

Forum on the Forests of Massachusetts – Forest Futures Visioning Process

Meeting Summary

On Monday May 18, 2009, the Harvard Forest in Petersham hosted a one-day Forum on the Forests of Massachusetts. The forum was designed to inform the launching of the Department of Conservation and Recreation's (DCR) Forest Futures Visioning Process by providing background information on the history, present conditions and possible future scenarios for the state's forests. This note provides a summary of the major points made by each of the forum presenters.¹

Introductions

Jim Levitt, Director of the Program on Conservation and Innovation at the Harvard Forest, provided an overview of the goals for the forum and introduced DCR Commissioner Rick Sullivan and Lisa Vernegaard, Director of Stewardship for the Trustees of Reservation. Lisa is chairing the Forest Futures Technical Steering Committee (TSC).

Commissioner Sullivan shared his thoughts on what DCR hopes to accomplish through the Forest Futures process, which includes the development of a long-term stewardship vision for DCR's forested lands as well as guidance on DCR's role in promoting effective forest stewardship on private lands. Commissioner Sullivan stressed the seriousness of DCR's commitment to the Forest Futures process, noting that DCR has made some mistakes in its forest management and has not always operated in a sufficiently transparent fashion, and sharing his hope that the Forest Futures process will help DCR be a better steward of its lands in the future.

Lisa Vernegaard opened her remarks by noting that a strong sense of place is what brings everyone together around the issue of the future of the state's forests. She then provided an overview of the TSC process, stressing that the committee will address future DCR stewardship of the state's public and private forest lands.

Massachusetts' Role as a Conservation Leader

Jim Levitt presented historical and present day context on the role of Massachusetts as a leader in land conservation, citing a long string of conservation innovations, going back as far as the creation of the Boston Common in 1634, pioneered by government and non-profit organizations in the Commonwealth. Levitt noted that there have been several periods over the past two centuries where "windows" have opened for conservation innovation. For instance, conservation and environmental protection advanced substantially during the first decade of the 20th century, in the 1930s, and in the 1960s and 70s. Levitt observed that we are apparently now entering a similar period, with major potential opportunities for innovative thinking about the role and management of forests, both locally and worldwide. It is in this broad context that the Forest Futures initiative should consider its work.

Land Use History & Potential Futures of Massachusetts Forests

David Foster, Director of the Harvard Forest, noting that the future is a function of where we've been in the past, described the long-term changes that have occurred in the state's forests. Foster indicated that change has been a constant in the state's forests, due both to natural and human disturbances, but emphasized that recent development activities are different from past ones in

¹ The presentations are available at <http://www.mass.gov/dcr/news/publicmeetings/forestryfvppast.htm>

that they have resulted in major losses of forests through a process of ‘hard’ deforestation which is very difficult to reverse. Noting the importance of protecting the forest land base, Foster described the Wildlands & Woodlands vision of broad scale protection from development of the state’s working forests and creation of 250,000 acres of unmanaged forest reserves, a category of habitat that is dramatically under-represented in the existing forested land base. In closing, Foster cautioned against hubris in our management approach to forests -- nature in some circumstances does not need our help -- and emphasized his view that the most critical task at hand is to protect the forested land base from development.

David Kittredge, State Extension Forester and UMass forestry professor, provided details on the current conditions and trends in forest land conditions, ownership and management, emphasizing the major differences in conditions between the eastern and western parts of the state (smaller forested parcels and reduced harvesting in eastern Massachusetts). Kittredge suggested that continuation of trends experienced in the more rapidly developing parts of the state pose serious challenges to the integrity of the state’s forests. He addressed the potential roles of carbon credits and forest easements, and the challenges posed by increased biomass production for renewable energy generation. Finally, Kittredge suggested that in addition to the Wildlands & Woodlands vision, the Forest Futures effort should consider the results of the forest study completed for Secretary Durand approximately a decade ago.

Bob O’Connor, Director of Land and Forest Conservation for the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA), presented up-to-date comprehensive data on public and private ownership of Massachusetts forests and also briefly reviewed the results of various other forest visioning efforts in the state (Brewer Commission, Forest Forums organized by EEA, and the recently developed Forest Guild vision). O’Connor highlighted the challenges of climate change and the demand for greater biomass removal from the forests. He noted that the state has made some forest management mistakes in the past and hopes the Forest Futures process will lead to a long-term stewardship vision that will help avoid these kinds of problems in the future.

Ensuring the Integrity of Forest Ecosystems

Andy Finton, Director of Science for the Massachusetts Nature Conservancy (TNC), described TNC’s approach for ensuring a long-term and sustainable stream of ecosystem services from the state’s forests. Finton enumerated the factors that influence biodiversity in forests and illustrated these concepts with maps showing the location of minimally fragmented forest blocks in the state and their overlap with state-owned lands. He stressed the need for a vision that ensures preservation of forest blocks that meet minimal size requirements, represent the full set of key habitat types as well as multiple replicates of each type, and allow for the connectivity needed to ensure ecosystem resilience in the face on continuing stresses due to climate change and other factors.

Ownership and Use of Massachusetts Forests

David Kittredge described recent ownership trends for forest lands in the state – increasing numbers of forest land owners and the consequent smaller average size of forested parcels. He then discussed his research on the values of forest land owners. He described the majority of owners (67%) as valuing privacy, contemplative benefits, and recreation while not being opposed to active forestry. Another 23% of owners have similar values but are opposed to any harvesting. According to recent Chapter 132 data, depending upon the year private forests have accounted for between 58% and 81% of the volume of harvested wood. Kittredge suggested that in the past DCR lands may have been harvested more intensively than the private lands.

Potential Changes to the Forests of Massachusetts in an Era of Global Warming

Hector Galbraith, Director of Climate Change at the Manomet Center, described how global warming is already having an impact on the state's forests and discussed in detail ongoing work to establish the vulnerability of different ecosystems in the state. Galbraith predicted that certain forested ecosystems (e.g., spruce/fir forests) will come under increasing stress and will likely disappear from the state over the longer term. He emphasized the need for adaptation given that a certain amount of future warming is now unavoidable. Under different CO₂ emission scenarios we should expect that the climate of Massachusetts potentially could become comparable with Washington DC or North Carolina. He noted the state is working on updating its State Wildlife Action Plan to reflect the potential changes in climate.

Bob Perschel, Northeast Region Director of the Forest Guild, discussed potential on-the-ground forest management strategies for adapting to climate change. He highlighted the role of uneven age management of mixed species stands in promoting resilience and resistance to change, and also described the role of management approaches, such as longer rotations, for sequestering more carbon in Massachusetts forests to mitigate worldwide warming effects.

Ecological Condition and Management Status of DCR Forests in Massachusetts

Bill Hill, State Lands Manager for DCR, presented an overview of DCR forest acquisitions and past forest management priorities. He indicated that originally most of our publicly owned forest land was acquired with the goal of rehabilitating areas that had been poorly managed or abused. Beginning in the 1930s, under the Civilian Conservation Corps, many forest plantations of red pine, Norway spruce and white pine were established on state lands (of which 7,300 acres remain). This legacy of past management continues to have an impact on the condition and management of these forests today.

David Goodwin, Assistant State Lands Manager for DCR, then provided information on the ecological and management status of DCR forests today. He discussed the major information sources on the condition of the state-owned forests (CFI plots, FIA data, chapter 132 cutting plans), and provided data on forest growth, harvests, and net growth. According to the data, in recent years DCR has harvested between 14% and 17% of the net growth of its forests.

Final Observations

To wrap up the forum, Commissioner Sullivan and Lisa Vernegaard shared their views on the key insights they took away from the day. Sullivan noted the importance of relying on sound science to guide the Forest Futures process. Vernegaard shared her impressions about the complex layers of the forest vision development process, which must incorporate information from the past and present as well as predictions about the future of the state's forests.

Questions and comments were then taken from the public attending the forum. These included comments on the need to focus on both the urban and rural forests; the importance for the legislature to appropriate adequate funds to DCR to implement the vision; the fact that values as well as science are critical to the Forest Futures process; the potential benefits of giving priority to conversion and use of forest products within the state; and the need to recognize that forests are dynamic and the vision needs to reflect this. One commenter also thanked the Commissioner and other state officials for recognizing that DCR has made some forest management mistakes and appears open to changes that will allow such mistakes to be avoided in the future.

