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5. Sustaining Working Forests

Overview

Vermont’s forestland is a key element of the state’s “working” landscape. Working forests supply Vermont’s wood products industry (estimated to generate over one billion dollars annually) and provide economic benefits that allow landowners to keep their land in production.¹ The USDA Forest Service has classified 4.35 million of Vermont as timberland, which means it is fertile and accessible enough to produce wood as a crop, and has not been withdrawn from timber management by statute or regulation.² Of this, approximately 80% is privately owned.³

It is economically challenging, however, to own large tracts of forestland. Sustainable forest management requires a long-term commitment, while the economic returns on timber and other forest products fluctuate with market conditions and available outlets. Property taxes can be a burden, since the value of forestland (especially if it has development potential) has been rising in Vermont. Many landowners struggle to hold on to their forestland without resorting to some degree of development in order to finance their continued ownership. Communities (through their planning commissions, conservation commissions, tree wardens and local conservation groups)

Economic components of Vermont’s working forests include:

- Professionals in the forest sector;
- Logging and trucking businesses;
- Saw and veneer mills (saw logs, millwork, containers, pallets);
- Pulp and paper manufacturers;
- Wood energy suppliers (cordwood, chips, pellets);
- Makers of furniture and other wood products;
- Associated forest products businesses (e.g., maple syrup, Christmas trees).

can help alleviate these pressures by supporting programs that maintain working forests.

Implementation

There are various strategies for maintaining and supporting working forests. Some of the most common are presented here.

State and Local Tax Stabilization Programs

Vermont’s Use Value Appraisal (UVA or “Current Use”) Program, which allows forestland to be taxed based on its use rather than its value for development, is one of Vermont’s most successful forest conservation programs. This program (see *Chapter 6, Current Use – Vermont’s Use Value Appraisal Program*), reduces the tax burden for participating landowners who agree to maintain and manage their forestland under an approved forest management plan. Municipalities also have the ability, under state law, to enact local tax stabilization agreements with forest landowners. (See *Chapter 7, Local Tax Stabilization for Forestland and Open Space*.)

Forest Management and Stewardship Plans

Much of Vermont’s forestland is under some form of active management, given that approximately 40% of eligible

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forestland is currently enrolled in the state's Current Use Program.⁴ The Current Use Program, administered by Vermont's county foresters, includes minimum state standards for forest management and regeneration, and requires forest management plans for enrolled land. The majority of forestland enrolled in the program must be actively managed for timber production under approved silvicultural guidelines, but recent program changes also allow for management of "Ecologically Significant Treatment Areas"(ESTAs) that may include old forests, natural communities, rare, threatened and endangered species, riparian areas, forested wetlands and vernal pools that are not subject to forest harvesting.

The voluntary Forest Stewardship Program, also administered by Vermont's county foresters, offers long range planning assistance to forest landowners. These plans are required for woodlands enrolled in the federal Forest Legacy Program, and to receive forestry practice funding through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). (See *Chapter 10, Federal and State Assistance Programs.*) Forest Stewardship plans track with planning formats through the Tree Farm Program and can be integrated with UVA plan creation. Guidelines are available from the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation.

In order to support long term forest ownership under sound management, communities can encourage landowners to develop forest management plans. These plans guide landowners to identify and understand forest types, habitats, and natural communities to sustainably manage and conserve them. Creating a management or stewardship plan leads landowners to consider the natural and economic values of their woodland over time. This helps to insure that forest landowners or their heirs will not be forced to make exploitive or inappropriate management actions based on sudden awareness of timber or land values.

Though not yet common in Vermont, a few municipalities require the submission of forest management plans under local zoning or subdivision regulations to ensure that important forest resources are sustainably managed. For example, plans might be required in association with the subdivision or development of tracts over a certain acreage, or for forestland within designated forest or conservation zoning districts. A locally required plan, however, may change an existing Current Use Program forest management plan only to the extent that the changes are silviculturally sound, as determined by the state, and to "protect specific natural, conservation, aesthetic, or wildlife features in properly designated zoning districts" (24 V.S.A. §4413).

Conservation Easements

Conservation easements maintain working forests and provide private landowners with tax benefits in return for long-term forestland conservation. Easements allow the

landowner to maintain ownership and use of the land, subject to negotiated and monitored easement provisions that limit further development. A third party, such as a local or statewide land trust, typically holds the easement. (See *Chapter 8, Conservation Easements.*)

Showcasing Forest Stewardship

Communities, in association with county foresters, local conservation commissions, forest stewardship organizations, and interested landowners, can showcase examples of excellent forest stewardship as a way to encourage sustainable forest management practices on privately owned land. By showcasing stewardship projects, communities can highlight sustainable practices for harvesting timber, improving wildlife habitat, protecting water quality, and maintaining forest health. Local groups can also highlight properties that have been conserved through a land trust to demonstrate how conservation easements work. Organizations such as Audubon Vermont, Vermont Family Forests, the Vermont Woodlands Association and Vermont Coverts: Woodlands for Wildlife offer a variety of educational opportunities that promote forestland stewardship. (See *Resources* section.)

Third Party Certification

Third party certification involves an independent audit of forest management practices and certification that forestland is being managed in a sustainable fashion. Once certified, landowners can gain access to markets for sustainably produced wood products. Certification programs are available through the Forest Stewardship Council, Vermont Family Forests, Sustainable Forestry Initiative and the Vermont Tree Farm Program administered through the Vermont Woodlands Association. These programs vary in their cost and approach to forest management and environmental protection so landowners should research which program is the best fit for their goals.

Markets are still emerging for certified products. Communities can promote the local use of certified wood products under municipal procurement policies and "buy local" campaigns. The benefits realized from forest certification are also expected to grow in relation to the role that managed forests play in carbon sequestration, especially with the development of carbon offset markets to deal with climate change.

Landowner Cooperatives

Communities can encourage and help organize landowner cooperatives that share in the costs of managing land



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in order to foster conservation and stewardship, as well as market forest products. Landowners who coordinate activities through a cooperative or association can apply for federal or state assistance, share in road and timber management improvements, develop comprehensive wildlife habitat conservation and forest management plans, and seek conservation easements or third party certification for sustainable forest management if desired. Existing forest landowner cooperatives such as Vermont Family Forests and the Orange County Headwaters Project serve as good models in the state.

Buy Local: Promote Local Forest Products

The forest products industry is an important part of Vermont's economy. Sawmills, wood or lumber processing, and local manufacturing using local forest resources are important ways to keep forestland productive.

Communities can provide information about locally grown and manufactured wood products, and encourage local government, residents and businesses to buy and use lumber, flooring, firewood, furniture and other forest products produced in the state. Much like the local foods movement in Vermont, communities that support local wood products and manufacturing also support the state's rural economy and its forest resources.



Jake Brown/VNRC

Estate Planning: Promote Long-Term Forest Ownership

Parcelization and forest fragmentation are currently occurring in Vermont due to multiple factors, one of which is a lack of estate planning that provides for the transfer of forestland ownership within families, from one generation to the next. Family held forests account for a large percentage of Vermont's timberland, and the average age of a Vermont forest landowner is over 65.⁵

Detailed guidance on estate planning for family forests is available through the USDA Forest Service and VNRC Landowner Summit webpage at: www.vnrc.org/landownersummit.

Municipalities can encourage landowners to engage in estate planning so that forestland can be maintained over multiple generations, thus reducing the future threat of subdivision due to a death in the family, an unforeseen illness, or other events. Conservation commissions can

conduct workshops for landowners with estate planning professionals.

Things to Consider

Work with resource professionals. Communities should encourage landowners to work with forest resource professionals, including county foresters, consulting foresters and ecologists, forest conservation organizations, and government agencies to promote sound forest management. There are many resources available to assist local landowners. (See *Resources* section.)

Find funding for sound forest management. Federal agencies and programs, such as those of the USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service, can assist with funding to develop forest management plans and improve forest resource management. (See *Chapter 10, Federal and State Assistance Programs*.)

Case Study

Orange County Headwaters Project

The Orange County Headwaters Project (OCHP) was established in 2003 by a group of landowners in Washington and Corinth who were interested in permanently conserving their land through the use of conservation easements. The group has since formed a nonprofit organization with the following goals:

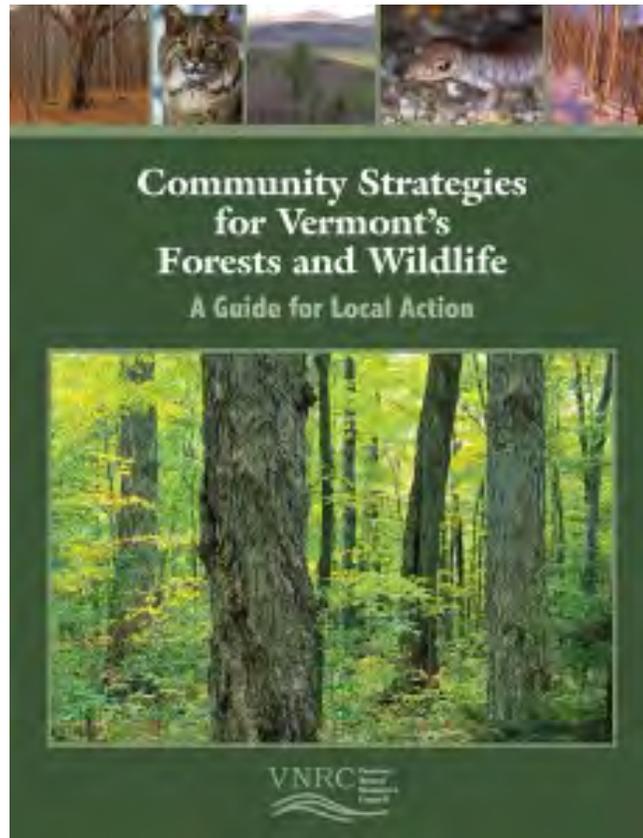
- Provide information, assistance, and leverage to landowners who are interested in conserving their land.
- Support sustainable forestry, watershed protection, and other conservation goals.
- Encourage civic engagement through a better understanding of land stewardship and ecology.
- Demonstrate the benefits of working collaboratively to accomplish landscape-level conservation.
- Document and evaluate the project to assist other communities with similar goals.

Since the OCHP began, 34 parcels of land have been conserved, totaling over 5,800 acres. This relatively small community-based project has gained momentum and capabilities beyond its original scope by forming partnerships with established conservation organizations, including the Vermont Land Trust, the Upper Valley Land Trust, and The Nature Conservancy. This combination of local commitment and collaborative conservation work may provide a new model for use by other communities. Source: <http://www.orangecountyheadwaters.org/>



This chapter is part of a larger publication called ***Community Strategies for Vermont's Forests and Wildlife: A Guide for Local Action***. You can download the entire publication or individual chapters (including the endnotes, resources, and credits page) for FREE at:

www.vnrc.org/programs/forests-wildlife/guide/



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