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Community Governance in New England's (Largely Private) Forests

Collective, local management of forests for community and individual benefits can take many institutional forms across a variety of ownership types. Numerous studies in the United States have examined the community engagement and impacts related to public forest management, community-owned forests, and community-based collaborative initiatives that span ownerships. Less well understood is how community governance can influence socioeconomic and environmental outcomes in a landscape dominated by private forest ownership. This study examines relationships among diverse forms of community governance that are seeking to promote local livelihood, well-being and conservation benefits in New England, where forest is over 80 percent privately owned. We show how municipalities, conservation commissions, trail committees, local housing authorities, local land trusts, and private forest owners have worked together with state, business and non-profit partners in innovative ways to achieve impacts that extend beyond the individual properties involved. An initial database of potential cases was assembled from Northern New England through networks of practitioners and publications. Ten cases were purposively selected to capture a diversity of practice and partnerships. Data have been collected through site visits, interviews and document review. Our case studies highlight motivations, partnerships, outcomes, equity issues and factors leading to success or failures in achieving their goals.

Some cases focus on efforts to establish or revitalize the classic New England Town Forest. For example, an economically struggling town devoted tax revenues to purchase a former quarry, which, through a partnership with a local business, has become a destination spot for people from neighboring states and Canada. Other cases focus on private lands. For example, a collectively-owned private forest, provided marked trails for public access and invited local nonprofits to conduct trainings on site for logging, bird conservation and mushroom identification. They also provide economic benefits by leasing taps to a local maple syrup operation and donating firewood to needy families. In some cases, benefits are scaled up by linking neighboring properties through informal agreement and easements. In yet another case, a regional non-profit sought to sustain forest-based livelihoods by partnering with local businesses and economic development groups to help residents access government incentives to convert to sustainable wood heating. In most cases, proponents expect their benefits to multiply over time because of the model they are providing to other private landowners and community groups. While this study is on-going, our analysis to date suggests that the complexity of these innovative, multi-sector partnerships requires skilled project leadership (one or more well-networked champions), institutionalization of local management (e.g. oversight by dedicated local committee), and supportive regional organizations (for legal, technical or financial support). Quantifying livelihood, health and equity benefits, especially the anticipated spin-off effects, has remained a challenge that this project hopes to discuss at the FLARE conference and tackle in its next phase. This study seeks to expand the understanding of community governance in a private lands context and identify the conditions under which it can be successful in achieving livelihood and conservation goals.