Maine Climate Council

Natural and Working Lands Work Group Meeting

Wednesday, December 20, 2023; 9:00 – 12:00 AM
Deering Building, Room 101, Blossom Lane, Augusta

For Zoom attendees, register in advance here:
https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZAud-qtrTMuGdGmShxJTwnrvIaDcJRoA2AC

Desired Outcomes: By the end of this meeting, we will have:

- Gained a better understanding of Maine's existing conserved lands
- Focused on farmlands: What is the current conservation status, what does success look like, and what are the obstacles to getting there?
- Established assignments for preparing for the January 23 meeting
- Provided an opportunity for public input

Agenda

What	When
Welcome – Adam, Andy • Introductions • Review Group Agreements (Ground Rules) & Agenda • 30% Land Key Questions – Have We Overlooked Any?	9:00 – 9:20
Presentation/Discussion – Land Conservation in Maine (Justin Schlawin)	9:20 – 9:45
Panel Discussion –Farmland Conservation in Maine: • Adam Bishop – Status of Farmland Conservation in Maine • Alex Redfield – Values of Farmland Conservation • TBD –	9:45 – 10:30
BREAK	10:30-10:45
Panel Discussion – Farmland (Con't)	10:45-11:30
Scope of Next 3 meetings January 23 meeting: stakeholder presentations • Document gallery (MNAP) • General work plan for meetings 3&4 • Reminder of meeting dates	11:30–11:50
Public Comment	11:50 – 12:00

Maine Climate Council Natural and Working Lands Work Group
30% Land Conservation Subgroup Overview

Maine is a land rich in contrasts between the boreal and temperate, freshwater and saltwater, upland and wetland, alpine and lowlands. The State's 33,315 square mile area includes seventeen and a half million acres of forestland interspersed with rugged mountains; more than 5,600 lakes and ponds; over 3,100,000 acres of wetlands; 31,800 miles of rivers and streams; 4,100 miles of coastline; and 4,613 coastal islands and ledges. Maine is the most heavily forested state in the nation, but it also is home to almost 1,500,000 acres of productive farmland, which continues to function as an important resource both for Maine and regionally.

Strategy E: from the Maine Climate Action Plan:

Protect Maine's Environment and Working Lands and Waters: Promote Natural Climate Solutions and Increase Carbon Sequestration

- *Increase by 2030 the total acreage of conserved lands in the state to 30% through voluntary, focused purchases of land and working forest or farm conservation easements.*
- *Additional targets should be identified in 2021, in partnership with stakeholders, to develop specific sub-goals for these conserved lands for Maine's forest cover, agriculture lands, and coastal areas.*
- *Focus conservation on high biodiversity areas to support land and water connectivity and ecosystem health.*

What We Know:

- According to the *Maine Won't Wait* 2022 progress report, 4,336,762 acres of Maine's land is in some form of conservation. This acreage represents 22.0% of the state.[1]
- More than 50,000 acres of land were conserved annually in 2021 and 2022.
- Most of Maine's conserved lands are held in large, working forest conservation easements in northern and eastern Maine. Southern Maine, with a higher population density and numerous biodiversity 'hot spots,' has a lower proportion of conserved lands.
- Maine has been most successful in conserving wetlands and mountaintops with high ecological, scenic, and recreational values.
- Maine lost 10% of its farmland between 2012 and 2017. Compared to forests and wetlands, a significantly lower proportion of the state's remaining farmland has been conserved, and significantly fewer public resources have been dedicated to this effort. According to Maine Farmland Trust, only 3.5% of the existing open, farmable land in Maine underlain with prime farmland or agricultural soils of statewide significance has been permanently conserved. Maine lags far behind most of the northeastern US in the percentage of our state's agricultural land that has been protected.
- Using the current definition of conserved lands, to reach the 30% goal, Maine needs to conserve an additional 1.6 million acres by 2030, or more than 225,000 acres each year. **This rate of conservation is nearly five times the rate of the past two years.**

[1] This acreage is derived from the state's Conserved Lands Database managed by the Maine Natural Areas Program. The acreage reflects lands that are permanently conserved through fee ownership or easement. These lands and easements are held by federal, state, and local agencies and non-profit groups.

- Conservation of Maine's forests, wetlands, forests, and farmlands is a team effort, requiring public and private funding sources, collaboration between the state and conservation groups, and landowners willing to engage in conservation.

Work Underway

- To help inform future conservation targets, DACF, and public and private partners reviewed land conservation accomplishments since the 1997 Land Acquisition Priorities Advisory Committee (LAPAC) produced its report. This work identified acquisition gaps that can be used as one among many resources to inform future acquisition priorities. Results from the LAPAC report are expected soon.
- DACF's Bureau of Parks and Lands has over $22 million in approved funding and 35,000 acres of conservation projects underway.
- The Land for Maine's Future (LMF) program has approved dozens of new projects since Governor Mills and the legislature reinvigorated the program with $40 million in new funding. The LMF board has recently added new Equity and Community Accessibility scoring criteria for the 2023 proposal request (RFP). They include whether the project serves low-income or otherwise disadvantaged communities, provides greenspace in areas with limited outdoor recreation, and is accessible from neighborhoods, schools, downtowns, public transportation stops, and village centers.
- The Working Farmland Access and Protection Program was established within DACF. This program strengthens the alignment between the DACF farmland conservation goals and the Land for Maine's Future program and has the potential to provide additional support for agricultural land preservation in the future.
- Due to the recently passed Inflation Reduction Act, an unprecedented amount of federal funding for farmland conservation will be available through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program of NRCS. However, utilization of ACEP funds presents challenges and historically has not always been a viable option for farmland protection projects in Maine.

Potential Considerations and Barriers

- From a simple efficiency standpoint (i.e., cost and time), conserving large working forest easements is the fastest path to 30%. However, there is a substantial need to safeguard smaller parcels that include wildlife habitat and recreational lands close to southern and central Maine population centers.
- Farmland across the state is impacted by sprawl and development pressure; our best agricultural soils are a finite resource, and critical to meeting another Maine Won't Wait goal, which is to increase consumption of Maine-grown food to 30% by 2030.
- Staffing capacity among state agencies, non-profit partners, contracted appraisers, surveyors, legal counsel, and others is a significant barrier. Nearly all conservation projects require grant proposals and funding, and the administration of public grant funding is time-consuming. While fiscal accountability is essential, publicly funded conservation programs often pose barriers to accomplishing conservation work in an expedient way.
- Maine has a strong land stewardship ethic, and we must consider the importance of managing and monitoring the additional lands that are conserved.

- The LMF Program is quickly drawing down its funding. Will there be additional LMF funding available to help meet the 2030 goal?

Some Key Questions

- Seek consensus on 'what to count' as conserved. For example, how do we consider current-use programs, such as Open Space and Tree Growth, that are not permanent? How do we consider tribal lands?
- How should we balance and weigh the numerous conservation priorities: working farmland, biodiversity (e.g., ecological reserves), public access for under-represented groups, recreation, ecosystem services (e.g., drinking water), working forests, coastal systems, climate resilient landscapes, tribal land needs, and other concerns?
- How (and where) can we build capacity quickly to execute land conservation projects?
- What is the impact of our geographic representation of conserved lands, and how should we consider geography in future conservation efforts?
- How can we leverage and increase various funding sources, which will be necessary to reach the 2030 goal?