

# Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership - NOVEMBER 2019 UPDATE

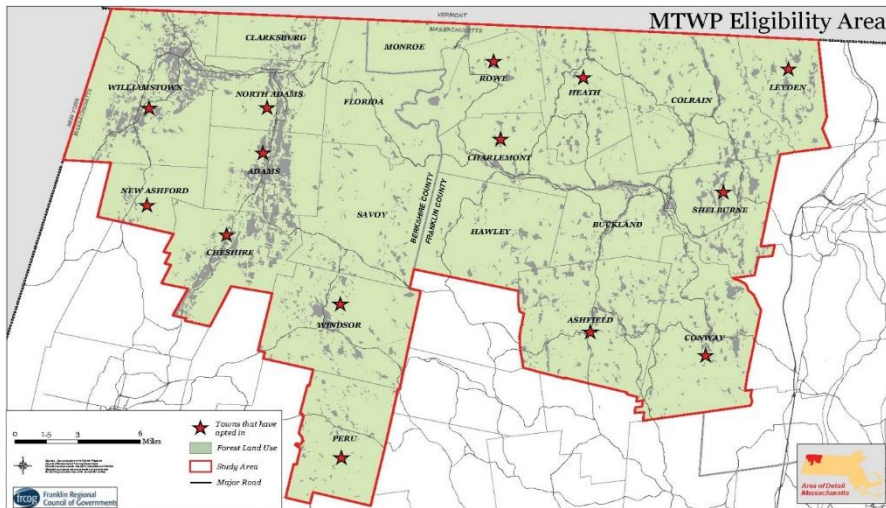
## A Forest-Based Economic Development and Conservation Project



**Purpose:** To bring recognition and additional financial and technical resources to 21 municipalities in northwestern Massachusetts, primarily via special designation by the 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.



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



### MTWP STATUS

State legislation establishing the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership passed as part of the State Environmental Bond Bill in August 2018, as amended by Governor Baker in December 2018. Towns in the region have two years from the passage of the legislation to opt-in to the partnership through a vote by the Select Board, Mayor, or Town Meeting. Fourteen towns in the MTWP region have voted to participate in the partnership as of November 2019.

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.

### NEXT STEPS

Establishment of the MTWP Board and bylaws is underway. A first meeting of the Board is tentatively scheduled for January 2020 to nominate and elect officers and to adopt bylaws.

### MTWP PROJECT WEBSITE

To learn more about the project, find a copy of the legislation, or contact project team partners, visit:

[mohawktrailwoodlandpartnership.org](http://mohawktrailwoodlandpartnership.org)

## MTWP IMPLEMENTATION GRANTS NOW AVAILABLE!

In support of the goals of the MTWP, the MA Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs (EEA) is offering grants of up to \$20,000 to communities that have voted to participate in the partnership (or that opt-in before signing a grant contract with EEA). Eligible activities must advance the goals of increasing economic development related to sustainable forestry and natural resource-based tourism, or increasing forest conservation and sustainable forestry on private and municipal lands. Examples of eligible projects include:

- Studies or inventories to support a carbon credit market project or forest stewardship planning activities.
- Projects to support outdoor recreation such as signage, tourism facilities, & trail repairs.
- Educational exhibits about sustainable forestry.
- Education or assistance to landowners to support sustainable forestry.
- Design, planning, or other activities to prepare a project for other grant funding opportunities.
- Acquisition of trail easements, river corridor easements, or town forest or conservation land.

**Applications are due by January 9, 2020**, and can be found on COMMBUYS by searching by the BID number (20-1042-ENV-ENV01-45719) or typing in Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership in the name section.



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 potential State and Federal designation has been and still is a key component of the Project. **Over 60 community meetings** open to the public 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 is currently 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 will be replaced by the MTWP Governing Board.

The MTWP Advisory Committee recommended five (5) programmatic priorities that would be given the greatest level of effort once State and Federal funding is secured:

- Forest Land Conservation
- Municipal Financial Sustainability
- Sustainable Forestry Practices
- Forest Based Economic Development
- Natural Resource Based 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 now 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. As of November 2019, 14 of the 21 municipalities have opted in. Beginning in 2020, the project will transition to the MTWP Board, and Federal legislation will be pursued based on the State legislation.

**Funding and Business Model:** By creating a special designation, 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 income generating activities would be needed to supplement some programmatic activities. The State legislation established a MTWP Fund, but did

## MA RURAL POLICY PLAN RELEASED

In October the MA Rural Policy Advisory Commission (RPAC) released its *Rural Policy Plan for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*. The Plan identifies, highlights and offers policy recommendations related to the unique issues and challenges faced by rural MA, and addresses 15 Focus Areas that were identified through listening sessions held across the state in late 2018. The goal of the Plan is to provide a thorough but succinct outline of each Focus Area that identifies the issues and highlights sub-regional differences, describes current related state policies and best practices from Massachusetts or other States, and provides prioritized recommendations.

An overarching recommendation is to create an Office of Rural Policy to provide purposed focus on rural issues and advance the recommendations of the Plan. The Plan is available at: <https://frcog.org/ma-rural-policy-plan-released/>



## 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.

not provide an appropriation. However, MA EEA announced availability of 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 and development to address climate change, invasive species or to develop new wood based products; d.) a marketing program and gallery to promote the sale of local wood products; and e.) public education about the ecological benefits of forest management.
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 road maintenance or tourism-related emergency response.
6. Grants or technical assistance to private landowners to prepare forest management plans and implement recommendations.
7. Grants for natural resource-based recreational development or promotion.

**Decision Making:** Currently this effort is transitioning 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 could 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.