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Contact: Clarisse Hart, Harvard Forest Outreach Manager
(978) 756-6157; hart3@fas.harvard.edu

Forest Land Acquired by Harvard Forest as Outcome of Illegal Tree-Cutting Incident

PETERSHAM, Mass. (Feb. 24, 2012)---The future of approximately 125 acres of forest land has changed from potential golf course development to scientific research and public access in Petersham thanks to a lengthy conservation and legal saga that began with trees unlawfully cut down from Harvard Forest land.

In 2008, Harvard Forest employees discovered, to their considerable dismay, that 19 sizable trees had been cut down and about 75 additional trees fatally damaged on Harvard Forest land adjoining the Petersham Country Club (PCC). The unauthorized tree harvest also did significant damage to wetlands and a vernal pool. The harvesting had been conducted by the land clearance company Forward Enterprises, Inc. (FEI), owned by Paul Davis of Oakham. FEI had been contracted by PCC to conduct clearing activities on PCC land.

As a result of a recent settlement agreement involving Davis, Harvard Forest, and PCC, the Harvard Forest has acquired 125 acres of Country Club forest land to the south of Poor Farm Road. The acquisition is being financed largely by funds released by the settlement of the suit, with the cooperation of the Petersham Country Club. As part of this purchase, the land, which in 2002 became subject to a permanent conservation easement held by the Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust, continues to be conserved, but without the potential for golf course development.

According to Harvard Forest Director David Foster, "Timber trespass and disregard of state harvesting and wetland regulations are serious legal infractions that harm our environment and should have severe repercussions. Impacts from this illegal incident will have enduring consequences for the land." However, through this resolution Harvard University has been able to acquire valuable forestland that will enhance its research and educational mission and provide the residents of Petersham with continued access to open space adjoining the Petersham Town Forest and the Poor Farm Road walking path. Foster notes that Harvard Forest has been able to turn an egregious wrong into a benefit "to the environment and the people of Petersham--and even to New England--where there is a great need to retain our landscape of woodlands, wildlands, farms, and other open space."

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The Harvard Forest, a research department of Harvard University, was established in 1907 and is one of the oldest and most intensively studied research forests in North America. The Forest consists of nearly 3,500 acres of forest, streams and wetlands. Its research and education programs involve students and researchers from hundreds of institutions around the world, including students and teachers from local K-12 schools. The Harvard Forest Fisher Museum of Forestry and natural history trails are open to the public year-round. To learn more about the Harvard Forest and its role in the local community, visit <http://harvardforest.fas.harvard.edu/harvard-forest-and-town-petersham>.

For further information or to schedule an interview, contact:

Clarisse Hart, Harvard Forest Outreach Manager, 978-756-6157

Edythe Ellin, Harvard Forest Director of Administration, 978-756-6124

Bill Page, Petersham Country Club, 978-874-0744