

LAND CONSERVATION TASK FORCE

BACKGROUND PAPER: WILDLIFE HABITAT AND ECOLOGICAL RESOURCES

I. Introduction

Protecting wildlife habitat and significant ecological resources has always been a mainstay of land conservation programs in Maine and nationally. There are numerous public funding programs (though not necessarily sufficient funds) both at the state and federal level, that either specifically target wildlife habitat or include it among various objectives. Often these funding sources are matched with each other to fund a particular project.

Quality information and plans exist both at the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife (MDIF&W) and Maine Natural Areas Program (MNAP), as well as with non-profits such as The Nature Conservancy to help target conservation efforts to priority lands.

II. Existing Public Land Conservation Programs that fund acquisition of wildlife habitat and significant ecological resources

Land for Maine's Future Program (LMF): While not exclusively focused on wildlife/ecological projects, LMF is a substantial contributor to many wildlife/ecology-oriented projects. Since its beginning in 1987, LMF has played a role in conserving approximately 600,000 acres of land, approximately 20% of the land conserved during that period (more information below). LMF is close to being out of uncommitted funds.

Maine Natural Resource Conservation Program (MNRCP): MNRCP is a state-wide mitigation program funded by developer fees that awards grants to projects that restore and protect high priority aquatic resources throughout Maine. Since its launch in 2008, MNRCP has awarded over \$11 million to non-profit groups, municipalities and public agencies to help restore, enhance or preserve wetlands and other important habitats at 88 project sites across the state.

North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA): Administered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, NAWCA offers both large (\$1 million) and small (up to \$100,000) grants to increase bird populations and restore/protect wetlands. Over the years, Maine has generally been successful receiving at least one large grant annually as well as numerous smaller grants. The scoring criteria favors locations nearer to the coast.

National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program (Coastal Wetlands Grants): Also administered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this program offers grants of up to \$1 million for projects that protect coastal wetlands. The program is very competitive with only about \$19 million distributed nationally over the past year, however Maine has received at least one grant annually since 2010.

Pittman Robertson Wildlife Restoration (PR): PR funding is raised through a federal tax on guns and ammunition and is distributed by formula to state fish & wildlife agencies for restoration of wild

birds and mammals and to acquire, develop and manage their habitats. MDIF&W can use these funds for a variety of management

Endangered Species Act – Section 6 Grant Programs (Section 6): There are several Section 6 grant programs administered by U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service which are all targeted towards protection of endangered species habit. Grants to Maine projects have been infrequent but have included significant grants to land conservation projects along Atlantic salmon rivers.

Land & Water Conservation Fund (LWCF): LWCF is the primary source of federal funding to acquire lands to be added to National Wildlife Refuges in Maine including Moosehorn, Petit Manan, Sunhaze Meadows, Umbagog and Rachel Carson, as well as Acadia National Park and the White Mountain National Forest. LWCF expenditures fluctuate greatly from year to year and the long-term future of the program is currently being debated in Congress.

Forest Legacy Program (FLP): Historically, FLP has been a major funder of large forest conservation projects in Maine, often providing multi-million-dollar grants to one or two projects annually. Projects typically involve large tracts of working forest lands often encompassing significant habitats and ecological features. Maine has not actively pursued FLP funding since 2014.

Maine Outdoor Heritage Fund (MOHF): Funded through sales of a special lottery ticket, MOHF provides grant funding for a wide range of conservation projects including land and easement acquisition. Its grants are small and typically supplement other funding for land acquisitions.

III. How Land for Maine’s Future Program addresses wildlife habitat and ecological protection needs.

Under its Conservation and Recreation Lands Program, LMF designates three of its seven categories of Major Land Assets to ecological and wildlife resources as follows:

- Lands Supporting Vital Ecological Functions and Values
- Rare, Threatened, or Endangered Plants,
- Natural Communities, Wildlife and their habitat

The quality of the proposed parcel in one of these categories is an important component of the scoring system. In addition, the LMF scoring process gives additional points to projects that involve ecological reserves, islands and undeveloped coastline. Finally, the most recent LMF bond issue directed LMF to give additional priority to projects that provided significant protection for deer wintering areas.

IV. Progress over past thirty years and any major shortcomings.

While specific figures are difficult to come by, it is fair to say that protection of wildlife habitat and significant ecological areas has participated fully in the success of land conservation over the past 30 years. Approximately one-third of completed LMF projects were sponsored by MDIF&W and many projects sponsored by DACF also had substantial wildlife benefits. Of funded projects, 30% listed their Major Land Asset as “Vital Ecological Functions and Values, while 8% listed Rare, Threatened &

Endangered Species. The diversity of funding sources for habitat protection often allow project sponsors to match state and federal funding.

However, ecological assessments of the state indicate that some of the most biologically rich areas are in the southern half of Maine where the land base is more fragmented, development pressures are greatest and land prices are highest. Consequently, land conservation projects in these areas are more challenging and expensive. When one looks at the tremendous increase in conserved lands over the past 30 years, the great majority (around 90%) of the protected acreage is in the northern half of the state. The Land Acquisition Priorities Advisory Committee recognized this issue in its report back in 1997 and recommended an increased priority be placed on conservation of natural areas in the southern part of the state. Since that time there have been notable successes such as Mount Agamenticus to the Sea and the Kennebec Highlands – projects that have pieced together dozens of parcels to create large conserved areas, but more work remains to be done.

While nearly 20% of Maine is now in some form of conservation ownership, a 2014 report from the Maine Natural Areas Program found less than 4% is set aside as ecological reserves or other forever-wild type designations compared to a national average of 16%. The report also found that no biophysical region (a geographic designation of the state's ecological regions) has all of its ecological systems adequately represented.

V. Key Guidance and Resources for Protection of Important Habitat and Ecological Resources

Maine's natural resource agencies provide abundant information and guidance for land conservation efforts targeted at wildlife habitat and significant ecological resources. MDIF&W has prepared a State Wildlife Action Plan that identifies 378 Species of Greatest Conservation Need, the habitats needed by each of these species, the greatest stressors affecting their habitats, and the conservation actions to take to benefit each species. In addition, MDIF&W coordinates the Beginning with Habitat program that provides habitat mapping for Maine Communities and identifies Focus Areas; landscape scale areas that contain exceptionally rich concentrations of at-risk species and natural communities and high quality common natural communities, significant wildlife habitats, and their intersection with large blocks of undeveloped habitat. MDIF&W has also developed a series of species management plans for both game and non-game species.

The Maine Natural Areas Program (MNAP) maintains a data management system containing current and historical information about natural features from across Maine. This information is shared with state agencies, town planners, land trusts, and other groups interested in conservation planning. MNAP has classified 104 different natural community types that collectively cover the state's landscape. Each type is assigned a rarity rank of 1 (rare) through 5 (common). MNAP is also responsible for maintaining the list of rare plants species in Maine whose populations within the state are highly vulnerable to loss as well as coordinating a statewide system of ecological reserves.

In terms of aquatic ecosystems, the State long ago ranked Maine's most outstanding rivers and lakes. More recently, groups like The Nature Conservancy are using the latest science to identify priority watersheds and aquatic habitats.

Lastly, there are many local and regional planning efforts that have identified habits, ecological resources and aquatic ecosystems that are conservation priorities. These include municipal open space plans, watershed plans and land trust acquisition priorities.

VI. Some key issues and questions for the future

- How do we factor a changing climate in land conservation programs and priorities?
- Where are the greatest threats to Maine's wildlife and ecological resources?
- Is the current balance of conservation easement lands and fee lands effectively protecting important habitats and ecological resources? Are more ecological reserves needed?
- How can land conservation efforts best protect important aquatic ecosystems?
- Do additional steps need to focus more land conservation resources to the southern half of the state?

VII. Suggested resources for those who want to dig deeper

Beginning with Habitat: <http://beginningwithhabitat.org/index.html>

State Wildlife Action Plan: <https://www.maine.gov/ifw/fish-wildlife/wildlife/wildlife-action-plan.html>

MDIF&W Species Action Plans: <https://www.maine.gov/ifw/fish-wildlife/wildlife/species-planning/index.html>

Maine Natural Areas Program resources: <http://www.maine.gov/dacf/mnap/features/index.htm>

A Conservation Vision for Maine Using Ecological Systems prepared by MNAP: <http://www.maine.gov/dacf/mnap/about/publications/ra.htm>

Maine's Climate Future from the Climate Change Institute: <http://climatechange.umaine.edu/research/publications/climate-future>

The Nature Conservancy Report on Resilient Sites for Conservation in the Eastern United State: [http://www.conservationgateway.org/ConservationByGeography/NorthAmerica/UnitedStates/edc/Documents/ED_Resiliency%20Fact%20Sheet_full%20region_07112014%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.conservationgateway.org/ConservationByGeography/NorthAmerica/UnitedStates/edc/Documents/ED_Resiliency%20Fact%20Sheet_full%20region_07112014%20(1).pdf)