

Wildlands and Woodlands Conservation Project: Western Massachusetts Aggregation Project Description

This unique project is the first-ever collaborative effort of eight Massachusetts land trusts to purchase conservation restrictions over 12,600 acres of land owned by 77 individual landowners. These diverse, local and regional conservation organizations coordinated their land conservation activities to secure local funding to pay for independent appraisals and negotiate options to purchase these conservation restrictions (CRs) at 75% of the appraised value. Properties were selected based upon each land trust's conservation priorities for their region in support of the broader vision articulated in the Harvard Forest's 2005 publication, *Wildlands and Woodlands, A Vision for the Forests of Massachusetts* (W&W). Partners include the East Quabbin Land Trust, Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust, Franklin Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, Kestrel Trust, Berkshire Natural Resources Council, New England Forestry Foundation, and Monterey Preservation Land Trust.

The northeast United States is broken into private ownerships averaging less than ten acres. If the pace of conservation is to be increased to meet the needs of protecting the forests that provide clean air and clean water, new methods must be developed to utilize the capabilities of a diverse group of conservation organizations in partnership with the private stewards of these forests.

The 77 properties comprising this project are home to significant natural resources including:

- Fifty-seven of the 77 parcels representing 5,558 acres are located within the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program (NHESP) BioMap supporting natural landscape, 23 of which covering 1,668 acres are within Core Habitat.
- Fifty-one parcels encompassing 6,105 acres are located within NHESP Living Waters critical supporting watersheds, 23 of which are within Core Habitat.
- Twenty-eight parcels are within priority habitats of rare species and 11 parcels are located within the newly designated state habitat reserve areas.
- All together these lands protect nearly 30 miles of waterfront along ponds, rivers and streams in western Massachusetts.

In addition, the protection of the 77 properties that account for 12,600 acres also serves to greatly expand existing resource areas in central and western Massachusetts. Nearly all of the properties abut existing open space, NHESP Estimated Habitats for Rare Wildlife, and Living Waters Watershed land.

The addition of the aggregation project land significantly increases forest stewardship land in the major watershed regions of western Massachusetts:

- a more than 60% increase in the Bashbish Watershed in the southwest corner of the state,
- a roughly 17% increase in the Deerfield and Farmington River watersheds,
- and a 5% increase in the Millers River watershed in Franklin County.

Our goal is to secure funding commitments by December 2010 payable over a three-year period to purchase all 77 conservation restrictions. Bridge funding will be utilized in order to close on selected parcels prior to receipt of committed funds. To date, \$7.4 million of the \$21.2 million necessary to complete this project has been raised by the individual land trusts and the landowners through their 25% donation of the CR value. If received, grant funds from The Fine Fund will be used to establish the campaign support necessary to raise the remaining project funds. Professional support will be hired to work with the volunteer campaign leadership committee as well as provide a website, publications, and events to cultivate and solicit funding from individuals, corporations, foundations and public programs.