greenprint Project (CT)  
Pawcatuck Borderlands Project (CT/RI)  
MassConn Sustainable Forest Partnership (MA)  
North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership (MA)  
Pioneer Valley Land Trust Group (MA)  
Westfield Highlands Forest Partnership (MA)  
Taunton Watershed Coalition (MA)  
Quabbin to Cardigan Partnership (NH/MA)  
Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership (NH)  
Chittenden County Uplands Conservation Project (VT)  
Chateauguy No-town Project (VT)  
Orange County Headwaters Project (VT)  
Mt. Agamenticus To the Sea Conservation Initiative (ME)  
Lower Penobscot Watershed Coalition (ME)  
High Peaks Initiative (ME)  
Portland North Land Trust Collaborative (ME)  
Upland Headwaters Alliance (ME)  
12-Rivers Collaborative (ME)

### Partnerships not participating in Phase II of the research

Wachusett Working Lands Partnership (MA)  
Berkshire Conservation Collaboration (MA)