

Forests for Maine's Future



Protecting Maine's forest landscape through conservation easements

By Joe Rankin

Forests for Maine's Future Writer

Next year the Forest Society of Maine will reach the big 3-0. As in 30 years. Sometime in the next two or three years it will have another nice round number to celebrate -- one million.

As in 1,000,000 acres of Maine forest conserved.

The **Forest Society of Maine** is a conservation organization. But it doesn't lobby, or litigate, or testify, or send out action alerts. It doesn't own a lot of land outright. What it does do is work with landowners who are interested in placing conservation easements on their property -- easements that will ensure the forest remains undeveloped, largely unfragmented and available for plants and wildlife and growing trees that can be harvested for lumber, chips or pulp.



1 Conserved lands on Moosehead Lake with Big Moose Mountain in background. (FSM photo)

"Our core mission is to ensure that the wonderful North Woods of Maine are going to be here for future generations to enjoy as we've enjoyed them for their cultural, ecological, recreational and economic benefits," said Alan Hutchinson, the Society's executive director.

The Forest Society of Maine owes its genesis to a timber baron and former Maine governor -- Abner Coburn, who lived from 1803 to 1885. Coburn amassed a fiefdom of hundreds of thousands of acres. One of his first acquisitions was a huge tract around Attean Pond in northern Somerset County, a wild area of dense spruce and fir forests, granite mountains and bogs.

Leap to the mid-1980s. Coburn's descendants are spread far and wide, and are in the process of selling the Coburn lands. For one piece in particular, 20,000 acres on Attean Pond, they want some protections.

"They wanted to do something to hold together all of the special features that would ensure that Attean Township, where the Coburn family's fortune got its start, would retain the special ecological values of the lake, the ponds, the bog, the scenic beauty around the lake and the public's access to the Moose River Bow Trip. They wanted to hold together all of these special features, while enabling future owners to benefit from timber harvesting as their family had done for a hundred years," said Hutchinson.

Coburn family lawyers drew up the first large-scale working forest conservation easement in the country. Then they went looking for an organization that would hold it and monitor it -- forever. But there wasn't one in the state. In 1984 the venerable Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests agreed to temporarily extend its reach into Maine and created an entity called the Forest Society of Maine to be the custodian of the easement, with the SPNHF's staff doing the work.



2 Looking across Attean Pond from the summit of Sally Mountain. (FSM photo)

Leap to the late 1990s. The big sell-off of Maine forestland that began in the 1980s is well underway. Huge chunks of land are being sold and resold. The finger-snapping pace of the sales was making a lot of people very nervous. How would this affect the future of Maine's vast North Woods? What needed to be done? Who could do it if it did need to be done? Was a new organization needed?

Maine Coast Heritage Trust, a respected conservation group focused on working with coastal landowners and communities, helped initiate a series of meetings designed to consider those questions. Jerry Bley, who now runs the private conservation consulting firm Creative Conservation, facilitated the discussions.

The consensus, Bley reported, was that there was a need for a new organization to work with forest landowners on conservation opportunities in the North Woods; the Forest Society of Maine could be turned into a stand-alone organization to take on the job; that its mission should include conserving the forest's "productive working capacity" as well as ecological values; and that Maine's forest products industry and conservationists needed to be partners for the effort to succeed.

"It was the first time that the forest products industry and the conservation groups pursued a relationship," said Bley. "Not necessarily for any particularly lofty goals, but simply with the understanding that to do land conservation in Maine it was only going to be possible if cooperative, trusting relationships existed between the organization created and the community out there."

Bley, who went on to serve 12 years on FSM's board of directors, believes the experiment succeeded fabulously. It not only succeeded in conserving forest, but helped forge a stronger working relationship between forest landowners and conservation groups, he said.

FSM had to grow up fast. The ink was barely dry on the mission statement when the huge West Branch Project came along. The staff consisted of Hutchinson, a former employee of the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife who was hired as executive director. "They handed me about two dozen manila envelopes stuffed with background information and business plans and bylaws and said, 'here you go.' I worked off my kitchen table for about six months," Hutchinson remembers.

Today FSM has a staff of seven and an annual operating budget of \$600,000. It holds easements covering about 800,000 acres and manages easements covering another 200,000 acres for other organizations.

(For a list of some of FSM's conservation successes, please scroll to the bottom of this story.)

“At any given time we are working on three to a dozen conservation projects, with all of them in different stages,” said Hutchinson. “Most of the time we have two or three or four in the pipeline. And we have a good year if we can close on two or three or four. Even the smallest projects can take more than year to finish.”



3 Winter timber harvest on the West Branch easement (FSM photo)

FSM’s magnum opus was the Plum Creek Timber Co. transaction, which yielded easements on 359,000 acres, plus direct acquisition of 45,000 acres by The Nature Conservancy and the Appalachian Mountain Club. It was part of a concept plan for Plum Creek’s Moosehead Lake lands approved by the state’s Land Use Regulation Commission. The Forest Society of Maine was on the sidelines during the fight over the company’s concept plan, which some environmental groups characterized as too development-oriented. Instead, FSM focused on working with Plum Creek to expand the area they would put under easements. And succeeded.

Said Hutchinson: “The Moosehead Lake area lands have been a focus for conservation for decades. We just saw this huge potential if Plum Creek could get to the point where they would agree to something more permanent and larger than envisioned.”

In 2003 FSM completed negotiations of conservation easements for the West Branch lands, bringing together a varied bunch of groups and governments and landowners to conserve 329,000 acres, including some 47,000 acres the state wanted to acquire around Seboomook Lake and Baker Lake and the headwater ponds of the St. John River.

FSM has helped the tiny town of Amherst, east of Bangor, set up the 5,000-acre Amherst Community Forest in partnership with the state. They recently finished up an easement deal on a small inholding in that forest. They worked with the Orono Land Trust to sculpt a deal on a 180-acre piece of Caribou bog.



4 Kayaker on Moosehead Lake (Chris Ayres photo courtesy FSM)

“We’re here to serve. That’s been at the root of our philosophy and mission from day one, meaning our belief is to be here to respond to landowners and communities and others when they need help to keep special lands undeveloped and intact,” said Hutchinson. “We’re not out saying we’ve got to save this piece or that piece. Our perspective is we’re here to provide options for landowners and communities faced with loss of forest lands.”

To further that goal, FSM recently opened an office in Greenville.

Karin Tilberg is the organization's deputy director. She staffs the Greenville office, negotiates easements, and helps with administration. A former staffer for Maine Audubon and later a senior advisor to Gov. John Baldacci on conservation issues, she has watched the Forest Society of Maine's work from the outside, and the inside. One of its big strengths is its focus, Tilberg said. "It has a very clear niche -- to work with forestland owners to conserve forestlands. Because Maine has so much forestland and relatively larger ownerships it's very important to have an organization working with that category of landowners."

Of late the larger easement deals have been fewer and farther between. That's partly a function of economics, and the recent recession. Easements are a commodity, like anything else, and these days the price of a conservation easement isn't what it was, or what it might be again. And so landowners who might like to negotiate the sale of a working forest easement are holding back, seeing where things go.

"I wouldn't be surprised to see some of these larger easements come up again in the future as the economy turns around. There's just a lot of uncertainty about the world around us, and the economy," said Hutchinson. Then he adds: "And the other thing is there's no money (to buy easements). The Land for Maine's Future Program is frozen and there's uncertainty about Forest Legacy and the Land and Water Conservation Fund (two federal programs that have funneled a lot of money into conservation easement programs in Maine). Everybody's just thinking it's better to wait and see what happens."

Meanwhile, there is other work to do, including monitoring the easements FSM is already responsible for. They make the organization essentially a part-owner in nearly 800,000 acres of the Maine woods with a vested interest in ensuring that those holdings are managed in accordance with the details of the easements -- that deeryards are not encroached on, protected areas like bogs are not damaged, that stipulated amounts of tree cover are maintained.

To do that the Society uses special remote sensing technology, satellite imagery, aerial photography and on-the-ground visits. It's the only way it can be done with such a small staff.

And easement agreements themselves have evolved. It used to be that the easement holder would make a yearly check to see if things were okay. If there were violations a lot of umbrage would be taken. Today's easements are a lot more sophisticated and the easement holder essentially has a place at the table, a voice in the management.

"Now we are part of this early planning of these harvests and roadbuilding activities. We're right inside with them in their operations. We're judging and able to see how good their GIS systems are and that the information is flowing out to their (equipment) operators. We know all their people and are making sure they're paying attention. By doing that we're avoiding probably 90 percent of the problems," Hutchinson said.



5 Hikers along Big Wilson Stream in Elliottsville. (FSM photo)

FSM has had tremendous influence on shaping the future of Maine's North Woods.

"The number of easements and the sheer size of the conserved working forests with all the values of wood, clean air and water, recreation and wildlife, has been the biggest success to date," said Sherry Huber, the executive director of the Maine TREE Foundation. Huber worked with Bley on the series of meetings that would lay the groundwork for the organization in the 1990s and from 2005 to 2011 served as president of FSM's board of directors.

"One can easily argue that all the easements are important," Huber added. "But the two that have had the greatest impact have been the West Branch and Plum Creek easements because of their size and the fact that they provide for no development, sustainable forest management and because they provide for public access."

While past successes are impressive, challenges ahead are formidable. They include building membership, money, politics, and increasing demand.

Hutchinson said the Society quietly did a survey of landowners not too long ago and found that demand for its services is only expected to grow. "Even some of the most conservative landowners are saying 'yes, we can see the time when we're going to need your help.' One of the biggest challenges is going to be keeping this organization growing, building and maintaining its capacity so it can really fulfill its mission. It's going to be an exciting 10 to 15 years and that's going to determine the future of the Maine North Woods."

At the same time, politics and budget disputes cast doubts on the future of Forest Legacy and Land for Maine's Future, programs whose investments in working forest conservation, and the dollars they helped leverage, made many projects possible.

Bley said FSM "still doesn't have the financial resources to take on all the projects it wants within the time frame it wants. It doesn't have a lot of risk capital that it can use to go out and take advantage of a particularly fleeting opportunity. There continues to be capacity needs for the organization to accomplish everything."

Huber agrees: "The biggest challenge is to continue to be able to respond to landowner desire to sell or donate easements, given the tough economic conditions and to effectively monitor the easements, which is critical, given that they are 'forever.' "



6 FSM Executive Director Alan Hutchinson points out conserved lands from a boat on Attean Lake. (FSM photo)



7. No. 5 Bog, Attean Mountain in background (FSM photo)

Sometimes, it helps to remember not only what the outcome has been, but what the outcome might have been.

Huber has no doubt that without the Forest Society of Maine, its staff and its donors, “there would have been more “fragmentation of large holdings, more development and far less certainty that the Maine forest resource will be there for many years to come.”

Tilberg said without the work of the Society, and groups like The Nature Conservancy, and the New England Forestry Foundation, “we could have seen these larger tracts of forestland fragment and lost the essence of Maine’s North Woods.”

It might be helpful to think back to those Coburn lands. While the Attean lands are still undeveloped and producing timber and pulp, other Coburn family lands not covered by a conservation easement met a different fate: Tomhegan Township and Enchanted Pond both saw significant subdivision and development.

Joe Rankin is a forestry writer and beekeeper who lives in central Maine.

Forest Society of Maine conservation achievements

Attean Pond and Township, near Jackman. About 20,000-acres surrounding Attean Pond and the Moose River with its famous canoe trip. The conserved lands have hiking trails, campsites, great canoeing, beautiful mountains and special ecological areas.

Nicatous Lake, about 40 miles northeast of Bangor. About 20,000-acres surrounding Nicatous Lake and abutting the state-owned Duck Lake forest, offering canoeing, camping, hiking, fishing, hunting, and more while surrounded by eagles, loons, and moose.

Big Spencer Mountain, overlooking Moosehead Lake. A 5,000-acre mountain renowned for its hiking trail, views, and special ecological values. FSM raised a couple of million dollars to buy this mountain after the breakup of Great Northern Paper Co. and donated it to the people of the state of Maine.

Northeast Carry and Norcross Brook on Moosehead Lake. Two highly important public access points for canoeists and boaters on the north end of Moosehead Lake. FSM worked with the state to raise the funds to acquire these important public access sites and several miles of abutting shoreline on Moosehead Lake after the breakup of Great Northern Paper Co. put their futures at risk.

West Branch Project, including the headwaters of the Penobscot and St John rivers. Surrounding Historic Pittston Farm, these lands were part of Great Northern’s vast land holdings that were sold off as that company was dissolved after more than a century of ownership. Through a five-year, multi-million dollar fundraising campaign, FSM was able to conserve these 329,000 acres that contain the West and South branches of the Penobscot River and the headwater ponds of the St. John River.

Amherst Mountains Community Forest, east of Bangor. Residents of the town of Amherst sought FSM's assistance in trying to maintain a 5,000-acre tract of forestland in the heart of their town that was being sold off as part of the break up of a paper company's land holdings after more than a century of stable ownership. The lands contain several scenic backcountry ponds, hiking and snowmobile trails, campsites, beautiful hills with granite ledge tops offering great views, and had a long history of providing important open space for hunting, fishing, camping, snowmobiling and forest products – all important parts of the town's character, traditions, and economy. FSM led the effort to secure the future of this forest for the town, in partnership with the state.

No. 5 Mountain, near Jackman. FSM helped The Nature Conservancy conserve this 15,000-acre parcel that had been a high priority for conservation due to its outstanding ecological and recreational attributes, which include No. 5 Bog, a National Natural Landmark, and a significant portion of the Moose River Bow trip.

Moosehead Forest, 360,000 acres around Moosehead Lake. The second largest conservation easement ever accomplished in the nation, The Nature Conservancy partnered with FSM to purchase the easement and FSM became the permanent easement holder in 2012. The lands are owned and managed by Plum Creek Timberlands and the easement ensures public access across this large expanse of forest, protects fish and wildlife habitat, dozens of habitats for rare and endangered plants and animals, and ensures the forest will stay as a forest forever and be managed sustainably.