

CHAPTER 1

PLAN SUMMARY

The 2004 Deerfield River Watershed Open Space and Recreation Plan presents a vision shared by fifteen towns in western Franklin County and eastern Berkshire County, Massachusetts as well as the perspectives of active watershed stakeholders from state agencies to snowmobile club members to land trusts and historical commissions. The Watershed Open Space and Recreation Plan explores key issues, concerns, goals, and objectives dealing with forests and farmland, environmental problems, scenic views, cultural resources, and the threats to these resources posed by residential development and poor land use planning, and provides solutions requiring the regional and sub-regional collaboration of watershed stakeholders. The solutions are in the form of a Ten-Year Action Plan, created by a Regional Open Space Planning Committee, which provides real steps that towns, organizations, agencies at the local, regional, and state-wide level can take towards achieving their goals together.

The Plan emphasizes the remarkable wealth of the watershed's most significant resources, including:

Important regional water supply resources:

- The high yield aquifers in West Charlemont, Colrain, Shelburne, Deerfield, and Greenfield; and,
- The largest blocks of unprotected, contiguous forest in Charlemont, Heath, Shelburne, Leyden, and Colrain that provide recharge to important ground and surface waters.

Regionally significant wildlife habitats in the watershed:

- The BioMap Core Habitats most at risk from development in Colrain, Charlemont, Leyden, Conway, and Buckland;
- Vernal pools and wetlands watershed-wide; and,
- Large blocks of contiguous forest of various age classes;

Regionally significant conservation areas for future acquisition:

- In addition to the forests already mentioned above, large groups of active farm fields and prime farmland soils are one of the most important areas in need of conservation.

Regionally significant scenic and cultural landscapes and resources:

- The Deerfield River Valley and major tributaries;
- Agricultural landscapes;
- Scenic views from the Mohawk Trail;

- Historic village centers; and,
- Natural-cultural features like Mt. Massaemet, which are recognized over time and space.

Regionally significant recreational resources:

- The Deerfield River;
- State Forests; and,
- Private snowmobile trail network.

These aspects of the watershed provide residents with clean air and water, proximity to viable populations of native plants and animals, jobs, and access to an abundance of recreational opportunities. The Deerfield River Watershed's forests and farmland give the basin its rural character, contribute to the local property tax base, and are at the heart of what residents love about living there.

Communities in the Deerfield River Watershed are fortunate in comparison to many towns in Massachusetts, in that their watershed still contain many active farms that employ significantly more people than in other regions of the state. In addition, the Deerfield River is still one of the cleanest rivers in the Commonwealth and the hills are still blanketed with contiguous forests that provide habitat, recreational opportunities, and income from forest products.

The entire watershed in Massachusetts is about 220,000 acres in size. Overall, about 80 percent of this land is privately owned. One-fourth of the privately owned land has some level of protection from development, but most of that is enrolled in one of the Chapter 61 Programs, which provides towns an opportunity to protect the land at some time in the future.

One important message contained within the plan is that the watershed's natural, agricultural, cultural and recreational resources should not be taken for granted. In the past several decades, residential development has resulted in a loss of farmland. The following were included as part of a presentation at the 2004 Deerfield River Watershed Association's Annual Conference and describes the threat of development in the region (Massachusetts portion of the watershed).

- Watershed-wide population grew 14 percent between 1970-2000 and is projected to increase 20 percent between 2000-2025;
- Between 1985 and 1999, the watershed lost 10 percent of its cropland (-1,750 acres) and 22 percent of its pasture (-2,370 acres); and,
- Between 1985 and 1999, the watershed saw a 58 percent increase in the amount of land developed in large-lot residential uses (+3,443 acres).

By maximum build-out, the Massachusetts portion of the watershed would be home to nearly six times the current population. For the residents of the thirteen hill towns in Massachusetts, the change in population would be severe: It would increase from 15,250

people to over 130,000. This increase in population could be on par with doubling the population of all twenty-six towns in Franklin County and then stuffing the new residents into the thirteen hill town watershed communities. At build-out, residents in these communities could be withdrawing almost 20 million gallons of drinking water a day. Given the lack of high yield aquifers in the basin, water could very well be the most critical development constraint in the future. In addition, as back lots develop into subdivisions, the 1,200 miles of roads would have fragmented any remaining blocks of unprotected forest, restricting both wildlife movement and recreational trail use. Conservation of priority lands and resource values will require increased public awareness of their value and a concerted, cooperative effort on behalf of landowners, elected officials, municipal boards and committees, state and federal agencies and recreation interest groups. The following regional and sub-regional collaborations represent an excerpt of the entire Ten-Year Action Plan and the best chance for the watershed residents to begin to act together to conserve the region's most significant natural, cultural, and recreational resources.

Selected Action Steps

Establish a Deerfield River Watershed –Regional Open Space Committee (ROSC) that would meet Bi-Annually and act as a Liaison or as a Facilitator for Sub-Regional and Regional Collaborations.

Organize a meeting with Legislators, staff of the Office of Commonwealth Development, and representatives from the watershed towns to discuss how to develop a regional approach to the promotion of development patterns that sustain the quality of the region's agricultural, natural, cultural, and recreational resources.

Collaborate to conserve forests within shared BioMap Core Habitat areas using a multitude of strategies from forest management promotion to the use of conservation restrictions.

Collaborate to develop the Green River Greenway for both habitat protection and as a recreational trail.

Work together to monitor the water quality of the Glen Brook Sub-watershed, an Outstanding Resource Water, to protect current and potential future water supplies.

Seek grant funding to pay for more detailed hydrologic studies to inform land planning, land protection, water quality monitoring, and zoning strategies to conserve groundwater quality.

Investigate the feasibility of a watershed boundary ridge trail that could be extended up into Vermont that would also link village areas to parks.

