

DRAFT

The Resilient Lands Initiative: Expanding Nature Across the Commonwealth to Help People

A Vision and Strategy Executive Summary – July 29, 2020

The Resilient Lands Vision is to protect and improve the quality of life for residents of every Massachusetts community through land conservation initiatives that conserve and enhance the health of the forests, farms and soils that protect human and natural communities, protect drinking water and food supplies, provide healthy outdoor recreation, power a green economy, support municipal fiscal stability, protect wildlife habitat, store more carbon, and reduce vulnerability to climate impacts such as urban heat islands, flooding, sea level rise, drought, and air and water pollution. The economy of Massachusetts, along with the health and welfare of its residents, depends on these “goods and services” that natural systems provide. Striving for an overall expansion of nature across the Commonwealth, especially in under-served communities and especially as climate impacts increase, is critical to the future quality of life for all Massachusetts residents.

The planning phase of the Resilient Lands Initiative (RLI, or Initiative) has involved 12 Steering Committee meetings of a talented group of about 40 experts in the 8 “land values” (see below) and 14 focus groups that included 270 advocates, volunteers, field practitioners, farmers, foresters and landowners. This initiative has been distinct because of our visioning through two particular lenses: 1) justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion and 2) climate change. The Initiative has strived to be more inclusive of the needs of residents who are often at the margins of land conservation and restoration plans, especially in Environmental Justice neighborhoods.¹

The recommendations focus on conserving natural landscapes most critical to nature and human well-being and improving the quality of life in our cities and towns through a range of greening initiatives. The “No Net Loss of Farms and Forests” (the first in the nation) reduces losses to sprawl development in rural and suburban areas via smart growth incentives and focuses farm and forest expansion projects to green Environmental Justice and other under-served neighborhoods. In this way, the RLI conserves natural landscapes, expands rural natural resource jobs and community stability and expands the range of values that conserved landscapes bring to people as the climate changes while equally focusing on greening urban areas so they are cooler and more livable. These benefits are critical in reducing our vulnerability to climate change and adapting to its impacts, including extreme heat and precipitation, drought, and air pollution.

¹ For a summary of the state definition of Environmental Justice Community: See: <https://docs.digital.mass.gov/dataset/massgis-data-2010-us-census-environmental-justice-populations>

By implementing the RLI strategies, we can improve the benefits the land provides with skilled management and restoration over time. In addition to reducing impacts to communities from climate change, strategic land conservation, restoration and stewardship will enhance farm and forest production of local products, improve public health with close-to-home outdoor recreation and cooler neighborhoods, and improve water quality and supply, watershed health, and coastal resources that support our state’s sustainable “blue economy” (tourism, commercial and recreational fisheries, and aquaculture). In creating natural flood control and mitigation greenways, building urban parks, and restoring land to reduce heat and flooding impacts, hundreds of new “green” jobs will become available. Conserving and restoring the health of rural, suburban and urban wildlife habitats are also crucial to provide essential services for nearby and downstream communities and, equally importantly, for the wildlife.

Phase II of the RLI, implementing the Resilient Lands Vision, will be inclusive and supported by state programs, agencies and grants over the next ten years. It will encourage a whole landscape and watershed approach to climate resilience projects where projects are best done at a multi-municipal level. Natural systems don’t follow municipal boundaries and a watershed approach allows us to ensure healthy ecosystems are able to adapt to climate change. It will be led by land trusts, regional conservation partnerships, public health committees, watershed organizations, regional planning associations and EEA agencies to expand implementation of landscape-scale land conservation, restoration and stewardship projects. By conserving, restoring and stewarding nature, we are taking an extremely cost-effective approach to reducing the impacts from climate change while providing cleaner and cooler air, safe and sustainable drinking water, abundant outdoor recreation and exercise areas, more local jobs, more local food and wood products, more stable tax bases, and resilient fisheries and wildlife habitats for future generations.

The implementation of the Resilient Lands Vision will be led by the Steering Committee and Focus Group members who represent the government, non-profit, private and volunteer sectors and are interested in all eight land values on which we focus: *urban parks and public health, forests, farms, habitat, water supply and watersheds, reducing climate impacts to people, economic stability, and outdoor recreation.*

- **The Resilient Lands Initiative will implement its Vision through eight strategies:**
 1. **No Net Loss of Farms and Forests:** Achieve “No Net Loss” of farms and forests through smart growth incentives and investments in new urban and riverine greenspace;
 - Draft and pass the “Land for People and Nature” Law to set the No Net Loss Goal and include incentives for cities and towns for Natural Resource Protection Zoning and City and Village “Green” Zones (Chapter 40 “Tree”) that are equitable to landowners and supportive of housing goals in all communities; incentives for rural, suburban and urban jobs related to forest and farm expansion and stewardship and expanding urban greenspace (gardens and farms, parks, wildlands, river corridors, tree canopy) and suburban and village tree canopy cover via zoning, tax incentives and grants. The No Net Loss program should focus on efficient land use that supports

natural resource-based economic development in rural communities, strong tax bases in all communities, vibrant cities and village and town centers and expanded green spaces so all residents have the benefits of close-by green space and the health, economic and climate resilience benefits it provides.

2. **Focus on Food Systems:** Expand the amount, quality and accessibility of locally grown food, especially in food deserts, and ready our local food production system (farms, fisheries and aquaculture) for future stress from droughts, floods, storms, sea level rise and other climate change impacts;
 - Expand the capacity and funding of the Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program to protect “whole farms” (land, infrastructure and housing) and make them affordable (with rolling admissions and funding for non-federal projects)
 - Create a “Vacant Lots to Farms” program in our cities in “food deserts” to turn these liabilities into a solution to food insecurity
 - Expand urban “green teams” across our cities
 - Expand MDAR’s Urban Farming Program.

3. **Focus on Urban Greenspaces and Community Health:** Improve public health by providing readily accessible close-to-home natural areas for outdoor recreation, exploration and inspiration and preparing communities for increasing heat waves, flooding, storms and other climate change impacts;
 - Designate climate risk zones where land restoration, conservation and stewardship projects are critical to reduce heat islands and flooding
 - Create a network of shady green spaces in high-density neighborhoods across the state using vacant lots, tax title parcels and other areas
 - Launch a grant program for Environmental Justice (EJ) neighborhood organizations to lead outreach, design and implementation of initiatives to use restoration, conservation and stewardship projects to improve community health as climate change impacts worsen.

4. **Focus on Water Resources:** Protect and restore drinking water supplies, inland and coastal waters and habitats from increased threats;
 - Expand landscape-scale conservation grant funding, including in public drinking water supply watersheds, that also focus on premier unfragmented (and restorable) landscapes and cold-water habitats
 - Create a demonstration watershed pollutant permit-credit trading program focused on stormwater in a pilot watershed
 - Expand the restoration of urban river “daylighting” projects
 - Update Drinking Water Protection Zones to require expanded protection of uplands and natural buffers which help protect drinking water supplies from contamination from storm water pollution
 - Work with MassWorks and the State Revolving Fund programs to support green infrastructure projects (“Smart Sewering”, rain gardens and cooling parks, restoration of paved areas, etc.)
 - Conduct a statewide parking lot assessment with recommendations for incentives for reducing pavement and stormwater impacts and rating of low-

use parking lots in priority watersheds for stormwater reduction and flood risk.

5. Focus on Landscape Conservation and Restoration:

- Expand landscape and watershed-scale conservation, stewardship and restoration projects and grants via EEA and its agencies and local, regional, and statewide land trusts, regional conservation partnerships and watershed organizations – permanent conservation is critical in our efforts to reduce our vulnerability to climate change
- Create a new EEA grant program that focuses on conserving and restoring natural system connections across municipal boundaries. This program would focus on natural resource areas like watersheds, river corridors, greenways and working landscapes (farms and forests). This program would be applicable for large landscapes in rural areas and smaller landscapes in suburbs and cities.
- Expand state conservation land tax cap to \$5 million per year and advocate with our Congressional Delegation to add fee land to the federal tax incentives (currently only CR's qualify).

6. Focus on the Green Economy: Create a new green economy with expanded jobs in sustainable farming, forest management, and coastal/marine products and in expanding and stewarding forests and urban tree canopy and healthy soils that store more carbon:

- Create at least 10 new jobs in each of our 170 rural communities and at least 30 new jobs in each of our 45 cities, with expanded forest and farm resilience and urban forestry projects
- Create a program to provide municipal and private forest and farm landowners with annual payments for implementing best practices for carbon storage and climate resilience
- Provide funding, technical assistance and incentives for infrastructure, processing and value-added products from working farms and forests to advance a viable local food and fiber system and working lands economies modeled after Vermont's Working Landscapes Program.

7. Focus on Natural Carbon Storage and Climate Resilience: Achieve a significant increase in carbon storage and climate resilience in forests, wetlands (coastal and inland) and soils;

- Launch the Forest Resilience Program to pay annual incentives to private and municipal landowners (10+ acres) to adopt verified forestry practices (such as thinning, extended rotation, tree retention, etc.) to expand carbon storage and improve forest climate resilience on our 3 million acres of forests
- Draft and pass an amendment to the MA Forest Tax Law – “Chapter 61 C” (for climate and carbon) that will codify the Forest Resilience Program, fund

landowner incentives and incorporate increased carbon storage in the Global Warming Solutions Act inventory

- Adopt the recommendation of the Healthy Soils Action Plan including incentives for soil best practices and further reduction of wetland conversions
- Establish a goal and metric for forest conservation and construction of wood buildings using locally-sourced timber for carbon storage and substitution of steel, concrete and plastics in the Global Warming Solutions Act for 2030.

8. **Focus on Collaboration for Sustainable Solutions:** Engage with residents and communities on a coordinated outreach and education campaign focused on the benefits of land conservation, stewardship and restoration as climate change solutions.

- Ensure communication is clear and in terms that that resonate with people not involved with land conservation
- Create 24 case studies and stories from across Massachusetts that demonstrate how land conservation, stewardship and restoration enhance each of the eight “land values”
- Create a website for all recreation and open space opportunities across public and private ownerships by 2022
- Develop a website focused on “nature-based” climate solutions and how they can be implemented at home and in neighborhoods
- Build the RLI marketing campaign around the concept of No Net Loss of Nature’s Services, to complement other initiatives that leverage this concept to build environmental literacy
- Establish a matching grant fund for municipally-sponsored education programs on climate threats, resilience and nature’s services as part of the MVP or another state program
- Strive to be inclusive in implementing the RLI especially reaching out and including Environmental Justice communities and the private sector (farmers, foresters, developers, etc.).