

MOHAWK TRAIL WOODLANDS PARTNERSHIP - JUNE 2020 UPDATE

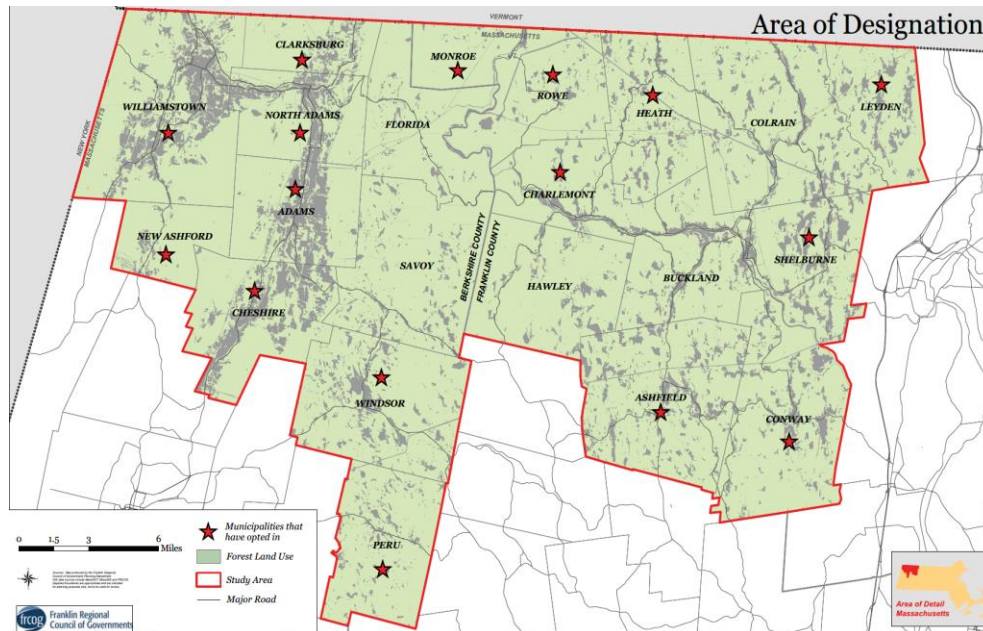
A Forest-Based Economic Development and Conservation Project



Purpose: To bring recognition and additional financial and technical resources to 21 municipalities in northwestern Massachusetts, via a locally led partnership with support from U.S. Forest Service and the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs to:

- Increase sustainable economic development related to forestry and natural resource-based tourism;
- Support forest conservation on private lands and use of sustainable forestry practices; and
- Improve fiscal stability and sustainability of the municipalities.

MTWP Eligibility Area: The 21-town MTWP area in the northwestern corner of Massachusetts is roughly 82% forested and encompasses Adams, Cheshire, Clarksburg, Florida, New Ashford, North Adams, Peru, Savoy, Williamstown and Windsor in Berkshire County, and Ashfield, Buckland, Charlemont, Colrain, Conway, Hawley, Heath, Leyden, Monroe, Rowe, and Shelburne in Franklin County.



MTWP BOARD HOLDS FIRST MEETING

The first meeting of the MTWP Board was held on January 28, 2020 at the Berkshire East Ski Lodge in Charlemont. Eighteen Board members attended, representing MTWP towns and regional organizations. The Board unanimously voted to elect Hank Art (Williamstown) as Chair, and Rick Chandler (Ashfield) as Vice Chair. Bylaws were also adopted at the meeting.

NEXT STEPS

> Towns in the region have two years from the passage of the State legislation creating the MTWP (August 2018) to opt-in to the partnership through a vote by the Select Board, Mayor, or Town Meeting. To date, 16 towns in the MTWP region have voted to opt-in to the partnership. Once a town opts-in, they can appoint a representative to the MTWP Board.

> On November 21, 2019, the Chief of the U.S. Forest Service and the MA Secretary of Energy & Environmental Affairs signed a Shared Stewardship Agreement to provide technical assistance to the MTWP to support the goals of the Partnership (see page 3). A USFS Liaison will attend the next Board meeting to discuss possible research projects in the MTWP region.

> Short-term tasks for the Board include nominating an Executive Committee, hiring staff to support the MTWP, and updating the MTWP Plan with a new round of public outreach and data analysis.

MTWP PROJECT WEBSITE:

mohawktrailwoodlandpartnership.org

ADAMS & MTWP RECEIVE \$1.5M FOR CLIMATE ADAPTATION & RESILIENCY

In February, the MA Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs (EEA) announced almost \$1.5 million in funding awarded to the Town of Adams (lead applicant) and other MTWP towns through the Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) program. The funding will be used for stormwater management resiliency projects and to assess the potential for forest carbon market projects and payments to landowners in the region. The project is the largest single grant award so far through the MVP program.



Damage to a road in Colrain during Tropical Storm Irene.

MTWP IMPLEMENTATION GRANTS AWARDED

Ten MTWP towns and the Franklin Regional Council of Governments were awarded a total of \$260,000 through EEA's MTWP Grant Program, established specifically to fund projects in the MTWP region related to the goals of the partnership. The grants will fund recreational trail improvements, forest stewardship plans, environmental education, forest carbon project assessment, and an inventory of the region's nature-based tourism infrastructure. A second round of implementation grants was announced in March; applications are due by June 18.

The woodlands of this area provide a variety of opportunities and benefits. People are drawn to the area for its natural resource-based tourism activities such as hiking, skiing, biking, camping, fishing and snowmobiling. A significant number of people make their living off the woodlands, whether running recreation-based businesses, cutting and selling firewood off their woodlots, harvesting timber for furniture or flooring, working as foresters, or selling maple syrup. Forests provide critical ecological services including water supply recharge and protection, wildlife habitat and diversity, water and air purification and carbon sequestration.

Project Background: Public and stakeholder input about the State designation and potential Federal designation has been and still is a key component of the Project. **Over 60 public meetings** have occurred since the start of the project to discuss and shape the project and get feedback. The project team - Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG), the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC) and the Franklin Land Trust (FLT), in partnership with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) – initiated the project in 2013 with regional and town-by-town public outreach sessions. Input from these sessions helped shape the project plan and goals.

A key recommendation from the community meetings was the formation of an Advisory Committee to help oversee the specifics of any designation. The **MTWP Advisory Committee** has met regularly since 2014 to craft a project plan, the State legislation, and a draft business plan and governance structure. The Committee was comprised of representatives from 20 of the 21 towns, appointed by the Select Board or Mayor, and regional appointments representing land conservation, economic development, forestry, and the environment. In 2014, the project team expanded to include a liaison with the U.S. Forest Service. The MTWP Advisory Committee has been replaced by the MTWP Governing Board (see side bar Page 1).

The MTWP project has several programmatic priorities that will be given the greatest level of effort once State and Federal funding is secured including: Forest Land Conservation; Municipal



Financial Sustainability; Sustainable Forestry Practices; and Forest & Natural Resource Based Economic Development & Tourism. These funding priorities were identified through the public outreach process and research conducted by the project team. Each programmatic priority has specific implementation activities (outlined on page 4).

State and Federal Legislation: In 2016, project team members met with 20 of the 21 towns to gauge interest in proceeding with a special designation for the region, to be created through State and Federal legislation. Most of the towns provided **letters of support** to proceed with the State legislation. The Advisory Committee and project team prepared draft State legislation that would create the Partnership according to the goals and framework outlined in the plan. The legislation was filed with the Massachusetts Legislature in January 2017 by legislators representing the region. A Public Hearing on the proposed MTWP legislation was held in Boston at the State House on October 10, 2017 by the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Natural Resources and the Environment. Members of the MTWP Advisory Committee attended the hearing to testify in support of the MTWP legislation. Revisions were proposed to the legislation in January 2018 to address comments from the Public Hearing, and in March 2018, the revised legislation was reported out of Committee favorably. In August 2018, the legislation passed as part of the Environmental Bond Bill. Towns have the opportunity to “opt-in” to formally join the Partnership via a vote of the Select Board or Town Meeting during the 2 year opt-in period following passage of the legislation. Beginning in 2020, the project has transitioned to the MTWP Board, and Federal legislation is being pursued based on the State legislation. As of June 2020, 16 of the 21 eligible municipalities have opted in.

Funding and Business Model: By creating a special designation and funding appropriation by State and Federal law, the MTWP can receive State and Federal funding to support the goals of the partnership. The proposed funding request of \$30 million assumes a total Federal contribution over 4 years of \$24 million and a State contribution over the same timeframe of \$6 million. The intent of the proposed business model for the MTWP is to create a financial structure that can be **self-sustaining** over the long term. The bulk of the initial funding received would be used to establish and capitalize an “Investment Trust Fund” which would generate sufficient income by Year 5 to sustain key elements of the program over the long term. After the initial appropriations, funding via grants, donations and other activities would be

SHARED STEWARDSHIP FRAMEWORK

Under the Shared Stewardship Framework signed in November 2019 by Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen and Massachusetts Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) Secretary Kathleen Theoharides in Charlemont, the U.S. Forest Service will designate a project liaison to the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership and will assist on forest research and expanding natural resource-based tourism. This is the first Shared Stewardship Agreement in the 20-state Eastern Region and the first in one of the ten states that do not have a National Forest.



MTWP Advisory Committee members and regional planning staff attend the signing of the Shared Stewardship Agreement on November 21, 2019.

“As we work to address climate change, Massachusetts’ forests are critical to our efforts to both reduce greenhouse gas emissions and ensure the resilience of our communities,” said Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Kathleen Theoharides. “We are grateful for the support that the Forest Service will provide the Mohawk Trail Woodlands through this Shared Stewardship Agreement.”

<https://www.mass.gov/news/baker-polito-administration-and-usda-forest-service-sign-stewardship-agreement-to-support>

MTWP BOARD COMPOSITION

The Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership is a cooperative association of municipalities and regional organizations working collaboratively to achieve the purposes described in the legislation. As outlined in the State legislation, the composition of the Partnership Board is as follows:

- One member appointed by each municipality that has “opted in” to the Partnership (minimum of 11)
- One member appointed from each of the following regional, State, and Federal entities:
 - Berkshire Regional Planning Commission
 - Berkshire Natural Resources Council
 - Deerfield River Watershed Association
 - Franklin Land Trust
 - Franklin Regional Council of Governments
 - Greater Shelburne Falls Area Business Association
 - Hoosic River Watershed Association
 - Lever, Inc.
 - Massachusetts Forest Alliance
 - MA Chapter of Yankee Divisions of New England Society of American Foresters
 - MA Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs (EEA)
 - UMASS Amherst Public Health & Health Sciences Faculty
 - UMass Amherst Forest Ecosystems, Carbon Cycling in Terrestrial Systems & Climate Change Faculty
 - U.S. Forest Service (if authorized)

The Executive Committee shall consist of five members, including two municipal representatives, one EEA representative, one U.S. Forest Service representative, and one regional organization representative.

needed to supplement some programmatic activities. The State legislation established a MTWP Fund, but did not provide funding. However, MA EEA announced MTWP Implementation Grants in November 2019 (see side bar on Page 2).

Other proposed expenditures if funding is received are:

1. Design, construction and operation of the Mohawk Trail Forest Center, a multi-purpose facility that would provide: a.) tourism services; b.) technical assistance to private forest landowners and businesses to implement sustainable forestry practices; c.) opportunities for research to address climate change, invasive species or to develop new wood based products; d.) a marketing program to promote the sale of local wood products; and e.) public education about forest ecology.
2. Protection of approximately 2,100 acres of forest land via conservation restrictions with willing landowners with land remaining in private ownership and on the tax rolls.
3. Capitalization of a Revolving Loan Fund to support natural resource businesses.
4. Creation of a Forest Viability Program with grants provided to forest-based businesses in exchange for a temporary restriction on forest land.
5. Establishment of “Municipal Cooperative Agreements” that provide annual grants to participating towns to support municipal services or operations related to the goals of the Partnership such as tourism-related emergency response or recreational trails.
6. Grants or technical assistance to private landowners and towns to prepare sustainable forest management plans and implement recommendations.
7. Grants for sustainable natural resource-based recreational tourism.

Decision Making: The MTWP has transitioned from the MTWP Advisory Committee to the **MTWP Board**. The Board includes representatives from all towns that have voted to participate as well as regional organizations (see side bar) and will be responsible for making key decisions and implementing the goals of the partnership. Funding is being sought to staff the MTWP with an Executive Director and an Administrative Assistant. As proposed, staff would be supported by at least one (1) high level staff person from the U.S. Forest Service that ideally would be located at the Mohawk Trail Forest Center. This staff person would coordinate services and technical assistance with the Executive Director. The U.S. Forest Service could also partner with the State, a Town or a private landowner to establish a “Research Forest” to study climate change and sustainable forest management practices.