

Forest management plans next focus for Hancock conservation

22 December 2020



Permanently preserving a parcel of land is an exciting and celebration-worthy event, and commonplace for Monadnock region nonprofits and municipal conservation commissions. However, the Hancock Conservation Commission has realized they're at a tipping point after two decades of successful land acquisition: there's an increasingly urgent need for maintenance on town properties.

"When it comes to management, that sometimes gets overlooked," Chair Phil Brown said. "We have owned some properties for decades, now what do we do?"

Without any maintenance, a forested property can grow beyond tree species' optimal harvest age, and "become subject to the forces of nature, for better and worse," he said. Boardwalks and bridges on some town hiking trails are starting to fall into disrepair, as well as the trails themselves, he said.

"A lot of these parcels are quiet, best-kept secrets," he said, which is great for wildlife, and possibly some neighbors who enjoy the obscurity of the public lands next door. However, the town will now have an opportunity to weigh in on what they want to see happening in there, he said, as well as prioritize timely action for things like trail maintenance or invasive species treatments as the Conservation Commission sets out to complete forest management plans for Hancock's eight or nine largest properties, some comprised of a hundred acres or more.

Forest management plans give the town more say about how every acre gets managed and treated, Brown said. "Without that, we don't have any clear guidelines and is hard to establish any continuity," he said. Forest management plans are renewed in 10-year intervals but many components stay relevant for far longer than that, he said.

The plans could prescribe where and how to treat areas with invasive species infestations, or manage some areas of the properties for lucrative timber harvests, carve out other swaths of forest to revert to old growth, or manage other areas to diversify wildlife habitat or enhance recreation opportunities. All of the above goals, plus stipulations of existing conservation easements and input from the Harris Center, are factoring into the first plan they're drafting with help from a forestry consultant, for the 110-acre Walcott Forest tract off Route 202. Two other plots are currently undergoing a primary analysis.

"Certainly we will have some people who don't want us to cut any trees," Brown said, and others may push to capitalize on timber harvests. Although income generation wasn't the primary intent of the forest management plans, revenue from timber harvests can help to pay for other costs associated with the plans, he said, including the forestry consultants' per-acre cost of development, shoring up runoff concerns at various access points, and implementing certain wildlife habitat features.

It's common for towns to implement forest management plans for their land, NH Association of Conservation Commissions Executive Director Barbara Richter said. "The best practice in conservation is to have a management plan created by a licensed forester prior to any timber harvest or active land use like mowing or invasive species control," she said. Typically, wildlife habitat and recreation goals are top priorities, she said, although timber harvests can be plan elements on larger tracts of land. There are no current statewide records on municipal income from timber harvests, Richter and a representative from the Department of Revenue confirmed.

The public will have an opportunity to hear about the Walcott Forest plan and review it in January, Brown said. "If residents are interested in being part of the process, we are welcoming their voice," he said. Although he's unsure what form the initial meetings will take, he hopes to have a forester-guided field trip when it's safe to do so. Some parts of the plan could be enacted in 2021, he said, such as re-blazing property boundaries and invasive species treatments.

Other Hancock properties featured in a 2017 ecological assessment include Cranberry Meadow (51.4 acres adjacent to Walcott), Juggernaut Pond (184 acres off Eaton Road), Prospect Hill (230 acres), the Morningstar and Greene parcels (25.4 and 105 acres respectively), Elmwood Junction (19.2 acres) and the Hancock Recreational Lands and Kepner Meadow plots (42.2 acres east of Norway Pond).

Source: <https://www.ledgertranscript.com/Hancock-conservation-commission-develops-forest-management-plans-for-town-owned-properties-37588343>