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NEW ENGLAND/NEW YORK FOREST INITIATIVE

I. Introduction

Once reduced to just 20-30% of the landscape in large portions of the NE/NY region, forests now occupy some 80% of the land base. This astonishing recovery, and the fact that the region is a leader in sustainable management, offer a compelling opportunity to secure the economic benefits and forest values that the region's people cherish and steward for future generations.

In 2008, the North East *State* Foresters Association¹ (NEFA) launched an effort to identify methods to maintain the region's forested landscape, increase the quality of stewardship of these lands, and strengthen the rural economy of the region. The project became known as the Northern Forest Keeping Forests as Forests initiative (NF KFAF) and included New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. NEFA invited representatives of the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the US Forest Service to participate in this effort. At the same time, the New England Governors' Conference (NEGC) independently established a Blue Ribbon Commission on Land Conservation (CLC).

As a result of these combined efforts, in September 2009 the New England Governors' Conference called upon the region's State Foresters to develop, "...a New England Forest Initiative to Keep Forests as Forests that will constitute a new blueprint to protect the region's forest land-base and ensure the sustainability of these lands, as a public policy appropriate to all New England; and identify barriers to and opportunities for sustaining forestlands that are in private ownership and expanding forest products production and consumption."

With this charge, the NF KFAF initiative expanded to include the southern New England States. The seven State Foresters have defined the *mission* of the New England/New York Forest Initiative: **to establish a regional model/demonstration program to strengthen markets for forest products, improve forest stewardship, and conserve the region's forest landscape for future generations.**

The mission will be pursued within the following *guiding principles*:

- **Spur job creation and maintenance by improving the forest based economy;**
- **Build a landscape-scale effort that emphasizes connectivity to Keep Forests as Forests;**
- **Foster collaboration and partnerships across borders and sectors;**
- **Encourage significant contributions from the private and philanthropic sectors; and**
- **Generate significant contributions to expanding renewable energy resources.**

¹ NEFA is comprised of the State Foresters of ME, NH, VT, and NY and a member from the US Forest Service, State and Private Forestry.

II. Background

A Treasured Resource:

New England and New York's forests define the character of the region, are integral to its economy, and sustain many of its communities - from the expansive timber ownerships of the Northern Forest to the back-forty woodlots of the south. These forests have proven resilient through time, having recovered from land clearing and harvesting of centuries past, undertaken without regard for future crops of timber. Today, these forests cover some 52 million acres in seven states that:

- Represent the largest intact temperate broadleaf forest in the nation, and one of the largest in the world, including almost 19 million acres in large contiguous blocks;
- Form the backbone of many if not most of our rural economies, providing a sustainable source of forest products including building supplies, firewood, furniture, toys and paper; creating jobs in the woods and mills and serving as an economic engine of the region's economies; and contributing over \$20 billion annually and sustaining over 100,000 jobs;
- Host a wondrous diversity of plant and animal life and the source of clean water for our rivers, lakes, aquifers and reservoirs;
- Safeguard public and private drinking water sources, both surface and groundwater, for millions of residents often acting as the primary barrier against pollutants and pathogens;
- Provide an important source of renewable energy that will reduce dependence on fossil fuels and enhance national security;
- Provide, through trees in towns and villages, ecosystem services including: storm water filtration, air cleansing, and energy efficiency through moderation of temperature, as well as scenic beauty;
- Offer outdoor adventures unsurpassed elsewhere in the eastern United States and supporting an emerging forest-based recreation and tourism economy that is already valued at more than \$5 billion and is poised to grow as more visitors seek out unique eco-tourism experiences; and
- Store great quantities of carbon and sequester approximately 10% of the region's annual greenhouse gas emissions each year.

Unpredictable Future Joined with Unusual Opportunity:

These extraordinary values in a region so densely populated represent a tremendous opportunity to have the best of both worlds: a vital built environment that includes large metropolitan areas as well as quaint historic villages, while securing for present and future generations the economic benefits and natural values the region's forests and their stewardship provide.

At the same time, the future of the region's forests has become uncertain and subject to a host of new pressures. Proposals to subdivide, develop, and convert forest tracts are greatest in the south, but present throughout the region. With some 80% of the region's forests privately owned, decisions by forest landowners will largely determine whether New England and New York's forest landscape, the jobs that depend on it, and the multitude of public values it provides will remain for future generations. Recent trends in the region's demography, land use and ownership, and climate change create strong doubt that these values will persist:

- Over the past two decades, fully two-thirds of the Northern Forest area has been sold at least once. From 1997-2003 nearly 400,000 acres of forest land have been converted to development

uses in New England and New York. In Connecticut, from 1985-2006 over 5,500 acres of forest *per year* has been converted to developed use – nearly a 6% loss. In Massachusetts, from 1999-2005, nearly 10,000 acres of forest per year was converted for development.

- Since 1993, the average size of forest ownerships dropped across the region, as forested tracts have been subdivided and sold. A 2006 US Forest Service survey of forest landowners showed that 86,000 landowners in New England/New York owning 2.77 million acres plan to sell some or all of their lands within five years. Some 35,000 landowners owning 869,000 acres of forest land indicated they plan to subdivide their forest lands over the same period.
- Intergenerational transfers of forest land will occur at an unprecedented rate as over one-third of forest owners, who own 44% of forestland in the US, are 65 years old or older;
- In many parts of the region, there is a wide and growing gap between the timber value of forest land and its value for development. Increasingly, timber management returns cannot justify current prices for forested acreage even in parts of areas where timber has, and continues to be, the primary use.
- Forest products-based infrastructure and communities are facing an unprecedented challenge from volatile markets for home-grown timber, high energy costs, foreign competition, high domestic production costs, and mill closings with associated job losses.
- Uncertainty regarding the stability of property tax policy for forest land, which greatly discourages private forest owners from maintaining their forests as forests.
- Expanding responsibilities to monitor and manage conservation easements in the public and private sectors without adequate resources.
- Finally, climate change itself creates great uncertainty about future forest conditions.

Coupled with these uncertainties, tremendous opportunity exists to maintain the exceptional economic and environmental values and traditional uses of the region's forests. The forest land base is largely intact in many parts of the region, with more forested acreage today than a century ago. Despite a difficult business climate, traditional forest products industries including paper mills and sawmills remain integral to our local economies and provide thousands of high-paying jobs. Newer uses of the forest as a renewable energy resource can create economic opportunities and new jobs. The boom in ecotourism combined with the proximity of the region's forests to major cities offers attractive prospects for businesses providing forest-based recreation.

Today, these opportunities coincide with the federal Administration's powerful and timely interest in an "All Lands" policy for management of the nation's forest resources (US Dept. of Agriculture), for strengthening the nation's "Treasured Landscapes," (US Dept. of Interior) and for developing the nation's renewable energy resources (US Dept. of Energy).

III. Goals and Demonstration Projects

The State Foresters see three important and related goals for this initiative:

Goal #1 - Strengthen Markets for Forest Products – Retain and strengthen the forest products industry in the region so that it employs people and produces at pre-recession levels;

Goal #2 - Improve Forest Stewardship – Implementing sustainable forestry on half the family forest ownerships in the region; and

Goal #3 - Minimize Forest Fragmentation, Parcelization, and Conversion – Permanently conserve an additional 15 million acres of forest land in the region (reaching the goal of conserving half the forest land in the region);

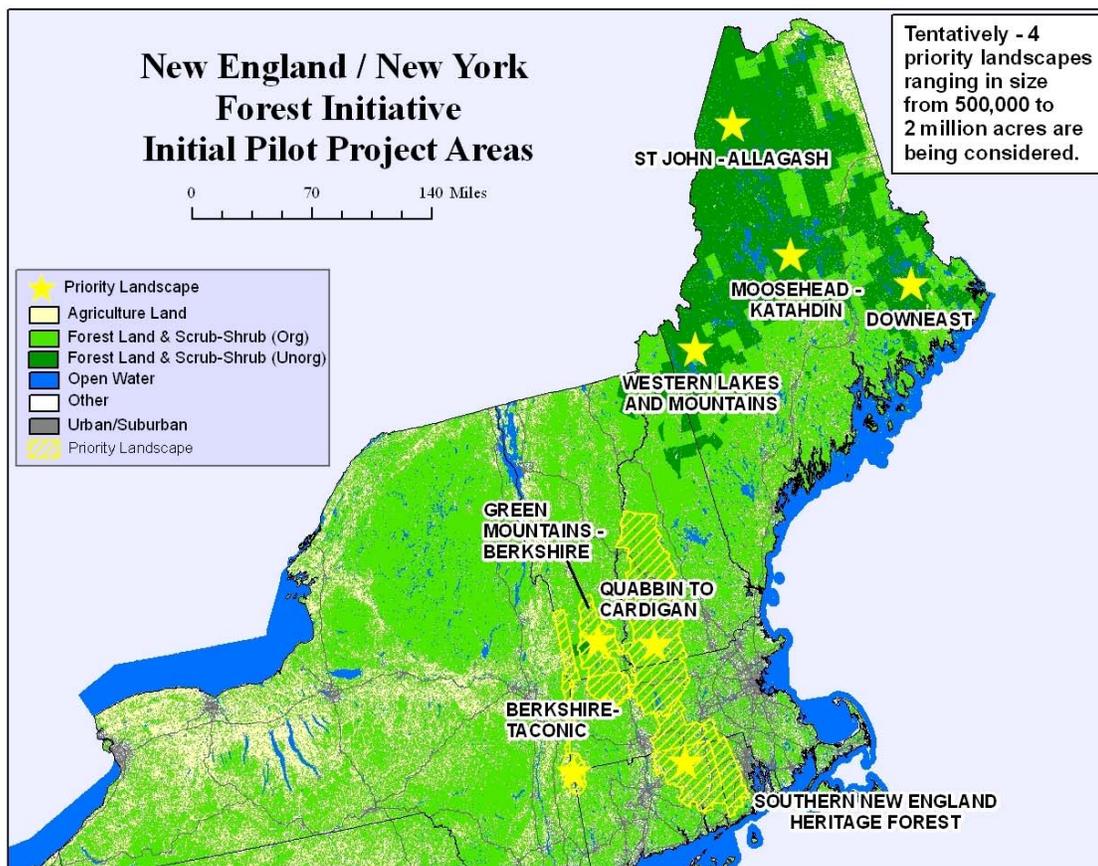
...and have devised a variety of strategies and an initial set of pilot or demonstration projects to address them:

- **Quabbin to Cardigan** – a three-pronged strategy of core-area land conservation, forest stewardship practices and forest industry assistance on a 2 million acre landscape of working forests, water supplies and unfragmented forests spanning western New Hampshire and northern Massachusetts.
- **The Berkshire/Taconic's** – A 230,000 acre area containing an inordinate number of rare species threatened by development and climate change. Efforts here to focus on restoring ecosystem functions through on-the-ground stewardship and preservation of large unfragmented forest blocks.
- **Southern New England Heritage Forest** – A 1.4 million acre area that will receive focused land-use planning assistance with a variety of land conservation tools preserving the working heritage of the last remaining rural landscape in Southern New England.
- **Green Mountain/Berkshire** – a programmatic working forest stewardship approach over the unfragmented forest of southern Vermont and Western Massachusetts.
- **Keeping Maine's Forests** – four priority landscapes now under consideration, ranging in size from 500,000 to 2 million acres that will be targeted for a collaborative effort involving federal and states agencies as well as private interests to keep these forests as forests.
- **Vermont Conservation Easement Stewardship Project** – development of a model conservation easement stewardship program for the working forests of Vermont and the region.
- **Several region-wide programmatic efforts** will aim to strengthen the forest products industry, monitor and increase stewardship on private forest lands, and ensure a strong, continuing, and university-based research and evaluation element to measure progress toward the goals and assure that we learn “what works.”.

IV. Implementation and Funding

The State Foresters from New England and New York will lead implementation of this effort, in collaboration with the NEG/CLC; and funding will generally flow to and through the states and specific projects. As the 10-year demonstration program outlined above goes from pilot to fully operational, the State Foresters estimate that \$200 million of *annual* funding will be required to achieve the stated goals, from a combination of federal support and state and private sources. Public funding will be made available primarily through enhancing and pooling current funding mechanisms with broader authorities to shift funds to priority areas and programs that will promote:

- Improved markets for forest products;
- Greater stewardship of forest land;
- The capacity to effectively monitor conservation easement and manage fee lands;
- Acquisition of conservation easements, with selective fee purchases;
- Broader outreach to and education of all stakeholders;
- Continued and improved public access to lands; and
- Continuing, independent evaluation of the effort.



The Keeping Forests as Forests group includes the following members:

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Anne Archie, US Forest Service, State & Private Forestry

Astor Boozer, New York State Conservationist, Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)

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