Wild & Scenic Rivers Stewardship Council
Forest Legacy Program Steering Committee

Status Report

February 17, 2026

To: Lucy Wallace and the Wild & Scenic Rivers Stewardship Council
From: Anna Wilkins, Wild & Scenic Forest Legacy Project Coordinator

As many of you know, the Forest Legacy Program (FLP) is a conservation program administered by the U.S. Forest Service in partnership with State agencies (DCR, here in Mass) to encourage the protection of privately owned forest lands through conservation easements or land purchases. The program reimburses up to 75% of qualified project costs but requires a minimum of 1,000 acres to apply. Here in southern New England, project applications require many landowners, project partners, and a coordinated effort to be successful.

This Nashua, Squannacook & Nissitissit Wild & Scenic Rivers Stewardship Council pursued this grant to permanently conserve 20 Tracts of land, totaling approximately 2,000 acres, within a 20-by-20-mile forested landscape around the NSN rivers. All tracts augment assemblages of conserved land, with excellent biodiversity, pristine surface waters, and important ecological, recreational, scenic & climate resiliency values. One-third of the acres are working forests which are used in forestry education. The Project area is subject to increasing development pressure, as first documented by the USFS in its 2005 report, *Forests on the Edge*. Project partners include 7 of the NSN WSR towns, 3 headwater towns, 2 regional conservation organizations, 6 land trusts, U.S. National Park Service, Mass Dept. of Conservation and Recreation, Mass Dept. of Fish and Game, private landowners, and the NSN WSR Stewardship Council. Protection of these lands will further the conservation goals of NPS

Freedoms Way National Heritage Area, U.S. F&WS Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge, Merrimack Conservation Partnership, and the NSN WSR Stewardship Plan.

The Conservation Restriction has been funded through the United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Forest Legacy Program (Forest Legacy Program Grant Award #23-DG-11094200-487). The management of the property shall follow an approved Forest Stewardship Plan and must remain no less than 75% forest, forever.

The Forest Legacy Steering Committee has 15 members and meets monthly on the fourth Wednesday of every month. Steering committee meetings have been fairly well attended with consistently 6-12 participants, and are helpful for our project partners, and Lindsay Nystrom, our Forest Legacy Project Coordinator for DCR. My role as coordinator is to convene and run these meetings, keep track of tract progress, and assist Lindsay Nystrom in providing assistance to the project partners. In between meetings, I meet with project partners, troubleshoot issues, and connect them with additional resources if needed. These sessions can be everything from talking through title solutions, to helping with the Conservation Restriction review process, to providing resources that help clarify Federal requirements. I'm also a project partner and steering committee member via my role at North County Land Trust, managing 3 of the 18 active tract projects.

Since the project award in FY2024, the partners have made slow and steady progress towards tract closures. Of the 20 tracts that were within the awarded application, two tracts have dropped, and two are at risk of being dropped.

- Tract 3 in Lancaster was sold to a developer (130 ac),
- Tract 6 was conserved via other methods, (119 ac)
- Tract 17 in Lancaster has fallen victim to a freeze on any and all real estate transactions within the landowner company, (21 ac) and
- Tract 20 has been sold to a new landowner who has expressed some interest in pursuing the program but has not committed. (19 ac)

Both Tract 17 and 20 are still being pursued, leaving us with 18 "active" tracts.

Tract 4 in Townsend (71 ac) is the only one to have closed thus far, with Tract 5 in Fitchburg set to close March 17th (142 ac). Closing is within sight for Tract 2 in Fitchburg (137 ac), and Tract 11 in Ashby (98 ac). In addition, Tract 15 in Lunenburg, has agreed to increase the acreage for consideration from 25 ac to 40 acres.

Our funding is secure and while USFS Forest Legacy positions that were lost during the DOGE purge have not been re-hired, processing of grant reimbursements has continued without much issue. Due to the various shifts in tract commitments, which the Forest Legacy Program anticipates, we have a budget surplus of unobligated funds. Once more tracts have closed, the steering committee may present new, additional tracts for consideration to help expend any remaining unobligated funds. While our total project acres have decreased due to the dropped tracts from 2,098 acres to **1,869 acres**, we are still well above the program minimum of 1,000 with a potential for additional acres due to the surplus in funds.

FY 2024 Forest Legacy Program Funding $8,615,000
Current Funding Request: $7,109,470
Unobligated Funds: **$1,505,529**

We are also doing quite well with our project requirement to have at least 25% non-federal cost share. With both donated value of land and due diligence, we are well above what is necessary with current budgeted cost share coming in at $4,016,975. The minimum cost share required is $2,871,666, leaving us with a current cost share percentage of **36%.**

Our project partners face challenges in advancing projects. A few common complaints include lengthy delays from service contractors such as title reviewers, surveyors, and Conservation Restriction reviews (Tract 11, Tract 16, Tract 15). In addition, in certain cases, negotiations with landowners and/or their families have made forward progress difficult (Tract 2, Tract 15, Tract 20). Once title and/or survey work has been completed, there are sometimes discovered issues that need remedy (Tract 5, Tract 10B, Tract 12 B, Tract 16). It is important to acknowledge the time and effort all of our project partners have put into pushing the projects forward as only part of the many responsibilities they all carry– some as volunteers, some as professionals balancing many additional duties.

Progress is being made on every active tract, with **seven tracts that either have appraisals or for which the appraisals are in process.** Once the tract has an appraised value, the final phase of documentation can be completed for closing. This means we will likely see a series of closings in the next 6-8 months. The Forest Legacy Steering Committee has its eye on our project deadline of September 2028, and are working diligently towards timely closings of all 18 "active" tracts and any that are able to be added.

Respectfully submitted,
Anna Wilkins