

Executive Summary

Rhode Island's forests blanket over more than 50% of the state. This forest cover, both private and public, offers a myriad of benefits to all Rhode Island citizens. While forested lands play an important role in providing materials for building homes and other wood products, forests also protect vital soils, preserve and improve air and water quality, and capture carbon emissions. Trees contribute to the quality of life in urban settings, play an important role in outdoor recreations and aesthetics, and are essential tools for storm water management and reducing temperatures. The relationship between forests, biological diversity, and habitat for wildlife is as equally important.

Forests provide these commodities and all their conservation roles, functions, and outputs without the care and management required by traditional infrastructure.

RIDEM's [Division of Forest Environment](#) (DFE) currently receives approximately 23% of its funding through the [Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act](#) (CFAA) through the [State and Private Forestry](#) programs (S&PF), leveraging the federal resources and partnerships in collaboration with private and public stakeholders. These programs are important components of DFE's mission and help protect public resources, support forest landowners and managers, and help to prevent the spread of wildfires:

- Cooperative Fire Program (State Fire Assistance (SFA) and Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA))
- Cooperative Forest Health Program
- Forest Stewardship Program
- Urban and Community Forestry Program
- Forest Legacy Program

These programs contribute to the Rhode Island's Department of Environmental Management [strategic goals](#), as well as the national priorities:

1. **Conserve and Manage Working Forest Landscapes for Multiple Values and Uses**
Forest landscapes, whether under public or private management must be conserved to protect landscape functionality, habitat and environmental benefits.
2. **Protect Forests from Threats**
Rhode Island's forests face threats on multiple fronts: development leading to the loss and fragmentation, ease of spread of invasive plants and pests/diseases, loss of habitat, loss of economic and environmental benefits, and wildfire risk.
3. **Enhance Public Benefits from Trees and Forests**
Support and promote the management and retention of forest lands for multiple benefits, including water and air quality, carbon sinks and sequestration, temperature moderation, forest products, wildlife habitat, outdoor recreation, and human health.

The Rhode Island 2020 Forest Action Plan discusses facts, trends, benefits and issues of concern, as well as priorities, goals, and strategies for the management of forest land. Five issues of concern are identified as having significant impact on the extent of forest land and its resilience:

- **Forest Loss, Fragmentation, and Parcelization** – wildlife habitat, landscape functionality and sustainability, interface and intermix, and invasive species
- **Forest Health** – invasive plants, wildlife habitat, diversity and resiliency, pests and diseases
- **Water** – stormwater, riverine/wetlands, water quality
- **Fire** – increasing intermix and expanding interface combined with increasing fuel loading
- **Climate Change** – increasing disturbances, alterations in species distributions and relationships, and compounding forest health threats

For four CFAA programs, the priority service areas are within the Wildland-Urban Interface/Intermix although their target audiences may differ somewhat:

- **Stewardship** works with landowners to manage their forests, and keep their property as working lands;
- **Forest Health** focuses on introduced and invasive pests/diseases/plants, since the interface is often where they appear and are more easily spread via human transport and developed corridors;
- **Fire** targets wildfire risk planning since most fires in Rhode Island are ignited by humans in the interface and intermix;
- **Urban & Community Forestry** conveys the importance of maintaining and planning for green space to limit the negative effects of landscape use change.

The **Forest Legacy** Program's priority parameters are not the same as the other four programs, but the general area is quite similar, mainly the forests within the western and eastern areas of Rhode Island and has not changed from the boundaries initially established in 1993.

Highlights from the Rhode Island 2020 Forest Action Plan include:

- Rhode Island's forest land began to increase in the late 1800s until the mid-1900s as livelihoods shifted from farming to industry and manufacturing. A slow decrease in forest land acres has occurred since the 1970s due to permanent land-use conversions for development and infrastructure.
- 75% of Rhode Island's trees range from 40-80 years old with only 2% between 0-20 years. This disparity affects wildlife needing early successional habitat, and also indicates fewer landowners are harvesting for timber production.
- An average acre of Rhode Island forest land absorbs 1.3 metric tons of atmospheric carbon.
- Rhode Island's forest land is predominantly held in private ownership. An estimated 38,000 families and individuals own 68% of Rhode Island's forest land.
- 70% of Rhode Islanders get their drinking water from reservoirs protected by forests.
- RIDEM's Divisions of **Forest Environment** (DFE) and **Fish and Wildlife** (DFW) manage more than 57,000 acres of state-owned forests.
- DFE provides services to private landowners with a field staff of 11:
 - 1 State Lands Forester in DFE
 - 1 Stewardship Forester working with private landowners
 - 1 Forest Health Program Coordinator
 - 1 Urban and Community Forestry Program Coordinator
 - 3 staff to maintain of DFE-managed Management Area trails, roads and campgrounds
 - 4 Forest Fire staff delivering training, outreach, plans and prescribed fire, and assisting DFW with prescribed fire
- Invasive pests continue to challenge forest management, whether gypsy moth outbreaks, new arrivals like emerald ash borer in 2018, or looming pests like spotted lanternfly presently spreading aggressively through PA and recently confirmed in NY.
- Of the many benefits provided by green space and natural areas is the human health effects (air quality and urban heat islands) which is important considering that Rhode Island is 11th nationally in ADHD/ADD, and 9th in asthma conditions per capita. (Covid-19 has recently emphasized the impact of impaired lung capacity and has highlighted economic disparities in community impact.)

There are many challenges facing Rhode Island, and the Division of Forest Environment, to meet the goals set out in this Forest Action Plan; most significantly, the lack of adequate funding and sufficient staffing levels. But the magnitude of the challenges to the State are beyond the actions on any one Division or Department, requiring collective commitment and action.

Rhode Island's Challenge

Concerted action is needed to keep one of the state's signature resources – its forests – intact, financially viable, and contributing the many values and public goods they provide. In the face of anticipated changes in the global climate and economy, each extant acre of forest is important, having intrinsic value, and contributing to the sustained health and well-being of the state's citizens, communities, forest products industry and forest-based tourism, and ecosystems.

Healthy forests are inextricably linked to healthy urban and rural communities and an intact natural landscape offers the best opportunity for both mitigating and adapting to climate change. A top priority for all Rhode Islanders must be to ensure that this regionally important forest resource will remain intact, healthy, productive, profitably and sustainably managed, and accessible to all segments of society.

Resources are needed to ensure that forest land is sustainably managed and maintained for the benefits to all residents. This is not something that can be accomplished by the Division of Forest Environment alone, nor even Rhode Island's Department of Environmental Management. This action requires the continuing financial commitment of federal, state, local, private, and philanthropic partners, all having a substantial stake in the outcomes, as noted in the [Blue Ribbon Commission on Land Conservation: 2010 Report to the Governors](#) and adapted below.

PRIMARY PRIORITY: Keeping forests as forests

FUND & SUPPORT

1. Promote and fund state-wide forest planning with emphasis on sustainable private forest conservation and management.
2. Make the working lands of Rhode Island more profitable and financially viable by growing more wood, cultivating new businesses, and creating and strengthening markets for their products.
3. Mindful of global economic and climate change: enhance economic, environmental, and social resilience across the state, to create more prosperous and sustainable industries and communities throughout Rhode Island.
4. Serve the interests of environmental justice, making the landscape and all its benefits more accessible to underserved populations; and our settled places, more livable and healthier, to discourage sprawling development patterns.
5. Provide technical assistance to the DEM Land Acquisition Committee, supporting protection of critical forest habitat, particularly larger intact blocks of high value forests for multiple benefits including connectivity and protection of wildlife habitat, and reduction in forest fragmentation.

EDUCATE & PARTNER

6. Strengthen the connections in the daily lives of the people of Rhode Island, whether residents, landowners, farms or businesses, and the land that supports them, to the mutual benefit of each.
7. Encourage the public to see themselves as part of, and not apart from, Rhode Island's natural heritage; educate them to its many values and public benefits and wise uses; and cultivate a conservation ethic as an active duty of citizenship.
8. Recognize the values and contributions of our urban forests and assure coordination and collaboration with this community to realize their full complement of benefits.

Rhode Island has a wealth of engaged and passionate natural resource professionals, non-profits, landowners, and residents involved in private forest land conservation and management. It is hoped that the 2020 Forest Action Plan will serve as a platform to build support, action and funding for state-wide forest planning and management beyond RIDEM's Division of Forest Environment.