Change and Opportunity in the Northern Forest

The Role of the Northern Forest Alliance

BY ANDREA COLNES

The Northern Forest

The Northern Forest is the largest remaining wild forest in the Eastern United States. Its woodlands, mountains, waters and wetlands are within reach of densely populated urban centers and a third of the US population. The four-state region, crossing northern Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and New York, is unique ecologically, encompassing diverse terrain and wildlife habitat. The Northern Forest is irreplaceable for the resources and opportunities it has provided to generations of residents, visitors and wildlife. It directly contributes $33 billion to the regional economy each year through the timber products and tourism economies, and employs a quarter of a million people. Its communities are built on tradition and long-standing ties to the forest. And it is the ecological backbone of the region, encompassing the headwaters of our greatest rivers, providing large undeveloped areas, clean air and clean water to millions of people.

The Northern Forest Alliance

It is to help answer this challenge that the members of the Northern Forest Alliance came together in 1990. Now including more than 35 conservation, recreation and forestry organizations, the members of the Alliance share a vision of a vibrant, healthy and economically prosperous Northern Forest. New York based members include such mainstays as the Adirondack Council, the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, the New York League of Conservation Voters, New York Rivers United, the Residents’ Committee to Protect the Adirondacks, the National Audubon Society and the Sierra Club. Together, we are committed to three broad goals that we feel are vital to the future of the Northern Forest:

- Permanently protecting wildlands, for their ecological values and inherent beauty.

The Alliance has proposed creating a system of Wildlands across the Northern Forest to maintain ecological balance, provide remote and wilderness recreation opportunities, provide solitude to rekindle the spirit, and support the region's
forest-based economy. Our vision calls for Wildlands that will:

- Continue to provide open access for traditional recreation such as hunting, hiking, fishing, canoeing, camping and other activities.
- Permanently protect ecologically and recreationally important areas to guarantee wildlife habitat and true wilderness experiences for future generations.
- Support sustainable timber harvesting that meets clear ecological and sustainability guidelines.
- Remain essentially undeveloped, without new construction that is inconsistent with maintaining the area’s wild qualities, ecological integrity and productive forests.

- Ensuring well managed forests that supply wood products, support wildlife, and provide jobs and recreation.

The Alliance believes that healthy, well managed forests are essential for the region’s economic, ecological and cultural well-being. We are deeply committed to working with landowners, policy makers and the public to establish a standard of forest stewardship that ensures a continuous supply of high quality timber, provides opportunities for local jobs, supports the growing recreation industry, and restores overall ecological integrity.

Over the past five years, people across the Northern Forest have become deeply engaged in this work of struggling to define the standards and benchmarks of good forestry that considers the full range of forest values. In Vermont, ground-breaking laws regulating heavy cutting and herbicide use were passed last year, in Maine people voiced a clarion call for forestry reform last year with 79% of voters calling for strong measures to change the way the Northwoods are managed, in New Hampshire the legislature is considering measures to limit herbicide use, and in New York three separate attempts to weaken clearcutting standards in the Adirondack Park over the past few years were turned back by the force of public opinion.

- Building strong, diverse, locally based economies that support vibrant communities within the Northern Forest.

The Alliance also believes that finding ways to revitalize our rural forest-based economy is essential to the future of the region. Diversifying our local economic base and finding ways to move beyond the historic boom-and-bust cycle of our forest economy poses a huge challenge for New York and the rest of the region. Although a daunting long-term goal, the members of the Alliance are engaged in a number of initiatives ranging from supporting community economic assistance workshops to working with local businesses to find ways to spur local value-added opportunities for growth in our natural resource based economy. It is our hope that the region will be able to develop innovative businesses that depend on stewardship rather than forest depletion to provide the foundation for employment for decades to come.

Taking Stock: Progress and Challenges

Since Congress and the Governors first focused on the urgent need to address the forces for change in the Northern Forest in the late 1980s, we have seen significant progress in some important areas. Perhaps most striking is the sheer weight of public awareness: across the region from New York to Maine, people have focused on the need to address the forces affecting the future of the Northern Forest — be they development pressure, short-sighted forestry practices or economic decline.

Over the past few years, one could rarely pick up a local newspaper without finding coverage of some late-breaking news such as the Whitney land sale in New York, the Ban-Clearcutting initiative in Maine, or forestry reform in Vermont.

This rising awareness of the Northern Forest as a place of national importance reached a new level this February when the Clinton Administration identified the Northern Forest as one of the nation’s three top conservation priorities. This recognition reflects the fact that the vast 26-million-acre Northern Forest is a mainstay of the economy, ecology and culture of the Northeast. It also recognizes that the Northern Forest is at risk and that decisive public action is needed to protect special places and the forest-based economy.

Changing Land ownership

Change can also be seen in the growing instability in land ownership across the region. In fall 1997, Champion International announced its plans to sell 325,000 acres of the Northern Forest, including 144,000 acres in New York. The pending sale creates uncertainty about the fate of the land.

The South Branch of the Grasse River
the jobs dependent on the forest, and the communities built around the jobs. The sale is not an anomaly, but part of a trend: since 1988, more than 7 million acres of the Northern Forest—more than 25 percent—have changed hands, including the sale and resale of vast land holdings in Maine.

The Champion lands for sale in New York, Vermont and New Hampshire include some of the region’s most outstanding natural resources, such as the Nulhegan Basin in Vermont and the northern flow river corridors in the northwest region of the Adirondack Park. An almost unanimous call from governors to residents to diverse organizations including the Northern Forest Alliance, have called for conservation of the critical portions of these lands for recreation, wildlife habitat, public access and sustainable forestry.

Beyond the Champion property, New Yorkers are facing a unique land protection opportunity. More than 30,000 acres of Fish Creek in Tug Hill, 105,000 acres of the Domtar lands, five parcels on Lake George totaling 900 acres, 12,000 acres of Niagara Mohawk lands surrounding Carry Falls Reservoir, and many other smaller parcels with important lakes and shorelines are currently on the market.

New York is unique among the Northern forest states in its ability to provide significant land protection funding through the NY Environmental Protection Fund and funds from the Clean Water/Clean Air bond. Elsewhere across the region, states lack the capacity to generate sufficient resources to protect the vast swaths of land coming on the market. For this reason, the Northern Forest Lands Council, all four Governors, the congressional delegation and others strongly urge full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Forest Legacy Program to support a state/federal partnership to protect important public resources.

Shift toward sustainable forestry

Ten years ago, talk of “sustainable forestry” was rare. Today, it’s a catchphrase bandied about by conservation and forestry professionals. Not everyone using the phrase agrees about what it means, but the fact that it’s a top-of-the-list issue is an encouraging sign.

In Maine, public concern about the state of the Northwoods has reached an all time high. Focused around a ballot initiative to ban clearcutting last November, almost 80% of all voters called for strong change in the way Maine’s Northwoods are managed. Although no action was ultimately taken, the pressure to end short-sighted forestry remains high and the legislature is currently considering a broadly supported package of measures which would impose clearcutting limits, establish stocking standards, set harvest limits and require independent audits.

In response to intense public concern about forest liquidation and a move towards intensive short-rotation forestry dependent on the use of herbicides, Vermont passed two new groundbreaking laws setting standards for heavy cutting and placing a moratorium on the use of aerial herbicides in forestry.

In New York, landowners, state and local representatives, environmentalists, Alliance members and others have joined together in the “Oswegatchie Roundtable” meetings to foster sustainable land stewardship in the Great Oswegatchie Forest and Boreal Heritage Reserve sections of the Adirondack Park. The project seeks new, non-regulatory ways to better manage the forest’s multiple resources in a 1.5-million-acre area.

On a regional basis, Green certification for forest products is gathering momentum and interest from landowners and managers. Through the work of Smartwood, the Green certification program of the Rainforest Alliance several Alliance members are deeply involved in this effort.

To continue to build on this progress, the members of the Alliance believe there are several key steps to take on the state and national level:

- Congress should pass the Northern Forest Stewardship Act without delay, to provide states the technical and financial assistance needed to help conserve the forest.
- Congress should allocate the full $900 million authorized annually for the Land & Water Conservation Fund to protect open space, watersheds, and recreational opportunities, and send at least $200 million of that to state projects.
- Congress should adequately fund the Forest Legacy Program to meet the demands in the Northern Forest and elsewhere in the country.
- Private and public interests should protect important forestlands currently for sale, including Champion International’s extensive northern flow river lands in the Adirondack Park, and land in New Hampshire and Vermont.
- Everyone concerned should participate in state-based sustainable forestry initiatives to ensure that they result in real, lasting changes in the way our forests are managed.
- Northern Forest communities, with the help of state, federal and private agencies, must develop an economically
viable transition strategy to achieve a strong timber base, competitive mills, and more added-value uses in the local economy.

- Congress should complete estate tax reform at the federal level to address needs in the Northern Forest.
- Many more communities, especially those at risk for mill closures or overly dependent on the forest products industry, should develop strategies for a new, sustainable local economy; and economic development experts should collaborate to develop local and regional opportunities.

Change is sweeping across the landscape, but with continued, united effort from everyone invested in the Northern Forest, we can turn the tide of change to our benefit. We can make sure the forest we leave to our children and theirs is a whole forest in every sense, and that it can continue as the foundation of our way of life in northern New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine.

**Congressional Action: Funding the Vision**

New York has led the way in land conservation with the Clean Water/Clean Air bond act, and the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), which provided the critical funds needed to conserve 15,000 acres of Whitney Industries land in December 1997. But even New York's progressive funding is not enough to handle all of the forestry and land conservation challenges facing the state and the region. Four federal programs have significant potential to help New York and the rest of the Northern Forest states address some of the changes pressuring the region. Two of these programs—the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Forest Legacy Program—just received the unanimous support of the New England Governors Conference through two unprecedented Resolutions passed at their February meeting in Washington, DC. Governor Pataki complimented this voice in New York by calling for the formation of a special LWCF Task Force to work for increased state-side LWCF funds for New York.

**The Land & Water Conservation Fund**

The Land & Water Conservation Fund is our country's single greatest source of funding for land and water conservation and recreational opportunities. It is authorized to spend $900 million each year, part of which can be spent on federal projects, and part of which is supposed to be allocated to each state for its

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**A Closer Look at The Northern Forest Stewardship Act**

The Northern Forest Stewardship Act would implement several of the key recommendations made by the Northern Forest Lands Council (NFLC), a region-wide body formed by the four Northern Forest governors and Congress to develop recommendations for the future of the Northern Forest. After four years of intensive public outreach and research, the NFLC delivered its final recommendations in 1994.

The Stewardship Act lays the foundation for ensuring good forestry, conserving wildlands, and strengthening local economies in the Northern Forest. It has very broad, bipartisan support in both the Senate and the House, but has been held up by western interests trying to force some political horse trading.

Drawn directly from the work of the NFLC, the Stewardship Act seeks to foster stewardship of private land, build knowledge and information of forest resources, promote a healthy, natural-resource driven economy, and increase funds available for conservation. It was first introduced in the 104th Congress, in August of 1995, with support from conservation and forest industry interests. Although the U.S. Senate passed the bill unanimously, the House did not act before the session ended.

Senators Patrick Leahy (D-VT) and Judd Gregg (R-NH) re-introduced the bill in the 105th Congress, with the bipartisan support of all Northern Forest Senators, including New York Senators Alfonse D'Amato and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. In the U.S. House, 49 representatives have signed onto the bill, including the following from New York: Hinchey (D), Slaughter (D), Boehlert (R), Gilman (R), Kelley (R), Molinari (R), Quinn (R), Lazio (R), Walsh (R), Flake (D), Lowey (D), Forbes (R), Maloney (D), Manton (D), Ackerman (D), La-Salle (D) and Engle (D).

The main provisions of the Stewardship Act would do the following:

- Establish a voluntary partnership between federal and state governments for protecting important forest lands in the Northern Forest. For those states that choose to identify lands in need of protection, the bill would authorize federal and state land protection from willing sellers.
- Provide direct economic development assistance to Northern Forest communities, through the Rural Economic Development Act, to help diversify and strengthen local economies. The bill encourages Congress to allocate sufficient funds the program to assist forest-dependent communities in the Northern Forest.
- Create a regional research institute consisting of the states, the US Forest Service, and other interested parties to coordinate research on ecosystem health, forest management, product development and economics, including technology transfer to the forest products industry and information sharing with landowners and the public.
- Establish principles of sustainability for: soil and water quality conservation, timber resource improvement, protection of fragile areas, and conservation of scenic qualities and recreational opportunities.
own priorities. Each state project matches its LWCF grant with an equal amount of local, state, or private dollars and in-kind contributions, leveraging the federal funds.

LWCF was established 35 years ago and has a dedicated source of revenue coming from the fees for oil and gas drilling, as well as other sources, such as park passes, federal land sales, and taxes on marine fuel. Unfortunately, Congress has not always spent the funds on their intended purpose. In 1996, LWCF funding sank to an all-time low, motivating conservation, recreation, and heritage organizations and professionals to begin working together to ensure these critical funds are properly appropriated each year.

This year, the Alliance is urging Congress to fully fund LWCF, with a minimum of $200 million going to state grants, and a total of $14.25 million for state and federal projects in the Northern Forest. Governor Pataki has created a task force to educate New Yorkers about the LWCF program, and to work with the state’s Congressional delegation to see that funding is restored to the state grants program.

The Forest Legacy Program

The Forest Legacy Program protects environmentally important forest areas that are threatened by conversion to non-forest uses. This program is an innovative collaboration of federal and state efforts, in which states can use federal funds to purchase conservation easements from willing sellers, and ensure that the land stays in productive timber operation. The program gives priority to lands that have important scenic or recreational values, riparian areas, fish and wildlife values, including threatened and endangered species, or other ecological values. The easements provide permanent protection for the forest, and can be held by either the Federal government (through the State and Private Forestry unit of the USFS), or by the state, as allowed by the 1996 Farm Bill.

The Forest Legacy Program has enabled Vermont landowners to conserve 37,000 acres; New Hampshire landowners have preserved more than 8,000 acres for forestry; and Maine landowners have secured more than 9,000 acres. In New York, landowners in Indian Lake and on the Tug Hill Plateau have sold conservation easements through the Forest Legacy Program to protect productive forests from development, while assuring that hunting, recreational use and public river access would continue.

The Alliance has urged Congress to appropriate $30 million to the Forest Legacy Program this year for Northern Forest projects. While this won’t come close to staving off sale and development threats on all Northern Forest lands, it would fund easements on very high priority lands, including the East Branch of Fish Creek, and lands owned by Domtar, Champion, and Niagara Mohawk in New York, the Green River Reservoir in Vermont, and Nicatous Lake, Mattawamkeag Lake, the East Branch of Mattawamkeag River, and Upper Richardson Lake in Maine.

Rural Development Through Forestry & Stewardship Incentive Programs

The Rural Development through Forestry Program (RDTF) has been effective at spawning community based economic collaboration and small business development. This non-traditional program allows local control of federal aid, with a match of 50 percent non-federal funds, building commitment from local partners and communities. RDTF has had tremendous success with a wide range of projects, which have resulted in new businesses, employment, development strategies, partnerships and educational opportunities. In New York it has funded such things as the Greater Adirondack RC&D Trade Shows and the New York Logger Training Project.

The Stewardship Incentive Program (SIP) provides cost-share assistance to help private, non-industrial landowners on parcels of less than 1,000 acres reach their management objectives. SIP has been an important source of funds to aid small private land owners in the Northern Forest who own 8 million acres across the region. Since 1991, SIP has leveraged state and private investment to support highly effective forest management planning by a wide diversity of landowners.

The Northern Forest Alliance welcomes your comments and thoughts about how to shape the future of the Northern Forest and its communities. Please contact us at: Northern Forest Alliance, 43 State St. Montpelier, Vermont 05602.

The Northern Forest Alliance is a coalition of conservation, forestry and recreation organizations, including:
- The Adirondack Council
- Appalachian Mountain Club
- Appalachian Trail Conference
- Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks
- Certified Forest Products Council
- Conservation Law Foundation
- Defenders of Wildlife
- Garden Club of America
- Gorham Trails Inc.
- Green Mountain Club
- Green Mountain Forest Watch
- John McKeith Location Photography
- Maine Audubon Society
- Massachusetts Audubon Society
- National Audubon Society
- National Wildlife Federation
- Natural Resources Council of Maine
- Natural Resources Defense Council
- New England Environmental Voters
- New England Forestry Foundation
- New Hampshire Rivers Council
- New York League of Conservation Voters
- New York Rivers United
- Residents’ Committee to Protect the Adirondacks
- Sierra Club
- Sierra Student Coalition
- Student Environmental Action Coalition
- Trout Unlimited: Basil Woods Jr. Chapter
- Trust for Public Land
- Vermont Alliance of Conservation Voters
- Vermont Audubon Council
- Vermont Land Trust
- Vermont Natural Resources Council
- The Wilderness Society
- World Wildlife Fund