

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

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Introduction

The Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership was started in 2013 as a community driven project for 21 towns in Western Franklin and Northern Berkshire Counties to support forest conservation in the region. Forest conservation was a key recommendation of the Regional Plans for Sustainable Development completed in 2013 by the Regional Planning Agencies for communities in Franklin and Berkshire Counties (Franklin Regional Council of Governments and Berkshire Regional Planning Commission). The 21-town area is roughly 82% forested. Community input expanded the goals of the project to include natural resource-based economic development and improving the financial sustainability of participating towns.

The 21 towns are 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 MTWP towns are collaborating with the Franklin Regional Council of Governments, the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, and environmental, land conservation, economic development, and forestry non-profit organizations working in the region. The U.S. Forest Service is also providing technical assistance on climate change research and tourism.

State legislation was filed to formally establish the MTWP which enables the 21-town region to jointly and individually pursue State and Federal funds to implement the priorities and goals of the project. The legislation was enacted in August 2018 as part of the Environmental Bond Bill. Sixteen communities have voted to “opt in” so far, allowing the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership governing board to be established. Federal legislation will also be needed to allow the U.S. Forest Service to participate on the MTWP Board, bringing its suite of financial and technical resources to the region.

This region is unique because of the range in topography and convergence of several different types of forests¹, which results in great diversity for an area of 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. A significant proportion of tax exempt state and non-profit owned land in several of the towns also constrains municipal budgets. Maintaining economically viable and ecologically sustainable forests and farms and a natural resource-based economy is essential to providing jobs while maintaining the rural way of life.

¹ Spruce-Fir; Northern Hardwoods; Oak-Hickory

The forests of this region provide important wildlife habitat, clean water and air, carbon sequestration and storage, recreational opportunities, rural character, local jobs and sustainable 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 of Massachusetts, and local conservation, forestry and economic development non-profits to work alongside town representatives. The MTWP has had an active Advisory Committee that participated in all aspects of the project.

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. The following FAQ section is organized according to the 3 goals of the MTWP.

Forest Conservation

1. How can forest land be conserved through the MTWP?

If sufficient financial support is received to establish an endowment, MTWP funds could 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, improve resiliency to climate change 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 3 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 collectively contribute to 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 can provide land owners with more information and tools about how to best protect their smaller woodlands.

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

Active forest management is an optional tool for landowners. For owners choosing this option, priority for funding would be given to land that has a track record of sustainable forestry practices. Any forest management 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, is defined by the MTWP legislation as the carefully planned growing, management, monitoring, harvesting and regeneration of woodland 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 from the region.

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

Although forests may appear the same year after year, they 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?

Living trees naturally cycle and continually absorb, or sequester, carbon from the atmosphere. Almost 50% of a tree's weight is carbon. Young forests (age 30-70 years) actively sequester more carbon per year, while older forests (over 100 years) store more carbon in total.² In addition, using local wood forest products for furniture, flooring, and timber for building construction keeps carbon stored in wood products for many decades. 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.

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.

² "Forest Carbon: An Essential Natural Solution to Climate Change," Paul Catanzaro, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and Anthony D'Amato, University of Vermont, 2019.

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 from development. While there is a significant amount of land in Chapter 61, this land is only temporarily protected 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 permanently conserved land and are concerned about more being conserved, the MTWP 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 significantly lower per capita income than the State. A significant area of woodlands that is conserved and sustainably managed can support forestry and recreation businesses in the area including recreational and forestry equipment sales and repair, outfitter services, professional forestry consulting 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 natural resource-based businesses. Helping landowners keep their forests undeveloped while promoting natural resource-based economic development can produce vibrant and sustainable rural 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, and

opportunities for hiking, hunting, and fishing. In addition, forests provide products such as maple sugar, furniture and building materials. 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.³ 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.

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. Tourism and wood products businesses surveyed in the region expressed a strong interest in business assistance including marketing, networking and financial assistance.⁴

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 is 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 needed to “opt-in” (vote affirmatively that they want to participate) before any actions of the partnership could occur. To date, 16 towns have taken this step. Town representatives are appointed by Select Boards or the Mayor. Other current participating organizations are listed in Question 19 with additional representatives in public health and forest

³ 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.

⁴ WPI – Survey of Local Businesses by Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) Students; 2017

ecosystems included on the MTWP Board. This diverse group will oversee policies and programs of the MTWP to ensure a balanced approach. The MTWP will 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. In addition, the MTWP must follow State Finance, Ethics and Open Meeting Laws.

13. How would the MTWP legislation impact the potential 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 initially showed interest in during public outreach meetings about this project. As a result, the MA Department of Energy Resources undertook studies to examine the potential supply, demand, and environmental and air quality impacts of wood heat in this region. The supply study has been completed and the air quality study to determine if there are potential public health impacts from commercial scale wood pellet heating facilities is nearing completion. UMASS Department of Environmental Health Sciences is expected to issue a report on the air quality study in the near future. However, reflecting public input, the amended 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 has been conducted by the UMASS Department of Environmental Health Sciences and a report will be issued in the near future. In addition, the MTWP legislation expanded the MTWP Board, which 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 legislation also expanded the MTWP Board 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?

Each municipality has 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) from 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 over 60 public meetings in all 21 towns to solicit feedback and ideas on the MTWP over the past 5 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 submitted letters in support of proceeding with the legislation. An Advisory Committee consisting of representatives from 20 of the 21 municipalities and 10 regional organizations met quarterly to shape this project. Sixteen (16) towns have opted into the Partnership to date and the MTWP Board has been formed with town and regional organization representatives to replace the MTWP Advisory Committee.

19. What municipalities and organizations are included on the MTWP Board?

- Municipalities in the 21-town MTWP region that have opted into the MTWP
- Franklin Regional Council of Governments (planning)
- Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (planning)
- Franklin Land Trust (land conservation)
- Berkshire Natural Resources Council (land conservation)
- Deerfield River Watershed Association (environmental)

- Hoosic River Watershed Association (environmental)
- Massachusetts Forest Alliance (forestry)
- Massachusetts Chapter of the Yankee Division of the New England Society of American Foresters (forestry)
- Greater Shelburne Falls Area Business Association (business organization)
- Lever, Inc. (business organization)
- Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environment
- UMass Public Health & Health Sciences Faculty Member
- UMass Forest Ecosystems, Carbon Cycling in Terrestrial Systems and Climate Change Faculty Member
- 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 related to forestry, engineering of roads and trails, recreation, watershed management, wildlife protection, and invasive species. 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 is 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.

In the interim, a Shared Stewardship Agreement has been signed between the State Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs and the U.S. Forest Service to provide technical assistance to the MTWP region. The agreement will assist MTWP implementation activities by: designating a US

Forest Service Liaison to coordinate special projects; providing technical assistance to potentially establish a research forest focusing on sustainable forest management practices to address invasive species, diseases, and climate change; and technical assistance on recreation and tourism opportunities and strategies.

21. How will the MTWP accomplish the goals of the project and what are the benefits to towns?

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 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 MTWP 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. The MTWP Board is required to follow all applicable State Finance, Ethics and Open Meeting Laws.

Recently the Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs (EEA) offered grant funding of up to \$20,000 to each community that has voted to participate in the partnership. Eligible activities must advance the MTWP goals of supporting natural resource-based economic development or increasing forest conservation.

For more information please visit the MTWP website: mohawktrailwoodlandpartnership.org