

# **Land Acquisition Priorities**

## **Themes Heard**

### **from Presenters, Task Force Members & the Public**

#### Working Lands

1. Prime ag is less than 4% of state and a major turnover of farmland is anticipated in the next decade. There needs to be a more focused farmland protection effort by LMF (return to a separate farmland program rather than combined with conservation and recreation lands) to conserve farms and provide opportunities for new farmers.
2. Similar to agriculture, family forests are in the midst of a major generational transition putting these lands at potential risk of conversion to development. These lands collectively are an important resource to the state's forest products industry.
3. There continues to be large landowners willing to sell landscape-scale working forest easements to secure Maine's timber base and guarantee public access. We need state and federal funding sources to take advantage of these opportunities.
4. Working waterfronts are critical to Maine's commercial fishing industry. LMF has done a good job of conserving selected wharves, but it needs to greatly expand to avoid having key facilities from being pushed out by development.

#### Water Resources

1. Give greater attention to water resources in land conservation planning such as designing projects around watersheds and/or conducting a better assessment of aquatic resources that could be factored into LMF decision-making.
2. Using land conservation to protect public drinking water sources provides a multitude of public benefits.
3. Maine's coastal and inland water resources are gems. Focus land protection on undeveloped parcels adjacent to Maine's waters which is good for wildlife and public access. Expanded coastal access should be a top priority as well as Maine's rivers.

#### Recreation

1. Remote recreation opportunities that are unique to Maine remain important, however from a tourism perspective, having recreation opportunities associated with or nearby to amenities is key. Tourists are looking for more creature comforts.
2. Local and regional trails should be a priority since they provide a safe way for people to enjoy their communities, particularly those that connect to downtown areas and conserved lands.
3. Multi-use linear trails have proven very popular and successful as economic generators. When opportunities come up for additional rails-to-trails, or similar trail routes, they should be pursued. Maine Guides and others are looking for more longer hiking trails.

4. Tourism trends that influence land conservation priorities: adventure recreation, locally grown foods, scenic landscapes. Wildlife watching, particularly birding, has become a major tourism draw. Conserved lands are important to hunters and anglers, particularly in developed part of state where public access to private lands has diminished.
5. Provide resources to secure motorized and non-motorized trail corridors across private lands which are increasingly imperiled by land ownership transition and changing landowner attitudes.
6. We need more state parks in southern Maine due to increasing demand.
7. Sometimes LMF projects disrupt traditional access and recreational uses such as ATV and snowmobile trails. This should be avoided unless satisfactory alternative routes can be established.

#### Wildlife & Ecological Values

1. Maine has done a good job protecting certain habitats, but there are other natural communities which have not been adequately represented on conservation lands, particularly in the southern half of the state.
2. Wildlife needs connections to travel from one area to another.
3. Maine has a relatively low percentage of lands that are preserved as ecological reserves. We should have more reserves that are off limits to timber harvesting.
4. Maine's North Woods, particularly the Western Mountains is a globally significant ecological area. While much has been accomplished, there's, there is still more to do.
5. Looking to future, it will be important to consider climate change in acquisition priorities by considering such factors as habitat connectivity; conserving diverse physical features; enhancing carbon storage in Maine's forests and conserving lands that will play important roles in sea level rise.
6. Provide added focus on critical game species habitat such as native brook trout waters and deer wintering areas, as well as non-game habitat for species of greatest conservation need and Focus Areas identified in the State Wildlife Action Plan.
7. Trapping and hunting should not be required (or permitted) on LMF acquired lands. We need more wildlife sanctuaries.

#### Local/Community Conservation

1. Should seek more open space conservation near where people live and work and which are accessible by public transportation. These lead to higher quality of life and healthier lifestyles. Current LMF Program does not actively support these types of projects.
2. Increase LMF focus on underserved towns and populations, including low-income, the disabled, seniors, new Mainers and others that currently have few open space lands available to them.
3. Maine is seeing an increase in its elderly and disabled populations. Increase focus on lands that have location and terrain suitable for universally accessible trails.
4. LMF should seek to work with Maine's tribes to conserve significant Native American lands.

## **Stewardship of Conserved Lands**

### **Themes Heard from Presenters, Task Force Members & the Public**

#### **Stewardship of Public Lands**

##### **A. State Parks**

1. Maine State Parks have an approximately \$50 million backlog of basic infrastructure maintenance and replacement including bathrooms, roads, campsites, administrative buildings. The last parks bond for capital improvements was in 2010.
2. Current sources of capital improvement funding, which primarily includes loon license plate revenues, Poland Springs revenue, and federal LWCF funds only sufficient for band-aid remedies. Park fees all go to General Fund and total about 55% of annual operating costs.
3. Maine State Parks has not built a significant new facility, such as a new campground, in 40 years. Facilities are considered “antiquated.” Modern public expectations often exceed the service capacity of the system. Other States’ park systems have invested in new infrastructure such as shelters, cabins, pavilions and visitor centers resulting in increased visitation and tourism spending.
4. Maine State Parks has numerous undeveloped parks and adequate lands on existing parks to substantially expand infrastructure if capital improvements funding were available.
5. Park use continues to increase, while Parks staffing continues to decline with 24 positions lost in last budget cycle.
6. State has had mixed results working with Friends groups. Sometimes very helpful, sometimes they have agendas which differ from BPL’s.
7. Snowmobile, and particularly ATV trail clubs are having trouble keeping up with trail maintenance due to an aging volunteer force and limited funding.
8. Parks needs a stable source of both operations and capital funding like Public Lands that allows for long-range planning for maintenance and improvements.

##### **B. Public Lands**

1. Public Lands operates on dedicated revenues derived primarily from timber harvest revenues. This system has generally been successful in providing sufficient and stable funding for operations. Capital projects represent about 15% of the annual budget. In recent years, BPL has made major investments in roads.
2. Unlike Parks, Public Lands provide very limited developed facilities, mostly primitive facilities. However, there is a growing demand for more developed facilities on Public Lands units ranging from universally accessible trails and boat launches to recreational vehicle camping areas.
3. BPL has only six seasonal ranger positions for their entire ownership. Constraint on providing additional recreational management services is due to lack of available approved positions, not funding.

4. Over the past two decades, BPL has taken on major working forest easements which require monitoring and recreational management but do not provide any revenue. While endowments typically cover monitoring costs, they do not provide sufficient funds for recreation management.
5. Some of the more heavily used Public Lands, like Tumbledown and the Cutler Coast have strained the recreational management abilities of BPL.
6. There has been public criticism that BPL doesn't do enough to make Public Lands known and accessible to the public. Lack of sufficient signage and information is a common complaint; one which BPL is actively working on improving.
7. Opportunity to expand interpretation of Maine's forest heritage which would add to people's outdoor recreation experience and attract more visitors.
8. LUPC permitting can be a major challenge in developing new facilities.
9. Generally speaking, the public seems satisfied with BPL's multiple use management on Public Lands, though some feel that the balance is tilted toward timber harvesting. In addition, trying to accommodate all recreation uses, both motorized and backcountry, on every unit, can create conflicts.
10. Maine should consider better protection for public lands to prevent them from being sold, leased or utilized for non-conservation purposes such as transmission and gas lines.

#### Stewardship of Private Conservation Lands

1. In general, land trusts' stewardship responsibilities and costs have grown dramatically in recent decades due to acquisition of new lands. A recent survey of land trust indicates that future stewardship costs and staffing is a top concern.
2. Volunteers are a critical resource for stewardship of private conservation lands. Some land trusts have developed highly successful volunteer stewardship programs integrated into the operations and fabric of the organization. Other land trusts have struggled to keep up with their stewardship responsibilities, particularly as the active volunteer pool ages out.
3. Land and easement acquisition by land trusts has, in general, slowed as land trusts focus on taking care of what they already own and putting more effort into educational programming.
4. Those land trust which are accredited (less than half of Maine's land trusts) are required to have full stewardship protocols in place, dedicated stewardship funding, and competent stewardship programs.
5. Some land trusts have entered into partnership with BPL to jointly manage public lands, generally with positive results.
6. Public's desire for more and better trails on land trust properties continues to grow including universally accessible trails which are very expensive to construct. Trail funding from the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) has not been able to keep up with demand.
7. Those organizations such as Maine Huts & Trails which have invested heavily in recreational infrastructure face a daunting maintenance and replacement challenge in the future.

# Community and Economic Issues Related to Land Conservation

## **Themes Heard from Presenters, Task Force Members & the Public**

### Working Lands

1. There will be a major turnover of farms in next decade due to an aging farming population, putting these lands at risk for development. Protecting farmland in Maine is necessary to ensure we have the land base to grow our regional food and agricultural economy, and affordable farmland for the next generation of farmers.
2. There is a growing demand for local food, both for Maine residents and as part of a growing culinary tourism sector.
3. Stabilization of the large landscape wood supply is important for the rural communities of the north woods region and we should be thinking about what role conserved lands can play in this market.
4. Family woodland ownership is changing, and it's hidden because it's happening at 20, 50 and 100-acre tracts. In many ways there's a greater impact from these many smaller turnovers than there is when a large tract of tens of thousands of acres changes hands from one corporate owner to another.
5. Conserving mature and managed forests is a way to reduce carbon emissions by storing carbon in the forest and wood products.
6. The Working Waterfront sector is estimated to be worth \$1.5 billion overall to the state's economy. With only 20 miles of the 5,300-mile shoreline available and appropriate for working waterfront uses, protection of these parcels is key for supporting fishing industries into the future.
7. The potential impacts of sea-level rise and climate change should be incorporated into the consideration of future working waterfront projects.
8. Cooperative management models – such as fishing coops and community forests – provide an opportunity to support traditional economies while also incorporating broader community control over the resource.
9. The public funding process should recognize that public access and working lands are not always compatible and should help minimize conflict and competition between recreational and commercial users.

### Tourism and Economic Development

1. Across the state, tourism continues to benefit from land conservation and open access for recreation. In recent years there has been significant growth in culinary tourism and adventure travel.
2. Fewer visitors want a true backcountry experience; instead people are looking for infrastructure and amenities that makes the experience comfortable.
3. People are increasingly looking for transformative experiences that tie in to both the natural setting and the local history, cultural and community
4. Destination tourism has potential, but we need to acknowledge that not every community is going to be a tourism destination. Some communities have a higher concentration of values: land, cultural assets, downtowns, name recognition. We should focus on preserving key landscape features in those areas and not trying to develop tourism opportunities everywhere.

5. There's a need for better infrastructure to fully realize the economic benefits of land conservation projects. It's increasingly recognized by the tourism and outdoor industries that having adequate roads and signage to get people to conserved lands is an important component of a successful project.
6. There's been a lot of effort devoted to conserving land, but very little directed at creating economic development around those conserved lands. The state as a whole and local communities could benefit from greater effort and coordination around marketing.
7. There's a tendency for promotional materials to include only white and able-bodied people, which is not reflective of the state's changing demographics.
8. The economic returns from conserved lands are not equal for all communities. There is untapped potential, especially in rural communities, and a need for greater collaboration between municipalities, regional planning organizations and conservation groups, in order to help underserved communities recognize greater economic benefits.

### Community Issues

1. Trails and greenspaces are not just for habitat. They can also be a tool for connecting people and places.
2. We need better ways of getting people to the outdoors and making them feel safe. The biggest challenge is transportation, and this is too frequently overlooked. You can't get to a state park from Portland using public transportation. As we look to the future we need to think about how people get to recreational resources.
3. Place-based education is seen as a powerful learning tool. It is being used to increase environmental literacy and to build a stewardship ethic in order to help secure a future for the next generation. Local conservation lands are often the classroom for place-based education programs.
4. There's a need to provide greater access to land for historically disenfranchised people.
5. There's a segment of the tribal community that continues to practice cultural traditions and ceremonies that require extremely remote areas with little evidence of human involvement. Having places set aside for these traditional uses is important.
6. Health organizations in the state are increasingly encouraging communities to take ownership of protecting resources that are important for community health; including land, air and water.
7. Access to active living is an obstacle for many Mainers. Making active living opportunities as accessible as possible is an important way to have future land conservation efforts support healthy living efforts.
8. For many families, their main source of protein is wild food. Local opportunities for hunting are diminishing as more lands are being posted and developed. Conserving a pool of wild food and access to it is important.
9. Overall communities recognize the benefit associated with land conservation, but they have financial obligations to fulfill and some are frustrated because they have no say in the tax exemption process. Land trusts would benefit from building better relationships with municipalities so that town officials don't feel left out. In addition, when you have municipal buy-in, then you have a product that people will protect.
10. In recent years, the Legislature has withheld significant amounts of revenue sharing for state purposes, distributing just 2% (instead of 5%) to Maine's municipalities. Such reductions often lead to municipalities being forced to raise property taxes or cut services in order to meet community needs. And although education funding and revenue sharing have far more impact on municipal budgets than tax exempt conservation lands, financial pressures force municipalities to look for money wherever they can.

## **Promoting Public Access and Stewardship on Private Lands**

### **Themes Heard from Presenters, Task Force Members & the Public**

#### Public Access on Private Lands

1. Private landowners provide significant benefits to the public by allowing access and use of their lands, and it is in the best interests of all parties (i.e. the public and private landowners) to maintain positive, working relationships.
2. 70% of woodland owners currently allow unfettered public access, but one half of those are thinking about changing their minds. Landowners want people to behave themselves and want to be respected. The primary issues landowners report are ATVs and illegal dumping.
3. The North Maine Woods provides a valuable public service by managing 3.5 million acres of private forest land for public use. Their service attracts Maine visitors and as such, the Maine Office of Tourism might consider strategies to help support that service.
4. The next generation of woodland owners is not the same as today, especially with regards to public access. The current generation believes in sharing their land. The next generation will be less timber oriented and less tolerant of the things that are going on in the woods; they don't have same loyalty to public access and don't see any incentives for continuing to provide access.
5. A study that was done to find out how much it would cost if we had to pay for public access on private lands, came back with a figure of \$33 per acre per year, which is not a viable option.
6. If landowner issues are not addressed, traditional public access may soon have competition from commercial ventures. An AirBnB model is emerging where landowners monetize public access by listing their property for recreation and charging for access.
7. The number of sportsmen who come to Maine to fish and hunt, particularly hunters has declined over the past decade. In the five-year period from 2009 through 2013, the change in numbers of licenses to hunt and fish in Maine has been mostly negative. And while ATV registrations have climbed steadily in recent years, snowmobile registrations peaked about 10 years ago at 100,000 and have been as low as 60,000 in more recent years.
8. The Landowner Relations program is within the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, under the Bureau of Warden Service. With 94% of the state privately owned, the program's objectives are ambitious and current levels of staffing and funding are insufficient to meet its goals.
9. We need to educate users about good stewardship and the importance of respecting private lands.
10. Illegal dumping negatively affects relationships with landowners and threatens wildlife and aquatic habitats. People who dispose of waste in unpermitted areas often do so to avoid disposal fees or the effort needed to properly dispose at landfills or recycling centers. Thousands of dollars are spent to clean up dump sites and the cost of hauling and disposing of this waste is often passed on to the landowner.

### Stewardship on Private Lands

1. To encourage good forest management and harvest practice, Maine Forest Service ideally wants to have the opportunity to connect the landowner to a private consulting forester before they cut. There are only 10 district foresters for the entire state and they can't support the need for outreach.
2. There are currently some funds available to help with forest management planning. At one time Maine Forest Service was able to offer financial assistance for pruning, thinnings and PCTs – things that cost money but didn't generate income, but they no longer have funds for these items. Some federal funding is available through NRCS to assist landowners with land stewardship.
3. USFS research indicates there are landowners that would be interested in stewardship activities if they knew what to do. But the idea of permanence can be scary to landowners so there need to be approaches in addition to easements, like term agreements or programs that provide incentives for good stewardship of land and other resources.
4. Landowners are still interested in land conservation. They don't necessarily trust the next generation. Having a program that would offset the transaction costs for people could lead to more donations of land and easements.
5. Current use taxation is an essential program for many landowners.

## **Funding for Future Land Conservation**

### **Themes Heard from Presenters, Task Force Members & the Public**

#### **Public Funding**

##### **A. State Funding**

1. Maine ranks 26<sup>th</sup> nationally in terms of state dollars spent on land conservation. The largest contributor source of state funding, by far, is the Land for Maine's Future Program which has contributed \$132 million over the past 30 years protecting over 600,000 acres.
2. Land for Maine's Future is not only the most important state funding source in terms of dollars, it is a critical catalyst for attracting local, federal and private contributions. Over the past generation, LMF's has contributed about 25% of total acquisition dollars, but has leveraged much of the remaining 75%. It provides important credibility for projects.
3. States around the country use a variety of mechanisms to fund land conservation including sales tax, real estate transfer taxes and recording fees, and oil/gas royalties – in many cases generating large and stable sources of funding.
4. Other states successfully combine land acquisition funding programs with other initiatives such as affordable housing, community revitalization and the arts.
5. Public appears comfortable with, and supportive of, relying primarily on bonding for supporting LMF. There is openness to other ideas, but not at the risk of generating major political battles.
6. Public comment strongly supported a new and large LMF bond. Some suggested new funding sources such as:
  - a 1% sales tax for 10 years to permanently endow a land acquisition fund eliminating the need for future bonding;
  - dedicated taxes or fees of related activities such as outdoor recreation equipment, water extraction, food and lodging;
  - lottery sales; and
  - added fee on vehicle registration.
7. There is substantial frustration among land trusts that the LMF process has become more burdensome, lengthier and less certain than in the past.

##### **B. Federal Funding**

1. Maine conservation projects have been very successful in attracting federal funding from a wide range of programs. Until recently, Maine was the national leader in securing Forest Legacy funds, and has also been successful with coastal wetlands funding, NAWCA grants (wetlands), REPI funding (Defense Department), stateside LWCF (municipal and state projects) and NRCS (farmland and forest).
2. Partnerships between land trusts and state agencies is critical to securing federal funds. In recent years, the Administration chose not to take advantage of many of these federal funding opportunities for land acquisition reducing their availability for acquisition projects.

### C. Local Funding

1. Local funding for land conservation is a major source nationally. In Maine, local contributions to conservation projects has been uneven across the state, with a minority of towns making substantial contributions.
2. Pressures on local finances resulting from state actions pertaining to revenue sharing and educational funding has left little room in most municipal budgets for land conservation.
3. Maine towns, in some cases, have tapped into existing funding streams to support land conservation such as tree growth tax withdrawal penalties or sales of tax foreclosed properties. Other states provide authority to municipalities to establish fees or taxes to support land conservation, such as a local option real estate transfer tax.

### Private Funding

1. Conservation is a significant and growing interest for donor advised funds, a philanthropic source which has grown dramatically in recent years. Many of Maine Community Foundation's donor advised funds are from wealthy part-time residents who appreciate Maine's natural resources.
2. Recent trends in private philanthropy include looking for multi-faceted projects where community and economic benefits are involved in addition to environmental benefits.
3. Climate change has become a major focus of private philanthropy nationally, including projects involving land acquisitions.
4. There is a growth opportunity for private philanthropy for Maine land conservation because is land resources are plentiful and exceptional. Particularly true in terms of climate change because Maine has an important resilient landscape for climate mitigation.
5. Maine can make a case for increased private philanthropy focused on its underserved rural and urban populations for projects that highlight connection between community and conservation.