

**DRAFT:**

# Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Ten-Year Plan: 2022-2032

## Land Acknowledgement

It is with gratitude and humility that we acknowledge that we are learning, speaking, working, and gathering on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican, Pocumtuc, and Abenaki people, who are the Indigenous Peoples of this land. We pay honor and respect to their ancestors past and present as we commit to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.

## Executive Summary

The Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership is a unique local effort to both conserve our forests and enhance our region's rural, land-based economy across the Northern Berkshire Mountains, hill towns, and riverside villages of northwestern Massachusetts.

In 2013, a group of citizens who live and work in the northwestern corner of the state came together as leaders and representatives from about 30 entities – towns, nonprofit organizations, practicing foresters, and business and academic organizations – to work cooperatively with the regional planning agencies in Franklin and Berkshire Counties, the State, and the U.S. Forest Service to create the Woodlands Partnership and further its goals.

The legislature of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts passed **authorizing legislation**<sup>1</sup> in 2018 to establish the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership (MTWP) as a public body, and to create both an operational Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Fund and an Investment Trust Fund for the region.

In November 2019, the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) and the U.S. Forest Service signed a **Shared Stewardship Framework** pledging cooperation on outreach and education to the communities, research and demonstration of “exemplary sustainable forest management practices,” and technical assistance related to local recreation and tourism.

---

<sup>1</sup> General Laws: Sections 89-91 Amended, Chapter 209 Acts of 2018.  
<https://malegislature.gov/laws/sessionlaws/acts/2018/chapter209>

Municipalities in the defined eligibility area [See map below] can vote by Select Board, town meeting, or Mayoral decision to join the Partnership and garner its benefits.<sup>2</sup> The first 11 towns to opt in sparked the creation of the MTWP Board, and, as of October 2022, 17 of 21 eligible towns have voted to join.

## The Place and Its People

The Northern Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts are rich with natural resources. The Deerfield and Hoosic Rivers flow through expanses of spruce-fir, northern hardwood, and transition oak-hickory forests among scenic mountains with farms and homes scattered along the rural roads of Western Franklin and Northern Berkshire Counties.

For thousands of years, Indigenous Peoples thrived in the area<sup>3</sup> before Europeans settled on unceded lands<sup>4</sup> to farm and establish small hamlets along the rivers. The principal tribes in the Berkshire Mountains were the Mohicans (Mahikans) in what is now Berkshire County, including the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans<sup>5</sup>, the Abenaki<sup>6</sup> in Franklin County, and the Pocumtuc<sup>7</sup> near Deerfield in areas flanking the Connecticut River. These tribal nations established a footpath, a corridor between the Connecticut and Hudson Rivers. The Mohawk<sup>8</sup> people were in the Hudson River Valley in what became New York State. In 1914, MA Route 2 – established largely following the Indigenous footpath – became the state’s first scenic highway, named the Mohawk Trail. Since then, millions of people have traveled to the Northern Berkshires and hill towns of western Franklin County to enjoy the region’s scenery, rural setting, natural resources, and the outdoor activities the mountains provide. These attractions have made tourism a prime economic driver for Main Street businesses and secluded recreation-based enterprises alike. In January 2021, the U.S. Department of Transportation designated the Mohawk Trail a National Scenic Byway.<sup>9</sup>

Today, many people, whether farmers or small business owners, make their living off the region’s woodlands by running recreation-based businesses, selling firewood from their woodlots, making and selling fine crafts and woodland products like maple syrup, harvesting

---

<sup>2</sup> Municipalities in the designated region can vote to join the MTWP. Towns that did not join by the 2020 legislative deadline must wait five years from the law’s 2018 passage, until 2023, to become full MTWP member towns (i.e., Hawley), but following their local vote to join, would be eligible to apply for a state grant program in the interim.

<sup>3</sup> Our Home on Native Land. <https://native-land.ca/>

<sup>4</sup> Many First Nations people never ceded or legally signed away their lands. Guide to Indigenous Land and Territorial Acknowledgements for Cultural Institutions. <https://opentextbc.ca/indigenizationfoundations/chapter/acknowledging-traditional-territories/#:~:text=Unceded%20means%20that%20First%20Nations,ancestors%20traditionally%20occupied%20and%20used>

<sup>5</sup> Stockbridge Munsee Community. <https://www.mohican.com/brief-history/>

<sup>6</sup> Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk Abenaki Nation. <https://abenakitribe.org/>

<sup>7</sup> Pocumtuc History. <http://www.dickshovel.com/pocu.html>

<sup>8</sup> Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe. <https://www.srmt-nsn.gov/about-the-tribe>

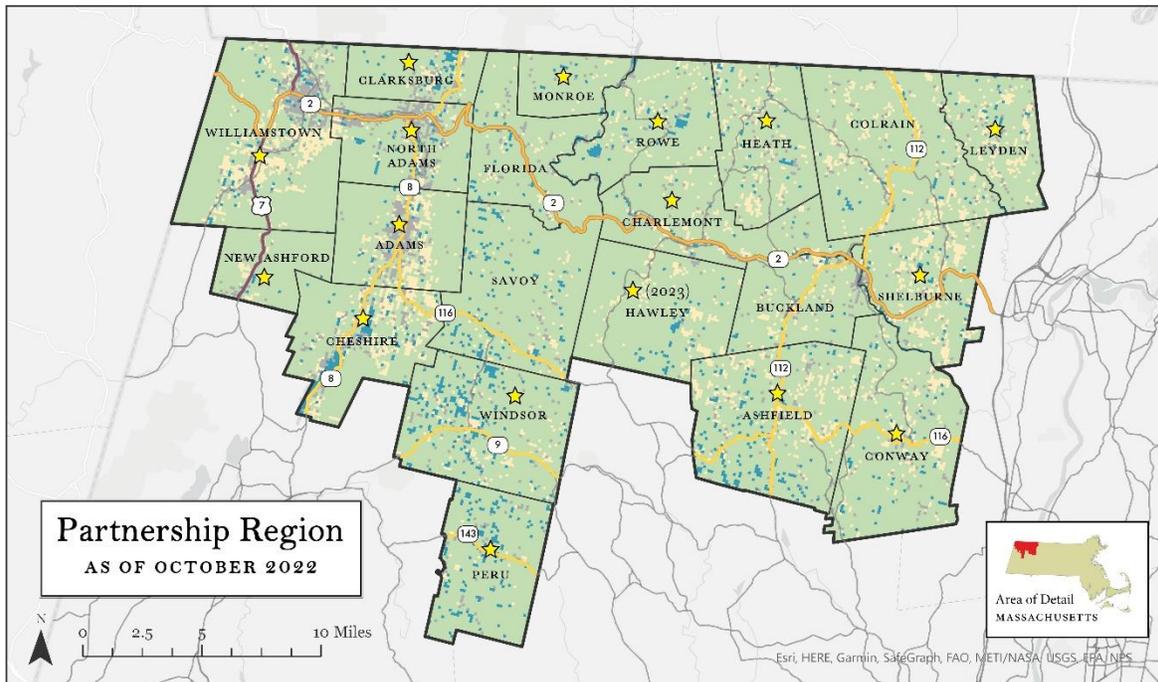
<sup>9</sup> National Scenic Byways Program. [https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/hep/scenic\\_byways/designations/2021\\_designated\\_byways.cfm](https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/hep/scenic_byways/designations/2021_designated_byways.cfm)

timber for furniture, flooring, and housing, or working as foresters. During the Industrial Revolution, historic downtowns and close-knit residential neighborhoods developed into larger employment centers along the region’s rivers.

The region's mountain landscape, rivers, diverse wildlife and plant life, woodlands, and farms provide a scenic and beautiful place to live, work, and play. More importantly, these landscape features provide environmental functions and health benefits. Forests in the region provide Massachusetts, and more broadly, New England, with critical ecological services including water supply recharge, flood mitigation, wildlife habitat, oxygen production, water and air purification, and carbon storage – all of which are crucial to sustain life in this era of rapid climate change.

### The Woodlands Partnership Landscape

The forests and watersheds of the Northern Berkshire Mountains and foothills are the focus of the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership.<sup>10</sup>



LEGEND Scale: 1:800,000			
	PARTNERSHIP REGION		FOREST
	TOWN BORDER		WATER OR WETLAND
	TOWNS THAT HAVE OPTED IN		CULTIVATED
	MA RTE. 2 / MOHAWK TRAIL		DEVELOPED
	U.S. ROUTE		
	STATE ROUTE		

<sup>10</sup> The Northern Berkshires include eleven (11) towns in western Franklin and ten (10) towns Northern Berkshire Counties.

Often described as the most rural and heavily forested corner of the Commonwealth (83% forested),<sup>11</sup> the region has a population density of 87 people per square mile (compared to 884 state-wide). The population of this region is statistically older and less ethnically diverse than the rest of the state, and is also declining in numbers – by almost 5% between 2010 and 2020 – with a similar decline anticipated by 2040.

The low population density, with most towns having populations of less than 1,000 people, has created challenges for small-town governments to maintain a tax base to adequately fund some public services and staff positions. Thus, residents identified municipal sustainability as another focus of the Woodlands Partnership, in concert with economic development that recognizes the importance of the forest resources in the region. Nine of the 21 towns in the Partnership region are listed as Environmental Justice communities according to the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, most based on income criteria (see Map 2.1).

## Origins

In 2013, the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG), Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC), Franklin Land Trust (FLT), and an Advisory Board<sup>12</sup> worked in partnership with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) to explore the possibility of leveraging the region’s extensive, mostly privately owned woodlands to obtain a Special Federal Designation. If earned, such a designation, created through federal legislation, would recognize the region’s outstanding forest resources and bring substantial financial and technical assistance to Northwestern Massachusetts to help keep woodlands in private ownership and fund sustainable rural economic development along the Mohawk Trail/Route 2 corridor and in the region’s 21 towns.<sup>13</sup> The MTWP was conceived as a public body, enabling the channeling of resources from the State and the U.S. Forest Service to the region, in lieu of a federally-owned National Forest.

Though federal legislation remains a goal, the Partnership reached a milestone in 2019, when the Chief of the USDA Forest Service, Victoria Christiansen, visited the region with Secretary of Massachusetts EOEEA Kathleen Theoharides to jointly sign a “Shared Stewardship Framework” outlining mutual benefits and areas of collaboration between federal and state agencies on behalf of the region.

After meeting for five years, the initial Advisory Committee was replaced in fall 2019 by the MTWP Board, whose membership is defined in the 2018 Massachusetts enabling legislation. The Partnership launched a small grant program to participating towns in 2019, and in 2022 is

---

<sup>11</sup> 86% of the approximately 666,000 acres of Protected and Recreational Open Space in the region is privately owned. This includes private for profit, private nonprofit, and land trust properties. MassGIS Protected and Recreational Open Space data layer, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Twelve regional organizations/institutions, and 21 towns with representatives of the USFS and MA-EOEEA.

<sup>13</sup> In 2014-2016, FRCOG and BRPC conducted extensive outreach to involve the public in planning the Partnership.

advertising its fourth grant round. Over \$1 million in grants have been distributed by the EOEEA to date, for projects ranging from town forest plans, trail building, and support for small businesses. The Partnership has also received two USDA Forest Service grants totaling \$120,000 that have helped to leverage two state climate grants totaling over \$1.6 million to develop a new climate forestry program.

The State enabling legislation also called for hiring a non-governmental organization to serve as administrator, and in November 2020, the Board approved a contract between the EOEEA and the New England Forestry Foundation (NEFF) to serve as Administrative Agent for the Partnership, which runs through June 2025. Forming its five Standing Committees over the course of 2021 (when meetings were held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic), the MTWP Board has continued to focus its near- and long-term objectives.

Ultimately, the envisioned federal designation would provide stable Federal and State funding and would also enable private fundraising for the Woodlands Partnership. This funding will be used to conserve forests, increase economic development related to sustainable forestry practices, forest-based business, and recreational tourism, improve the fiscal stability of municipalities, and preserve the quality of life in Northern Berkshire and Western Franklin Counties.

This plan is designed to further these goals through securing reliable governmental funding, obtaining programmatic grants from government and other funding sources, and being an advocate for improving the fiscal stability of municipalities. We will continue to press our State and Federal legislative delegations to secure a reliable, annual source of funding for the operation of the Woodlands Partnership and its programs, funding that is indicated in our enabling legislation.

---

### **Meeting the Goals of the Woodlands Partnership 2022-2032**

Listed below are the primary goals of the Woodland Partnership and programs we are considering in order to progress toward them.

**Goal 1:** Conserve forestland while keeping it in private ownership to protect the region's rural character and enhance the role forests play in providing clean water and air, flood control, carbon sequestration and storage, and habitat protection in New England.

- ▲ Purchase development rights (conservation restrictions or CRs) from willing landowners committed to long-term sustainable forest management, which helps people to continue to own and care for their land instead of selling it for development or selling timber rights for unsustainable harvests, as well as conservation easements for other ecological outcomes.
- ▲ Provide technical assistance to landowners to foster sustainable forest management, wildlife habitat, climate change resilience, woodland preservation, and to address the issue of tree diseases as well as invasive pests and plants.

- ⬆ Promote research on sustainable forestry practices. Partner to increase research on sustainable/exemplary forestry practices in the region's diverse forests, ways to market and use local forest-based products, and to disseminate the knowledge from applied science that results.
- ⬆ Enhance the ecological integrity of the region's forests in an era of rapid climate change, including evaluation of carbon credit programs and markets (verified to provide additionality of climate benefit) for private woodland owners.

**Goal 2:** Increase economic development and expand employment by nurturing sustainable forest products, outdoor recreation, and natural resource and tourism-based businesses.

- ⬆ Strengthen the marketing and branding of sustainable local forest products and ecotourism from the Northern Berkshires and Hilltowns.
- ⬆ Provide assistance to improve sustainable tourism infrastructure and associated outdoor recreation businesses.
- ⬆ Support research and development of new, innovative wood products.
- ⬆ Increase sustainable natural resources-related local jobs, especially for younger residents to help invigorate communities for the future.

**Goal 3:** Improve the fiscal stability of municipalities.

- ⬆ Provide funding to participating towns for municipal services related to outdoor recreation and tourism, and to address governmental ownership of lands and forest conservation restriction programs related to local tax bases.
- ⬆ Provide technical assistance to towns interested in developing carbon credit projects to improve stewardship and receive payments from their town forests.
- ⬆ Advocate for equitable and sufficient Payments in Lieu of Taxes to compensate municipalities for State ownership, Conservation Restrictions, ecosystem services, and other impacts of sustainable practices on local tax bases.
- ⬆ Secure sources of funding to support municipal services and tax bases while recognizing ecosystem services and benefits to the Commonwealth and larger region provided by our forests.

**Goal 4:** Public education.

- ⬆ Build a multi-purpose Forest Center, beginning with an online, virtual Forest Center, where residents and visitors can learn about the benefits that forests provide, showcase local wood products, celebrate the Berkshires and Hilltowns, and promote sustainable outdoor recreation and natural resource-based tourism.
- ⬆ Collaborate with educational institutions (pre-K through graduate) to promote forest conservation and sustainable forest land uses.

- ↑ Establish demonstration forests on town and private forests to inform the public about best management practices and how forest stewardship can enhance climate resilience and enhance carbon storage.

DRAFT