

# Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) about the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership

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Prepared by the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Advisory Committee

## **Introduction**

The Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership is a community driven project of 21 towns in Western Franklin and Northern Berkshire Counties that was started in 2013 to support forest conservation in the region, a recommendation of the Regional Plans for Sustainable Development completed in 2013 by the Regional Planning Agencies for communities in Franklin and Berkshire Counties. Community input expanded the goals of the project to include natural resource based economic development and improving the financial sustainability of participating towns.

The region is unique because of the convergence of several different types of forests, which results in great diversity for an area this size. However, it is also an economically distressed area suffering from population loss, low wages and strained municipal budgets. Communities in the region are struggling to keep their schools open, their roads plowed and their limited town budgets from going into the red. Maintaining forests and farms and a natural resource based economy is essential to providing jobs while maintaining the rural way of life.

The 21 towns are collaborating with the Franklin Regional Council of Governments, the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, the Franklin Land Trust, the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, non-profit organizations working in the region, and a U.S. Forest Service Liaison. 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 (added October 2015), Savoy, Williamstown and Windsor in Berkshire County, and Ashfield, Buckland, Charlemont, Colrain, Conway, Hawley, Heath, Leyden, Monroe, Rowe, and Shelburne in Franklin County.

The forests of this region provide important wildlife habitat, clean water and air, carbon storage, recreational opportunities, rural character, local jobs and renewable wood products. The MTWP will help conserve the region's forests and will bring new sources of funding and assistance to landowners, communities, and local businesses. It will bring the expertise of the U.S. Forest Service; the Commonwealth; and local conservation, forestry and economic development non-profits to work alongside town representatives. The MTWP has an active Advisory Committee that participates in all aspects of the project.

State legislation has been filed to formally establish the MTWP, which will enable the 21-town region to pursue State and Federal funds to implement the priorities and goals of the project. Federal legislation will also be needed if the State legislation is adopted to allow the U.S. Forest Service to participate in the MTWP, bringing its suite of financial and technical resources to the

region. The guiding principle of the MTWP is to support forest conservation and natural resource based economic development that sustains the region's ecosystems while improving the financial viability of municipalities. This FAQ is organized according to the 3 goals of the MTWP.

## **Forest Conservation**

### **1. How will forest land be conserved through the MTWP?**

If financial support is received, MTWP funds would be used to purchase permanent conservation restrictions from willing private landowners. A model conservation restriction has been drafted for the MTWP based on input from the MTWP Advisory Committee. A *conservation restriction*, also known as a conservation easement, protects specified conservation values including the natural, scenic or open condition of the land while allowing certain uses like agriculture, forestry, and recreation. Conservation restrictions permanently protect forest land and keep the land in private ownership. Any conservation restrictions purchased through the MTWP would be held by the municipality, a local land trust or the State.

Technical assistance on forest conservation will also be provided to landowners whether or not they want to permanently protect their land. The MTWP will help landowners create long term plans to care for their land to support wildlife habitat and to address invasive pests and plants and other threats to the health of their forests. It can also assist landowners to sustainably manage their land to provide local wood products or recreational opportunities which generate income.

### **2. Could more be done to protect large blocks of forest in the MTWP region and tie them into protection efforts?**

While many rural areas in Massachusetts have been lost to suburban development, the 21-Town region of western Franklin and northern Berkshire Counties remains largely un-fragmented and intact. From an ecological perspective, the region is a convergence of different types of forests, with an astounding amount of diversity for a region this size. However, funding is scarce for the protection of smaller forested land parcels that make up the large blocks of forest. One of the MTWP's objectives is to secure additional funding for forest conservation to allow local land trusts to supplement their forest protection efforts. In addition, the MTWP could provide land owners with more information and tools about how to best protect their lands.

### **3. Will landowners who place a conservation restriction on their land be required to harvest their forestland?**

Active forestry will be optional for landowners, however priority for funding would be given to land that has a track record of sustainable forest management. Any forestry on lands conserved with MTWP funds would need to use sustainable forestry best practices which consider a wide range of environmental factors, and which follow all existing State forestry laws. Sustainable Forest Management, as defined by the MTWP legislation, is the carefully planned growing, management, monitoring, harvesting and regeneration of woodlands that conserves or promotes biological diversity, ecological functions, soil productivity, water and air quality, carbon sequestration and storage, and cultural resources and recreational use of the forest while also

providing a continuous yield of a range of useable forest products.

**4. How can sustainable forest management benefit forest health and communities?**

Although forests may appear the same year after year, forests are always changing. Sustainable forest management can alter the amount of light and water available to favor specific trees, or manage the spacing of the trees to optimize the health of the remaining forest. Additionally, forests can be managed to promote native tree species by removing invasive plants, insects and diseases. Sustainable forest management is an important strategy for landowners to offset the expenses of land ownership, enhance wildlife habitat, create recreational trails, and address invasive plants and pests. It also creates local jobs from this renewable resource.

**5. How will sustainable forest management in the MTWP impact climate change?**

Trees naturally cycle and continually absorb, or sequester, carbon from the atmosphere, one of the leading causes of climate change. In fact almost 50% of a tree's weight is carbon. Maintaining a resilient forest with a diversity of tree ages and species helps ensure that our forests will continue to store and sequester additional carbon, a critical strategy to address climate change and its serious impacts to both nature and people. The MTWP will help landowners conserve their forests and address the impacts of climate change. In addition, using local wood forest products for furniture, flooring, and timber for building construction keeps carbon stored for many decades.

**6. Will this create a National Forest or increase regulations in the 21-town region?**

No. Ownership of land by the U.S. Forest Service is not allowed under the MTWP legislation. All land that is conserved with any funding received by the MTWP will remain in private ownership. Participation of municipalities and landowners in the MTWP will be strictly voluntary. No additional regulations or takings are included in the MTWP legislation.

**7. My town already has a significant amount of conserved land – why do we need more?**

Only approximately 28% of the land area in the 21-town region is permanently protected. While there is a significant amount of land in Chapter 61, this land is only temporarily restricted and can be developed at any time for residential or other uses in accordance with local zoning. Many landowners in the region want to conserve their land but cannot afford to donate a conservation restriction on their land. The MTWP would provide a much needed source of funding to pay landowners for their development rights, which would keep the forest land in private ownership and permanently protect it from development.

Because some municipalities already have a large percentage of the land permanently conserved and are concerned about more being conserved, the proposed State legislation allows any participating municipality with more than 40% of permanently protected open space to approve or deny the purchase of a conservation restriction with funding from the MTWP.

## **Natural Resource Based Economic Development**

### **8. Why is the MTWP project important to the 21-town region?**

The 21-town region has a rich history of human interaction with the land, from agriculture and forestry to outdoor recreation and tourism. It is a unique area with a convergence of different forest types. This diversity and history, coupled with the educational resources that are available in the region, provide an opportunity for research and innovation that can be instructive for many other places. At the same time, the region's resources and sense of place provide a backbone for what can be a sustainable, vital rural economy into the future. An investment in the forest resources and economic potential of this region by the State and U.S. Forest Service would help support rural towns and preserve the ecosystem services that improve the quality of life for everyone in the State.

### **9. Why is natural resource based economic development a goal of the MTWP?**

During the public meetings for the MTWP, economic development was emphasized by community members given the decline in population, loss of businesses, and low wages in the region. Communities in the region are among the most economically distressed in Massachusetts with wages at roughly 60% of the State average weekly wage and per capita income 22% lower than the State. A significant area of woodlands that is conserved can support forestry and recreation businesses in the area. Support businesses tend to spring up that could include recreational and forestry equipment sales and repair, outfitter services, professional forestry services, restaurants and lodging. An economic development goal of the MTWP is to support an environment where residents can find more opportunities to start or expand a local business. Helping landowners keep their forests and promoting natural resource economic development can produce vibrant and sustainable communities.

### **10. What are the economic benefits of forest conservation?**

The forests of western Massachusetts provide the Commonwealth with a wide array of invaluable services such as clean air and water, wildlife habitat, scenic views, carbon sequestration, opportunities for hiking, hunting, and fishing, and forest products such as maple sugar, and wood products like furniture and flooring. To ensure the long term viability of the forests and their communities, the project seeks to make owning forest land economically viable for private landowners. Conserving forests and sustainably managing them can enhance the many benefits which forests afford while also providing local wood and forest products. Massachusetts currently imports approximately 98% of the wood products we use every year.<sup>1</sup> Using locally grown wood products can benefit the local economy, reduce our use of wood from forests elsewhere, and benefit the rural character of the region by helping landowners maintain their forests instead of selling land for development.

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<sup>1</sup> Berlik, M.M., D.B. Kittredge, and D.R. Foster. 2002. The Illusion of Preservation: a global environmental argument for the local production of natural resources. Harvard Forest Paper No. 26, Harvard Forest, Harvard University, Petersham, MA..

**11. How will the MTWP support natural resource based economic development in the region?**

As currently envisioned, funding would be allocated to help stimulate natural resource based economic development, including the creation of a multi-purpose Forest Center. At MTWP public meetings a multi-purpose Forest Center was a popular suggestion. The Forest Center could: market local wood products and provide tourism services; provide technical assistance to landowners on sustainable forest management practices; provide public education about the ecological services forests provide; and support research and development on climate change, invasive species and innovative wood products. In addition, a Revolving Loan Fund and Forest Viability program are proposed to provide funding to natural resource based businesses in the region involved in forest products and recreational tourism.

**12. How will the MTWP balance conserving forest resources as it works to expand natural resource based economic development?**

The MTWP board will oversee the development of programs and guidelines in accordance with the goals and principals of the MTWP established in the State enabling legislation. The State legislation requires the use of sustainable forest management practices for any management activities related to the MTWP. The MTWP governing board will be comprised of town appointed representatives and regional organizations representing conservation, the environment, planning, forestry, public health, forest ecosystems and economic development.

At least 11 of the 21 towns must “opt-in” (vote affirmatively that they want to participate) before any actions of the partnership could occur. Town representatives will be appointed by Select Boards or the Mayor. Other current participating organizations are listed in Question 19 with additional representatives in public health and forest ecosystems included in the proposed legislation. This diverse group would oversee policies and programs of the MTWP to ensure a balanced approach. In addition, the MTWP would follow existing regulations governing public health, land use (e.g. zoning), and forest cutting practices which would not be impacted by the funding or programs of the MTWP.

**13. How would the MTWP legislation impact the construction of a wood pellet manufacturing facility?**

Using local wood for heat in houses and community buildings as an alternative to oil heat was an idea that community members showed interest in during public outreach meetings about this project. As a result, the MA Department of Energy Resources is undertaking a study to examine the potential supply, demand, and environmental and air quality impacts of wood heat in this region. The supply study has been completed at this point. The UMASS Clean Energy Extension has been engaged to complete the remaining components of the study. However, reflecting public input, the proposed State legislation prohibits the use of any funding received by the MTWP for the construction or operation of a wood pellet manufacturing facility.

**14. Will the MTWP increase harmful emissions from burning wood or reduce carbon storage in forests?**

Some community members are concerned that using modern energy efficient wood heat systems will increase emissions that impact air quality and human health. To address this concern about potential air quality impacts from modern energy efficient wood heat systems, a study on Wood Heat System Emissions and a Public Health Assessment is being conducted by the UMASS Department of Environmental Health Sciences. In addition, the MTWP Advisory Committee has recommended expanding the MTWP Board (if the legislation passes), that will oversee all activities of the Partnership, to include a representative with public health expertise.

Given concerns raised about climate change and carbon storage impacts, the MTWP Advisory Committee has also recommended expanding the MTWP Board (if the legislation passes) to include a representative with expertise in ecosystem functions, carbon cycling and/or climate change. In addition, the legislation strongly emphasizes the importance of carbon storage and sequestration. The MTWP is also exploring the possibility of a carbon market credit project that would focus on the storage of carbon and generate revenues for forest landowners.

**Municipal Financial Sustainability**

**15. What is the role of the municipalities in the MTWP?**

If the State legislation passes, each municipality will have the opportunity to vote to participate in the MTWP either by a Select Board or Town Meeting vote. The municipalities that opt into the MTWP will appoint a town representative to the MTWP governing “Board” that will oversee all aspects of the Partnership. Each town that participates will sit on the MTWP Board, which will be a voluntary position. The MTWP Board will be responsible for advancing the goals established by the MTWP legislation.

**16. How will the MTWP impact municipalities’ fiscal stability?**

An increase in natural resource based economic development, may result in a stronger tax base. However, additional recreational tourism in the region may result in greater demand for municipal services such as emergency response. The towns that opt in to the MTWP will be eligible for municipal grants, if State or Federal funding is received, which they can use to implement the objectives of the MTWP plan. Some potential examples which municipalities could choose to use the grants for include upgrading or creating trails and tourism facilities, connecting trail networks, and training or equipment for emergency response activities related to recreational tourism.

**17. Will the MTWP increase the tax-exempt land in my town?**

The MTWP project will provide funding to purchase conservation restrictions or easements (CRs) with willing private landowners to permanently protect forest land. No increase in State or Federally owned land could occur using MTWP funding. Land protected with MTWP funding must remain in private ownership. Forest land that is already in Chapter 61 will be prioritized for funding for permanent protection. Consequently a reduction in tax revenues is not

expected as land tax assessments under CR's are generally equal to or greater than Chapter 61 land.

**18. Have local residents had a chance to voice their opinion on this project?**

Yes. The project team has held or participated in approximately 60 public meetings in all 21 towns to solicit feedback and ideas on the MTWP over the past 4 years. The MTWP's goals and programs are a direct result of the ideas generated and discussed at these meetings. Most of the 21 towns have submitted letters of support in favor of proceeding with this legislation. An Advisory Committee currently consisting of representatives from 19 of the municipalities and 10 regional organizations continues to meet quarterly to shape this project.

**19. What municipalities and organizations are included or provide support to the MTWP Advisory Committee?**

- Municipalities in the 21-town MTWP region
- Franklin Regional Council of Governments
- Berkshire Regional Planning Commission
- Franklin Land Trust
- Berkshire Natural Resources Council
- Deerfield River Watershed Association
- Hoosic River Watershed Association
- Massachusetts Forest Alliance
- Massachusetts Chapter of the Yankee Division of the New England Society of American Foresters
- Greater Shelburne Falls Area Business Association
- Lever, Inc.
- Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environment
- U.S. Forest Service liaison

**20. What will the U.S. Forest Service's involvement be in the MTWP?**

The U.S. Forest Service's (Forest Service) mission is to help care for our Nation's forests. Where the forests are privately owned, the Forest Service helps by providing technical and financial assistance to forest landowners. Acceptance of Forest Service assistance is strictly voluntary. The MTWP seeks technical assistance for local communities and landowners. Municipalities are responsible for roads, search and rescue, providing clean water to residents and visitors, and encouraging economic opportunities. The Forest Service has over 100 years of experience caring for forests including addressing insect and disease outbreaks, invasive species, and fire. In addition, the Forest Service has extensive experience managing forest land for watershed protection, public recreation, and wildlife habitat.

The Forest Service has three main branches of expertise that the MTWP could access. One, the National Forest Systems can provide technical assistance in forestry, engineering of roads and trails, recreation, watershed, wildlife, invasive species, and fire. Another branch of the Forest Service is Forest Research, which includes the Forest Products Lab (FPL) that conducts

research into innovative wood products. The third branch of the Forest Service is State & Private Forestry, which has expertise in working with private landowners and managing cooperative agreements and grants for programs of interest to the MTWP. The Forest Service involvement in the MTWP will be dependent on Federal legislation but it is hoped that a Forest Service employee would participate on the MTWP Board to advance the goals of the MTWP and could coordinate technical assistance from the three branches of the Forest Service. The Forest Service views the MTWP as an innovative approach that could serve as a model to other areas of the country.

## **21. How will the MTWP accomplish the goals of the project?**

State and Federal funding is being pursued to create a sustainable Partnership over the long term. If any funding is received a business plan has been created that supports five (5) programmatic priorities that have been identified through an extensive public outreach process conducted over the last three years. The five (5) programmatic priorities are:

1. Natural Resource Based Economic Development
2. Forest Land Conservation
3. Municipal Financial Sustainability
4. Sustainable Forestry Practices
5. Recreational Tourism

If the Partnership is created and if funding is received an annual budget would need to be prepared that identifies sources and uses and this budget would require the approval of the MTWP Board. The Board and its Executive Committee would oversee the expenditures of any funding that is received in accordance with the purposes and goals of the Partnership outlined in the legislation and the Partnership Plan to be created. In addition, an annual audit would be required.

**For more information please visit the MTWP website: [mohawktrailwoodlandpartnership.org](http://mohawktrailwoodlandpartnership.org)**