

MA Forest Conservation Practitioner Focus Groups: Summary of Findings

Information sources and tools for forest conservation
(protection and stewardship)

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Research project overview

A UMass Amherst Extension research team received a four-year McIntire-Stennis Capacity Grant from U.S. Department of Agriculture to **study the resources used by Massachusetts organizations to assist with forest conservation decision making.**

The project focuses on tools and information sources (resources) developed to support forest protection (land conservation), forest stewardship (land management) and climate adaptation.

The study aims to understand **how these resources are used (or not used) by forest conservation practitioners.** We expect that our work will help inform future resource design and outreach, and ultimately improve the prospects for our forests.

The initial phase of the project involved conducting a **web survey** of practitioners. The second phase involved holding **focus groups** to delve deeper into the survey results, and to consider draft outreach material. The focus group results are presented here.

Target information sources and tools (resources)

The research team identified eleven resources that have been developed to guide forest conservation decision-making in (and beyond) Massachusetts:

- **Adaptation Workbook** (Northern Institute of Applied Climate Science/US Forest Service)
- **BioMap2** (MassWildlife & The Nature Conservancy)
- **DSL - Designing Sustainable Landscapes** (UMass Amherst)
- **Forest Carbon: *An essential natural solution for climate change*** (UMass Extension)
- **Increasing Forest Resiliency *for an uncertain future*** (UMass Extension)
- **MAPPR - Mapping & Prioritizing Parcels for Resilience** (Mass Audubon)
- **Massachusetts Climate Action Tool** (UMass Extension, MassWildlife, Northeast Climate Adaptation Science Center)
- **MassCAPS - Massachusetts Conservation Assessment & Prioritization System** (UMass Amherst)
- **Nature's Network** (UMass Amherst & US Fish & Wildlife Service)
- **NELF Explorer - New England Landscape Futures** (Harvard Forest)
- **Resilient & Connected Landscapes** (The Nature Conservancy)

Focus group research interests

- Learn more about how practitioners **discover and adopt** resources
- Deeper understanding of the resource use **experience**
- Deeper understanding of the **barriers** to resource use and potential **solutions**
- Gather information to help us decide on resources potentially suited to an **intervention**
- Learn more about **climate adaptation** interest and needs
- Understand how we could create more effective **outreach** materials, including real conservation stories that involved use of these resources.
- Help inform **future tool development**

Participant selection

Aimed to have four groups:

1. **Municipalities**
2. **Land trusts**
3. **Foresters** (Private consultants, and a subset of State government agencies)
4. **Planners** (Regional planning authorities, and a subset of State government agencies)

Invited survey participants who reported an awareness and use of the greatest number of resources

Focus groups overview

- Held in August 2020
- 15 participants in total
- 1 to 1.25 hours each
- Four focus groups:
 - 1. Land trusts (5 participants)
 - 2. Municipalities (6 participants)
 - 3. RPA staff, and Land protection consultant (2 participants)
 - 4. State government wildlife manager, and Forestry consultant (2 participants)
- Generally very experienced and competent people in their roles
- Participants were mostly western/central MA based

General impressions

- Positive and enthusiastic participation
- Lots of kudos for taking on this project
- Excited just to see a list of the resources
- Interested in a single portal to facilitate remembering and accessing resources that could also be shared with others

Question categories and response scoring codes

Understanding resource use

- Project assessment
- Seeking funding
- Engagement
- Policy
- Resource support
- Scale
- Principles
- Cherry-picking
- Resource choice
- Other tools

Barriers to resource use

- Technology
- Up-to-date
- Complicated
- Accessibility
- Knowledge
- Resource compatibility
- Time
- Resource recognition

Outreach material feedback

- Jargon
- Formatting
- Categories
- Audience
- Mode suggestion
- Promotion

Climate adaptation information

- Climate adaptation

Understanding resource use

What we heard:

- Resources are used informally to explore potential projects, and more formally during projects.
- Resources help to identify parcel values and are used to create a narrative for seeking project funding.
- Some participants had GIS support in their organization.
- The data are not always the right scale and coverage, and applying resources to the scale of interest can be challenging.
- Need a better understanding of the purpose, process and limitations of resources and their use.
- Forest management recommendations and land prioritization processes can be ambiguous and not specific.
- MassGIS/Oliver is an easy platform to access and use some of the resources.

Understanding resource use

Possible actions:

- Consider making resources available on different platforms and with different outputs to meet different project stages.
- Work with funders to encourage use of resources, highlight/match resources with funding sources.
- Ensure GIS support staff are targeted by outreach.
- Develop guidelines on applying a resource to the parcel scale.
- Develop guidelines on the principles of tool use.

Understanding resource use - Select quotes

“I use several of these tools in almost every conservation project we do, mostly as a pre-screening.”

“The first thing I do is I try to use these resources to figure out where the property sits in the landscape.”

“if the parcels are identified in those tools then I use, sort of the results from each one of those tools in the narrative, whether it's for a grant application or, you know, just to the local town.”

“loggers and foresters are often kind of perceived as black hats and so I sort of use them in, or I'm familiar with them in a sort of defensive manner.”

“with the dominance of small private lots how you take these resources and apply them to a 40 acre wood lot is, you know, difficult and takes time.”

Understanding resource use - Select quotes

“I would also say that if there is a scale at which below, this particular tool is no longer useful, that would also be useful to understand.”

“If I turn on BioMap2 layer, Natural Heritage layer, CAPS layer, I got like a giant polygon ... I'm not really sure where to take that when it comes to, you know, prioritizing conservation.”

“models are shiny objects in some ways ... you need to understand their limitations and the multiple uncertainties associated with them. They're very helpful, but you have to always keep in mind ... there are limitations.”

“there's some great stuff in there and there's some great examples, you know, but you can find what you want in there, if you're set out to find something you can find it there, if you want to sort of use it as a justification or a citation.”

Barriers to resource use

What we heard:

- What is the age of the data included in the resource/when was the resource last updated?
- Resources can have too many options, easy default settings would be welcome.
- People use the resources they recognize and are familiar with. Remembering a resource's name, where to access it, and how it is different from other resources is a barrier to use and letting others know about them.
- Insufficient general knowledge about climate adaptation.
- Unsure how to use the resources in combination.
- Participants lacked time to learn to use the resources.

Barriers to resource use

Possible actions:

- Include year published or updated, and underlying data age.
- Consider default settings for beginners, and instructions to make resources quicker to learn and use.
- Develop a portal where all resources are available.
- Educate about climate adaptation in outreach materials.
- Consider developing standard protocols for applying the suite of resources.
- Provide take home outreach materials and follow up emails associated with workshops.

Barriers to resource use - Select quotes

“I just feel overwhelmed like there's just, there's so many tools in our toolboxes.”

“I sort of feel like for some of the more sophisticated tools it might be neat if there were sort of a general setting where, you know, the most common things that people are looking for pops up”

“it's not so much that the tools are technically, you know, difficult to use, at least in my experience, it's just that we just don't have the time to utilize them for more forward-thinking conservation efforts.”

“If they can all be brought together through a single landing page ... with some direction as to what's appropriate under what circumstances or depending upon your objective. I think that that would be a massive improvement for everybody.”

Barriers to resource use - Select quotes

“if it's going to take 30 minutes to figure out how to use it, you're probably going to shut it down and go somewhere else.”

“I can't remember the names and what, which one did which and what, what was the one that I used last time, you know it was a year and a half ago.”

“how accurate is it? I mean, is it up to date?”

Climate adaptation information

What we heard:

- Participants want to use climate adaptation information, but are either confused as to whether the information they have access to is useful or specific enough, or perhaps have unwarranted expectations that the resources help them with climate adaptation.
- The Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) program was suggested as a good avenue for using these resources and considering climate adaptation.

Possible actions:

- Educate practitioners about climate adaptation.
- Develop specific and justifiable actions that can be taken.
- Liaise with the State regarding the MVP program.

Climate adaptation information - Select quotes

“the really interesting thing about that product is that you go through this process and it's not about changing your management strategy. It's really to show that a lot of your management strategies can be aligned to help make a climate resilient habitat or to adapt to climate change.”

“We just have been through the municipal vulnerability assessments and a lot of that has to do with you know, the climate threats in the future. And, you know, we use some of those same tools in talking about that”

“I feel like you need a certain amount of knowledge of why these things are important, you know what makes a resilient landscape and what doesn't. And that knowledge is evolving pretty quickly.”

“any project that is trying to increase the usage of these resources is going to be taking people who are professionals at one thing and trying to give them some additional knowledge about, for example, forest climate adaptation that they may not have yet. And it's that in between piece to get from being a consulting forester, for example, to being a consulting forester who's capable of using climate adaptation resources.”

Outreach material feedback

What we heard:

- Use simple succinct terms and categories relevant to the audience, with explanations where necessary.
- Create filters and directly compare resources, including from the perspective of likely work projects.
- Many novel outreach modes were suggested.

Possible actions:

- Careful consideration of language and format in outreach, and provide for filtering.
- Consider whether a single outreach mode is relevant to all audiences, including landowners.
- Consider video tutorials, workshops for continuing education credits, and partnering with the State.

Outreach material feedback - Select quotes

“this feels a little bit jargony, you know, and like it's really geared toward the professional planner.”

“I would add to that anytime you have jargon which those of us who've been doing this for a long time might understand but someone who's new to this may not. So I would suggest that, at a minimum, that you have a little info link that you can click on and get a little pop up to say what is it that you mean.”

“I'm just trying to think of who would use this, who would be like, “oh wow this is it, I'm looking for that, adaptive actions and management tools”. Um, and unless it was a course or I was a professor. I think this would be overwhelming to most people.”

“it would be helpful to kind of break it down a little bit easier to say like this tool would be good for when you're creating open space plans, like if we sort of think about like the main reasons why people in Massachusetts use these tools.”

Outreach material feedback - Select quotes

“some of the tools can be up a pretty steep learning curve and perhaps some tutorials that would walk a user through how it can be used and maybe some scenario-based tutorials would be very helpful.”

“a workshop that not only shows you how to use the tool, but like maybe all the participants explore the tool, looking at their own municipality and then kind of present at the end.”

“I think webinars are great and you want to make sure that if you're aiming at forest practitioners that they can get their continuing forestry education credits by attending ... people will show up for a one hour webinar if they're going to get credits for it and then once they're there if you provide them things that are specifically focused on the type of tasks that they need to do, then they're going to not only pay attention, but they'll actually take advantage of the resources.”

Tool mentions during the focus groups

Tool	Total count	Tool	Total count
BioMap2	36	MASSCAPS	4
MAPPR	14	Forest Carbon	4
Adaptation Workbook	13	Nature's Network	4
Resilient & Connected Landscapes	11	NELF Explorer	1
Massachusetts Climate Action Tool	8	Increasing Forest Resiliency	1

General takeaways across categories

- The barrier of *Time* was often about their role not allowing them enough time to pursue opportunities for the types of projects that would benefit from the use of these resources.
- Think about the target audience, useful categories, and minimizing jargon in outreach materials.
- Other outreach modes, such as video tutorials would be useful for learning how to use resources.
- Landowners are an important audience for these resources not to be overlooked.
- There is a need for locally specific management recommendations.
- Educate about the principles of tool use, and about climate adaptation generally.
- Compile the tools in one place.

Broader thoughts

- Partner with the State to help promote these resources.
- It would be helpful to:
 - outline each resource's strengths and limitations
 - develop language that compares the resources
 - describe how some of the resources are interrelated
- Develop concise descriptions or rationales for each resource, that users can cut and paste into grant applications, municipal plans and outreach materials.

Project next steps

- Continue to refine and expand the Land Conservation Tools website.
- Produce succinct outreach material to complement the website.
- Implement outreach and training and then research their effectiveness in increasing the appropriate use of a resource/resources.
- Continue to consider how focus group findings could influence future tool iterations and outreach.

Thank you for your interest

- Happy to meet with your developer team to discuss the findings as they relate to your resource.
- May seek your feedback on draft outputs/outreach materials.
- Planning another tool developer follow-up meeting later in 2021.

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