



Introduction to Community-Owned Forests

This Quick Guide provides an introduction to community-owned and managed forests as an approach to conserving private forests that has been gaining increasing attention. In June 2005 the Communities Committee and several other partners hosted a conference in Missoula, Montana on “Community-owned Forests: Possibilities, Experiences and Lessons Learned.” The conference brought together citizens, managers and researchers from across the United States, as well as Canada and Eastern Europe to discuss opportunities and challenges for community-owned forests. The Quick Guide captures key information and learning shared at the conference and from more recent experiences in community-owned forests. It discusses what community forests are and the benefits they provide, outlines the background leading to efforts to increase community ownership of forestlands, provides examples of community forests from across the country, and introduces how communities can acquire and manage forests.

What Are Community-Owned Forests?

Across the country, millions of acres of private forestland are changing hands. Much of this land is at risk of being developed for residential or commercial use, which can cause significant fragmentation of forests and wildlife habitat, close off local residents’ access to outdoor recreation opportunities, hunting, forestry and other traditional uses, and imperil economic development, employment and other community benefits. Increasingly, forward thinking communities are acquiring some of these lands to protect forests from possible conversion and to manage them as community forests. Community-owned forests are a valuable economic, social and environmental asset – in addition to keeping forestland intact, local forest ownership gives residents greater control and self-determination in how their communities grow and develop, keeps economic benefits from the land in local hands, preserves and enhances local traditions, and allows the community to invest in long-term resource protection.

As the examples in this guide show, community-owned forests can take many forms – forests owned by local municipal governments, such as the many town forests in New England; forests owned by local community-based non-profits; and even forests in collective private ownership. What sets these forests apart from other private or government-owned forests is the role that local residents play in their stewardship. Local residents are involved in determining the goals and purposes of these forests, developing a governance structure, selecting individuals or organizations responsible for managing these forests, and in enjoying the many social and economic benefits of the forests.

Changing Forest Ownership

In recent years, privately-owned forestland has been changing hands rapidly, particularly as large timber and forest products companies divest their land holdings. The result is often smaller parcels of forestland and increasing fragmentation of ownership. As ownership patterns shift, forests are increasingly being developed for commercial or residential uses.

- Since 1978, 20-25% of all privately-owned forest land has changed ownership; approximately 75% of industry-owned private forestland changed hands between 1996 and 2005. (Little, 2005; Shillinglaw, Morgan and Vaughan, 2007).
- Estimates suggest that another 20% of private forestland could change hands in the next ten years. (Block and Sample, 2001).
- Research by the USDA Forest Service shows that conversion of forest land to developed uses reached 1 million acres per year in the 1990s.

- Projections are that in the next 30 years, another 44.2 million acres, over 11% of all private forest land, will experience “dramatic increases in housing development.” (Stein et al., 2005).

Development of private forestland has significant consequences for the ecological functions of the forest as well as the communities that live in and near them. Loss of forest means loss of wildlife habitat and degradation of wetlands and riparian areas. Communities also lose forest-based businesses and jobs, in both forestry and recreation-based industries. Moreover, much of the forestland in private timber company ownership has traditionally been open to public access. As timber companies sell their lands to other private owners, this access could disappear. In fact, according to the Forest Service, the number of acres of private forest land open to outdoor recreation has been declining in recent years. (Smith and Darr, 2002).

Community members, conservation organizations and government agencies are working to keep some of these lands as contiguous forest through acquisition by land trusts or state or federal governments. However, this option is not always feasible or favored by local residents. Community forests offer a promising way to keep forests as forests and maintain them as community assets, putting the critical economic, environmental, recreational, social, cultural, and aesthetic values those forests have traditionally provided in the hands of local residents.

Benefits of Community Forests

Establishing a community-owned forest both protects forest land from unwanted development and gives communities a better ability to shape their future. Local forest ownership can also change how residents relate to the land, fostering an ethic of stewardship. Deborah Brighton of Vermont Family Forests notes, “A community forest makes people owners of working land in their community, and ownership changes the way people think about the land.” A community forest provides many economic, social and environmental benefits for the community, including:

- Protecting water sources
- Providing wildlife habitat
- Outdoor recreation
- Opportunities to observe and connect with nature
- Income from forestry activities
- Educational opportunities
- Demonstration of sustainable forest management practices
- Heat and/or energy for local schools and other public buildings

By keeping land in local hands, a community forest can also be a form of asset-based development, helping to build longer term wealth, not just current income.

Benefits and Products from Community Forests

Forestry activities in many town forests provide enough income to cover management costs, and often produce revenue for the town:

- Arcata Community Forest, CA (2 tracts, 1,822 total acres) – Forest Stewardship Council certified and generates \$500,000-\$700,000 of revenue per year from timber harvesting, of which \$245,000 covers management costs and \$20,000 goes toward salary for a ranger; forest is self-supporting, no tax revenues are used for management, and excess net revenue is used to purchase and maintain other city parkland and open space.
- Conway Town Forest, NH (1,840 acres) – timber sales generated \$81,171 in revenue between 1978 and 2003; revenues go toward additional land acquisition.

- Enosburg Town Forest, VT (120 acres) – a recent sale of 92,729 board feet of timber, 45 cords of wood and 238 tons of chips generated \$11,324 in income.
- Hillsboro Town Forest, Starksboro, VT – the Town of Starksboro has used timber from its town forest to build bookshelves for its library, and is conducting a pilot project to use wood chips from its town forest to generate energy for its local high school.
- Mount Washington Valley, ME and NH – a study of 12 town forests showed that they generated \$3.6 million over five years, in taxes, payments in lieu of taxes and forest land reimbursement.

Community-Owned Forests in Action

Community-owned and community-managed forests are not a new concept. Examples can be found around the world. Some New England “town forests,” for instance, were established well over a century ago. Today in the U.S., over 3,000 communities in 43 states own 4.5 million acres of forestland, and these numbers continue to grow (Little, 2005). Following are examples of community forests from across the country, illustrating the wide variety of values and resources that community forests protect, and the governance and ownership forms that shape their management.

Aitkin County Forest, Minnesota

Aitkin County’s Land Department manages over 220,000 acres of forestland, originally acquired over many years through tax forfeiture. The forests are managed for ecological, economic and social objectives – sustaining a healthy and diverse forest, insuring the viability of timber and non-timber economic activities, and maintaining recreational opportunities and aesthetic values on the County’s forested lands. Recreational opportunities include camping, hiking and skiing, motorized uses, and hunting and trapping. The forests are certified by the Forest Stewardship Council. While the County Board of Commissioners has final decision-making authority, a 15-member Lands and Forestry Advisory Committee of local citizens and forestry professionals meets 8-9 times a year to make recommendations on forest management practices. The Lands Department also holds public meetings to encourage public review of and feedback on annual forest management plans. For more information, contact the Aitkin County Land Department at 218-927-7364 or www.co.aitkin.mn.us.

Arcata City Forest, California

The City of Arcata, California owns 622 acres of forest, purchased over a 50-year period and dedicated as a Community Forest in 1955. In addition, the city owns and manages an additional 1,200 acres in the Jacoby Creek Forest. In addition to protecting the city’s water supply, the forest has provided recreational and educational opportunities, wildlife habitat and sustainable timber harvesting. Arcata’s Environmental Services Department manages the forests. A volunteer Forest Management Committee, composed of seven residents with backgrounds in botany, forest ecology, wildlife, fisheries, geology, recreation and forestry, advises department staff and City Council on forest policy. Committee meetings are open to the public and well-attended. Other avenues for citizen involvement include vision sessions and volunteer workdays. Humboldt State University also makes use of the forests as an outdoor laboratory for research and education. Both forests are certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, and the city uses revenues generated from the forests to purchase and develop additional recreational facilities. For additional information, contact the City of Arcata’s Environmental Services Department at 707-822-8184 or www.cityofarcata.org.

Blackfoot Challenge Community Project, Montana

In 2003, the Blackfoot Challenge, a local landowner-based watershed organization in the Blackfoot River valley of western Montana, and The Nature Conservancy initiated the Blackfoot Community Project (BCP), a community-based plan to purchase 89,000 acres of Plum Creek Timber Company forestland in the valley. As part of the project the Blackfoot Challenge owns and manages a 5,600-acre community forest. Local residents have identified their priority values and issues to guide forest management through surveys and community meetings. In addition to this core community forest, the U.S. Forest Service, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks, and several private landowners will own an additional 41,000 acres, together forming the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area (BCCA). The BCCA Council, consisting of 15 members representing adjacent landowners, user groups, and the various public agencies that manage land within the BCCA, has direct management authority for the Core and coordinates the management efforts of the public agencies and private landowners in the BCCA. For more information, contact the Blackfoot Challenge at 406-793-3900 or www.blackfootchallenge.org.

Elk Creek Forest, Montana

As Plum Creek Timber Company started selling its land in Montana's Swan Valley in Western Montana in the 1990s, the Swan Ecosystem Center (SEC), a local non-profit community organization began to work with other non-profit organizations and government agencies to conserve some of Plum Creek's forestland. SEC suggested the idea of a community forest for parcels that federal or state government agencies were not likely to purchase. Through a multi-year outreach process community members in the Swan Valley identified 13 parcels of Plum Creek land as their highest priorities for purchase based on their value for wildlife and timber management, historic and cultural importance, and likelihood of development due to proximity to roads and town infrastructure. In September 2006, SEC, along with the neighboring Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), took title to a one square-mile parcel of former Plum Creek land to create the Elk Creek Forest. Each entity now owns 320 acres of land. They completed a joint management plan in September, 2007, and have formed a management team with representatives from CSKT and residents of the Swan Valley to carry out the plan. For more information, contact the Swan Ecosystem Center at 406-754-3137 or www.swanecosystemcenter.com.

Farm Cove Community Forest, Maine

In 2005, the Downeast Lakes Land Trust (DLLT) acquired the 27,080 acre Farm Cove Community Forest, including 62 miles of lake shore. Within the forest is a 3,560 acre ecological reserve buffered by a 3,751-acre late-successional management area. The community forest is being managed for sustainable timber production, wildlife habitat and recreational use. DLLT recently received Forest Stewardship Council certification. Local residents, including guides and business owners, are strongly represented on the land trust Board of Directors and committees. The board makes forest management decisions, based on recommendations from the Forest Resources Committee. Other programmatic committees include the Trails Committee and Education Committee. The community forest secures a large portion of the natural resource base that the local economy depends on - not only through the value of timber harvested and jobs created directly and indirectly from forest management, but also of the clean water and air, protected open space and wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, and local recreational opportunities, including existing sporting guide and camp industries potential new forms of ecotourism. For more information, contact the Downeast Lakes Land Trust at 207-796-2100 or www.downeastlakes.org.

Hoke Community Forest, North Carolina

The Conservation Fund and Hoke County, North Carolina are working together to purchase 532 acres of forestland near the county seat of Raeford and adjacent to the buffer surrounding Fort Bragg. The proposed management strategy aims to restore wildlife habitat, protect riparian buffers, expand recreational access, and provide economic opportunities for local residents. The land includes riparian hardwood forest along Rockfish Creek and a tributary, as well as softwood forest. Long-term management will improve Red Cockaded Woodpecker habitat by thinning underbrush and restoring long leaf pine forest to replace existing loblolly pine. The forest will increase access to horse trails, hiking, camping and fishing for nearby residents, who currently have limited access to forests for outdoor recreation. The forest will also provide economic opportunities for the community, including harvesting of pine straw, an important and commercially valuable renewable resource, and sustainable timber harvesting. For more information contact the Conservation Fund's Resourceful Communities Program at 919-967-2223 or www.resourcefulcommunities.org.

Little Hogback Community Forest, Vermont

Vermont Family Forests and the Vermont Land Trust have worked with local residents around Monkton, Vermont to establish a privately-owned community forest. Together they have formed the Little Hogback Community Forest LLC, a Vermont limited liability corporation, which purchased a 115-acre forest near Monkton. Sixteen community residents own shares in the LLC, and the Vermont Land Trust holds a conservation easement on the land to protect it from future development. The LLC, the Vermont Land Trust and Vermont Family Forests will jointly approve a long-term forest management plan. The LLC will harvest some timber, approximately every 10 years, with revenues covering management costs and providing a return to shareholders. The forest is also open to the public for recreational use. For more information, contact Vermont Family Forests at (802) 453-7728 or www.familyforests.org.

13 Mile Woods, New Hampshire

In December 2005, the town of Errol acquired 5,269 acres of forestland for \$4.05 million to create the 13 Mile Woods Community Forest. Community members worked with the Trust for Public Land, Lyme Timber Company, Coastal Enterprises, Inc., the Northern Forest Center, and other local and regional institutions to purchase the land. The community forest contains significant frontage on the Androscoggin River and provides an important link between other national, state and private conservation lands, including the Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge and White Mountain National Forest. The state of New Hampshire owns a permanent conservation easement on the forest to protect it from development and ensure sustainable management. The 13 Mile Woods Association manages the forest on behalf of the Town of Errol. It will actively manage the land as a working forest, as well as to provide recreational opportunities such as hiking, hunting, fishing, skiing and snowmobiling. For more information, contact the Trust for Public Land at 802-223-1373 or www.tpl.org.

Acquiring and Managing a Community Forest

Each community forest effort is unique to the local forest and community, but critical components are:

- Engaging local residents and building partnerships
- Accessing technical expertise/support
- Assembling adequate financing
- Identifying community goals and values through an open, inclusive process
- Incorporating community vision into a written management plan
- Providing long term community stewardship and monitoring

For many communities, the road to a community forest starts when a parcel becomes available for purchase on the forestland market, and one or a few determined local residents see the potential opportunity to create a community forest. From there, the idea builds to a broader community effort, often with support from regional and national organizations, such as land trusts, conservation groups, recreational and business interests, financial institutions, as well as public officials at local, state and national levels. Partner organizations can play many roles, including assisting with negotiations for the land purchase, assembling financing, advising on particular financial tools, connecting with state and federal officials, or helping you apply to highly competitive grant programs. In cases where the land is likely to be sold before a community has time to raise sufficient funds, a land trust or other partner may even be able to purchase it and later sell it to the community when it has financing in place.

Community Priorities

Once the idea of a community forest has gained some momentum and support, a more formal process of community public meetings and priority-setting usually takes place, to solidify support, define community priorities and goals for how to use the forest, and determine the appropriate ownership and decision-making structure for its management. Every community has different needs and priorities for its forest – maintaining open space and scenic values, protecting water supplies, conserving wildlife habitat, providing timber and other forest products, offering outdoor recreation opportunities, and/or serving as an outdoor classroom for environmental education and other programs.

Governance Structures

Many community forests, particularly in New England, are owned by the local town or county government, with oversight by a conservation commission, town forest committee, forest advisory board or other similar body made up of local council members and/or volunteers from outside of the government structure. These committees may have decision-making authority themselves or be advisory bodies to the planning commission, town council or other governing body, which then has ultimate decision-making authority.

Public ownership and management, however, are not the only option for a community forest. Other ownership structures, including non-profit and limited liability corporations, can incorporate effective and representative local participation in managing the forest and sharing its benefits. Moreover, alternative structures can provide an opportunity to develop new leadership and management capacity among community residents not already involved in local government or volunteer efforts. Whatever the governance structure, the most important consideration is representation of diverse community interests and stakeholders – local/county government, businesses, recreation/hunting, conservation, education and others. Ultimately, what makes a forest a community forest is community involvement in its long-term stewardship.

Financing Acquisition

Often the biggest hurdle for communities seeking to acquire a community forest is assembling the necessary technical expertise and financing to purchase the forest. Buying forestland is costly, and the real estate transactions involved are complex. Pulling together funds from a variety of sources often takes years to accomplish, involving multiple entities and several sources of financing, including public or private grants, loans, bonds and/or private equity investments. Many community forest purchases also involve selling a conservation easement to a government agency or land trust can help lower the market value of the land and bring the acquisition cost within easier reach. Several public and private sources can provide funding toward the purchase of a community forest.

Federal Funding Sources

The Forest Legacy Program has provided funding for many recent community forest purchases. Other programs that support community forests include the Land and Water Conservation Fund, Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund, North American Wetlands Conservation Act Grant Program, Department of Defense Readiness and Environmental Protection Initiative, and Wetlands Reserve Program.

State and Local Government Funding Sources

Some states have grant programs specifically for land conservation, such as the Land for Maine's Future Program. Mitigation funds are another source of funding at the state level. Many states require that when a company develops or builds on sensitive lands, such as wetlands or wildlife habitat, that company must offset this damage by paying into a fund that supports conservation or restoration of other lands. In addition, each state manages a Clean Water State Revolving Fund (SRF), as provided under the federal Clean Water Act. SRFs provide low interest loans for water quality improvement projects, including projects that reduce non-point source pollution. Several states allow use of these funds to purchase land or easements to protect riparian ecosystems or protect waterways from non-point source pollution. General obligation or revenue bonds are another potential source of funding at the state and local level.

Private Funding Sources

Some philanthropic foundations, including national, regional and community foundations, will make grants for land acquisition. In addition, many foundations do not fund land acquisition, but support other conservation and forest-related projects, including developing a management plan, restoring habitat or creating recreational trails. In addition to making grants, some philanthropic foundations provide below-market-rate loans through program-related investments or revolving loan funds. Finally, banks and individual community members have made equity investments in community forest projects.

Long-term Management and Stewardship

Most community forests are governed by long-term management plans that outline the community's objectives, management activities to achieve these outcomes, and monitoring protocols to assess progress toward stated goals. Community-determined priorities and goals determine the overall direction and uses for forest land and inform the forest management plan. The authority charged with managing the forest generally then works with technical professionals to develop a forest management plan that provides a blueprint for specific management strategies to meet these priorities, governing activities in various parts of the forest over a set period of time. As the cases above illustrate, many community forests are certified by a national authority, such as the Forest Stewardship Council or Sustainable Forestry Initiative. This can give community members assurance that the forest is being managed in a

sustainable way, as well as provide for ongoing monitoring of forest conditions, and enhance the value of products from the forest.

Those charged with day-to-day management of community forests provide a variety of ways for local resident involvement, including regular opportunities for public feedback, and recreational, educational, stewardship and monitoring activities to encourage ongoing community involvement and interest in the forest. Most communities or municipalities have regular open meetings of their forest management team as a way to keep community residents informed about what's happening in the forest and provide opportunities for questions and input. Some towns have a team of volunteers who undertake stewardship and/or monitoring activities, such as maintaining or improving trails, removing invasive plants, taking soil or water samples, conducting wildlife surveys, or inventorying trees.

In many towns that have community forests, schools, from elementary to college and graduate levels, use the forest as a hands-on educational resource and living laboratory to learn about biology, ecology, forestry and other subjects. Community forests have educational value beyond the natural sciences – classes have written essays, conducted oral history projects, and even produced videos about their community forest. Avenues for ongoing community involvement help ensure effective community leadership, investment, and stewardship of community forests over the long term

RESOURCES

On the Communities Committee's website, www.communitiescommittee.org, the Community-Owned Forests Project section has:

- Information on funding and technical assistance, community outreach, forest planning and management;
- Links to national, regional and local organizations involved in community forestry; and
- Websites and case studies of individual community forests around the country.

You can also sign up for the Communities Committee's Community-Owned Forests email discussion list and watch for information on a planned technical assistance program.

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