

Brattleboro Reformer

Our Opinion: The time to act is now

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New England has been losing forestland to development at a rate of 65 acres per day, according to a new report released by the Harvard Forest, a research institute of Harvard University, and a team of authors from across the region.

"The incremental chipping away of forest and farmland by scattered development is hard to see day-to-day but it adds up over time and represents a significant threat to the region," said David Foster, director of the Harvard Forest in Petersham, Mass. "If we stay on the current path, we'll lose another 1.2 million acres of open land by 2060."

Conversion takes land out of production and eliminates the local wood and food, climate, flood protection and other benefits that the land provides.

For many years, New Englanders have done an outstanding job of preserving forestland, but public funding for land protection has been steadily declining in all six New England states; it is now half what it was at its 2008 peak, with land conservation trends following suit.

Between 2008 and 2014, public funding for land conservation dropped 50 percent, to \$62 million per year. In addition, the pace of regional land conservation has slowed substantially, from an average of 333,000 acres per year in the early 2000s to about 50,000 acres per year since 2010.

To combat these trends, the authors of the report — Wildlands and Woodlands, Farmlands and Communities — presented what they call "a bold vision for the future of the New England landscape."

Previously, the authors called for conserving 30 million acres of forest, 70 percent of the region's land area, and all remaining farmland, with most of the conserved forestland managed for wood products and other benefits and 10 percent managed as wildlands. This newest iteration outlines progress toward the vision, linking the protection of forests and farms directly to advancing livable urban to rural communities. The authors recommend tripling the pace of conservation, reversing trends in public funding, putting more land to work for sustainable farming and forestry, and integrating land conservation with the planning of cities, suburbs, and rural communities to reduce forest loss and promote more efficient use of land for economic development.

"Today's land conservation is about putting land to work to solve problems and provide an economic return to landowners while investing in nature," said Kathy Lambert, head of the Science & Policy Project at the Harvard Forest.

A startling conclusion the authors reached is that climate change is less of a threat to our forestland than is development.

"When we look specifically at forests in New England, it is clear that the impacts of land use will be far greater than those of climate change over the next 50 years," said Harvard Forest Senior Ecologist, Jonathan Thompson. "This may seem counter-intuitive given the major threat that climate change poses to all sectors of society. But climate change slowly alters the health and types of trees that grow whereas conversion eliminates forests altogether."

The report also noted that conserved land is a low-cost natural asset to confront challenges like climate change and support resource-based economies.

Despite the alarming trend of losing forestland, New England has a lot going for it, including our long tradition of public investment in land conservation and the emerging capacity of regional conservation partnerships that have increased four-fold since 2000. Throughout the tri-state region and New England itself, those invested in conserving forest and farm lands have been working together. One example is the adoption of the Community Preservation Act by 11 Massachusetts cities and towns last year, bringing the statewide total to 173 — approximately half of the state's cities and towns.

Citizens concerned about the loss of forest and farm lands should contact their representatives in the respective legislatures and urge them to consider setting state-based targets for land protection and reporting on them annually and safeguarding state funding for land conservation by fully funding existing state programs. It's also important to incorporate land management and protection into state climate action plans and incorporating the natural infrastructure of land into infrastructure investment plans.

On a national level, we can urge our representatives in Congress to support conservation, forestry, and farming programs in the 2018 federal Farm Bill.

As the director of the Harvard Forest noted in the report, "Investing in land protection and supporting people to steward their land responsibly offers a path to ecological and economic well-being that can benefit all of New England."

To learn more about the report and for suggestions on how you can take action, visit <http://wildlandsandwoodlands.org/vision/ww-vision-reports>.

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