



# *Funding* Nature's Future

## A Pathway to 30x30 in Massachusetts

**From the Berkshires to the Cape, forests, wetlands, streams and rivers, productive farmland, and special habitats like salt marshes represent Massachusetts's diverse landscape.**

These lands hold irreplaceable value, providing clean water, clean air, food production, climate regulation, and access to nature and recreation for the people and wildlife who call the Commonwealth home. Protecting these natural resources is critical to ensuring that these benefits continue, and land protection is the most cost-effective method to do so.<sup>1</sup>

But, as a densely developed state with growing demand for housing, clean energy, and grid infrastructure, Massachusetts is losing forests, wetlands, and farmland to residential, commercial, and energy development—more than 10,000 acres every year. Land degradation resulting from development and climate change—leading to increased forest fires, disease, and invasive species, for example—is also a significant threat to the ability of these lands to deliver the full range of human and wildlife benefits. This underscores the importance of quality stewardship of land once protected.

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## **The many benefits derived from the natural landscape need to be secured for future generations through policy and investments.**

Recognizing the need to leverage natural landscapes for climate and other benefits, the Commonwealth established a goal of permanently protecting at least 30% of the state's land and waters by 2030 and at least 40% by 2050. The 30x30 goal will require over 100,000 additional acres of conserved land, while the 40x50 goal will require another 500,000+ acres of conservation once the 30x30 goal is met. Reaching these goals will require at least doubling the current pace of land protection—in terms of acres per year, this means going from roughly 10,000 to 20,000 or more acres of land protected annually.

The Commonwealth is in an excellent position to achieve these land protection goals—the state and its land conservation partners have already protected 28% of the Commonwealth and have a large pipeline of conservation projects ready to go. Further, through nation-leading

### **To get to 30x30**

Requires ~100,000 additional protected acres (20,000 acres annually) and at least \$350 million per year in land conservation funding.

### **To get to 40x50**

After the 30x30 goal is met, requires another ~500,000 additional protected acres (25,000 acres annually) and at least \$400 million per year in land conservation funding.

policies and other efforts such as the Commonwealth's Resilient Lands Initiative, the Forests as Climate Solutions Initiative, and the anticipated Biodiversity Executive Order, the state has already demonstrated a strong commitment to increasing land protection and restoration to meet climate adaptation and mitigation goals as well as biodiversity targets.

## What is needed is more state funding.

Conservation funding in the Commonwealth has been historically variable and inconsistent—declining over time from a high in 2008 of \$45 million in state funding to \$25-30 million in recent years—and it is woefully insufficient to reach the 30x30 and 40x50 land conservation goals. The Commonwealth spends the least amount of money per capita on parks and recreation and lags in per capita spending on conservation as compared with its neighboring New England states. Current spending from land conservation funding programs of the Commonwealth is roughly \$25 million per year; adding in other public sources (i.e., local and federal funding) for conservation to the state-funded resources equates to about \$50 million annually. Conserving the additional acres required to reach the 30x30 land conservation goal will require at least **\$350 million** in total annual funding from now until 2030. This represents an additional \$300 million per year beyond current spending on conservation by the public sector.



## Why is protecting natural and working lands in the Commonwealth critically important?

*Natural and working lands in the Commonwealth provide tremendous social, economic, and environmental benefits. Among these are:*

- **Climate mitigation.** Healthy natural and working lands are an essential component of the state's plan to meet its net-zero goal by 2050—these lands already store the equivalent of the past 25 years of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the state.<sup>2</sup> Ensuring that this carbon is securely stored and preventing the conversion of natural and working lands to development allows for continued removal of at least 10% of the Commonwealth's GHG emissions.<sup>3</sup>
- **Climate adaptation.** The Commonwealth's forests reduce stormwater runoff by almost 90% on a per acre basis, compared with a developed area,<sup>3</sup> and they filter more than 1.6 trillion gallons of water annually.<sup>4</sup> This saves the state from costly flood mitigation and water quality treatment practices. Similarly, marshes and wetlands attenuate damaging storms by absorbing water and storm energy, saving billions of dollars in rebuilding.
- **Human health and recreation.** Natural areas offer mental and physical health benefits to the people who can access them. This is true of parks, green spaces,<sup>5</sup> and wilder areas.<sup>6</sup> Recent research suggests that conserving 30% of nature globally could support 90% of nature's benefit to human well-being.<sup>7</sup>
- **Habitat and biodiversity.** Natural and working lands provide crucial habitat for more than 400 native plant and animal species protected under the state's Endangered Species Act.
- **Job creation and economic output.** The Commonwealth's forests support 38,000 jobs and nearly \$10 billion in economic output;<sup>8</sup> 7,000 farms provide locally produced food and support 26,000 jobs in the state;<sup>9</sup> outdoor recreation supports more than 100,000 jobs and nearly \$12 billion in value-added output.<sup>10</sup> Overall, every \$1 invested in land conservation in the Commonwealth generates \$4 in economic benefits to the state.<sup>11</sup>

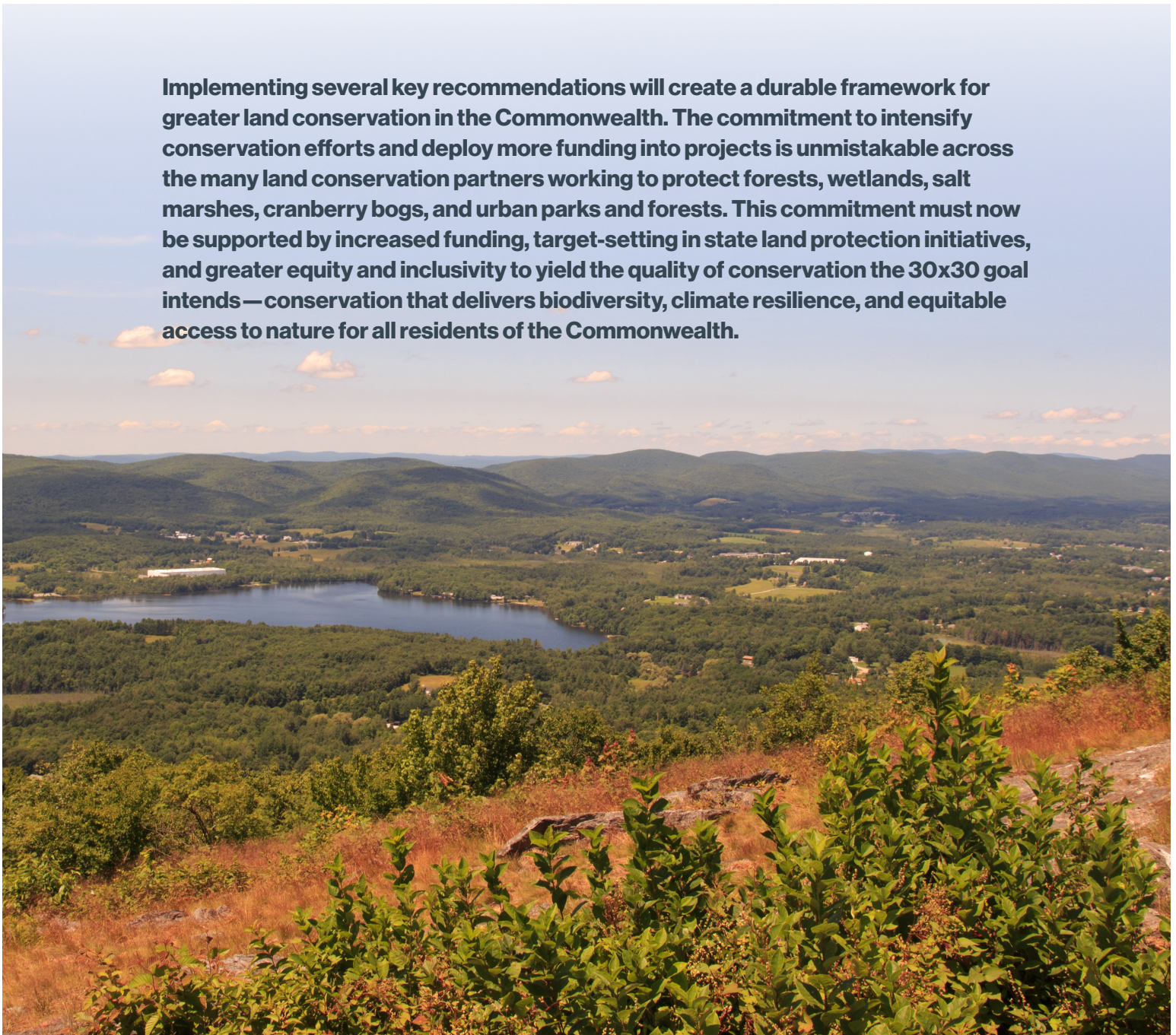


Once the 30x30 goal is met, reaching the 40x50 goal will require around an additional 500,000 acres of land protected (around 25,000 additional acres per year) and at least \$400 million annually from 2030 to 2050 (reflecting an additional \$350 million per year beyond current public spending on conservation). These estimates are **multiples of the current public investment in conservation**, and it is possible that **the cost of the land conservation goals could grow if land values continue to rise**. The importance of meeting multiple goals through this work, including equity and environmental justice, will require land conservation across a broader range of land values and geographies such as more expensive urban and exurban areas.<sup>12</sup> It also includes **improving compensation to communities hosting high levels of tax-exempt protected lands**, especially those located in central and western MA, in

order to improve their fiscal health and ability to support local services. These goals are also likely to add to total costs of reaching 2030 and 2050 conservation goals.

It is imperative therefore to **establish a dedicated annual funding source** and associated implementation strategies to meet our 30x30 goals and pave the way to achieve the much larger 40x50 goal. While these funding levels represent a significant increase over current spending on land conservation, there may be no other investment of public dollars that can return as many benefits. To put these levels of investment in context, achieving 30x30 will cost roughly \$9 to \$10 per resident each year until 2030; in comparison, annual spending on electricity by Massachusetts residents was nearly \$6 billion in 2023, which equals more than \$800 per Massachusetts resident.<sup>13</sup>

**Implementing several key recommendations will create a durable framework for greater land conservation in the Commonwealth. The commitment to intensify conservation efforts and deploy more funding into projects is unmistakable across the many land conservation partners working to protect forests, wetlands, salt marshes, cranberry bogs, and urban parks and forests. This commitment must now be supported by increased funding, target-setting in state land protection initiatives, and greater equity and inclusivity to yield the quality of conservation the 30x30 goal intends—conservation that delivers biodiversity, climate resilience, and equitable access to nature for all residents of the Commonwealth.**







**With the administration change at the federal level, it is more important than ever for the Commonwealth to take the lead on funding land conservation and deepen the investment in critical climate, biodiversity, and equity outcomes. The following recommendations will allow the Commonwealth to establish the level and consistency of funding required to achieve its critical land protection goals.**

*Specifically, the Commonwealth should:*

- **Establish a dedicated source of state funding for conservation.** Current state funding levels of around \$25 million annually are inadequate contributions to the increase in conservation required to get to the 30x30 and 40x50 land protection goals. State sources of funding and bond-funded capital plan expenditures for conservation are unlikely to significantly increase, though they represent an important piece of the conservation funding pie. One-time infusions of federal COVID relief funds have been expended. Moreover, incremental increases in funding may be negated by rising land values. Massachusetts can do so much more to increase conservation funding, taking as examples the many other states that have established dedicated sources of funding to meet conservation goals through vehicles such as dedicating a percentage of existing sporting goods sales taxes.<sup>14</sup>
- **Set a clear, legally binding carbon removal goal to define natural and working lands' contribution to the state's Net-Zero climate mitigation goal for 2050.** The Commonwealth's landmark 2021 Act Creating a Next-Generation Roadmap for Massachusetts Climate Policy established in law that each sector of the economy must meet a legally binding limit on GHG emissions each decade, in service of a state-wide net-zero GHG emissions goal for 2050. Importantly, the law includes the natural and working lands sector as one that must contribute to net zero by 2050.<sup>15</sup>

Forests, wetlands, and working lands in the Commonwealth remove 11 percent of annual GHG emissions currently, and the state's best estimate is that reaching net-zero emissions by 2050 could require carbon removal equivalent to roughly 15 percent of current GHG emissions. Moreover, carbon removal by natural processes is the most cost-effective option, with estimates for technological carbon removal (e.g., direct air capture, which is not yet commercially viable) ranging from \$150-\$200/ton CO<sub>2</sub>e within the next decade.<sup>16</sup> State policymakers should develop policies and incentives that recognize the value of natural lands as the lowest-cost carbon removal solution for 2050.



- **Grow public-private partnerships to leverage land protection resources.** The private land conservation sector (land trusts, conservation NGOs, and philanthropy from private donors) is taking increased action to fill spending gaps, including the recently launched \$75 million Catalyst Fund for land conservation announced by Mass Audubon. Increased private investment presents a unique opportunity that should not be missed. If the Commonwealth commits additional, consistent, and reliable funding, the private sector can leverage those resources to accelerate the pace of conservation.

For instance, if funds are reliable, then the private sector can secure loans, leverage Program-related Investments (PRI), and apply short-term capital to buy and hold land when landowners need it the most. Such dedicated and reliable funding takes many of the risks out of land protection that exist today, both landowner risks and private sector partner risks. Additionally, the public sector can create and formalize public-private partnerships through cooperative agreements and other means to best align resources, expand capacity, and take other actions that help each party meet ambitious and shared goals. Public-private partnerships are a key to accelerating the pace of land conservation in the Commonwealth, but they require greater and more reliable public funding to be successful.

- **Address equity concerns of Indigenous Peoples and local communities** by representing these voices and concerns within 30x30 land conservation planning and implementation activities. Land protection in the state has just begun to address historic disparities of Indigenous Peoples and communities with limited access to nature. Moreover, many rural communities that currently host high acreages of tax-exempt conservation lands feel burdened by challenges to fiscal viability. Future conservation based on conventional conservation priorities would simply avoid addressing these disparities. The Commonwealth's value of inclusive conservation must be at the forefront of 30x30 conservation activities and consideration of local voices from Indigenous Peoples and local community groups is critical to achieving a conservation vision for the state that ensures the benefits of conservation will flow equitably to multiple stakeholders. The state and land trust community must identify the groups statewide and within local geographies that need to be included in planning and implementing conservation and strengthen outreach and communication efforts through the ongoing natural resource planning and policy efforts of the Commonwealth.



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## References

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- <sup>13</sup> Based on calculations using data from: US Energy Information Administration, *State Energy Data* [https://www.eia.gov/state/seds/sep\\_fuel/html/fuel\\_use\\_es.pdf](https://www.eia.gov/state/seds/sep_fuel/html/fuel_use_es.pdf) and US Census Bureau, <https://data.census.gov/profile/Massachusetts?g=040XX00US25>.
- <sup>14</sup> We recognize the important contributions made by the private and philanthropic sectors on land conservation in the Commonwealth, but we do not include private sector spending in our estimates. Data on spending for land conservation from private sources is not systematically collected or available publicly. Further, private spending may have limitations such as geographic or thematic focus for land conservation, capacity limitations, and cannot be assumed as consistent or reliable to meet the 30x30 and 40x50 land conservation goals—private spending will also vary based on individual preferences and broader economic conditions. While private spending on land conservation will likely increase to leverage and match additional deployment of public funds, it cannot reliably fill the funding gap to meet statewide land conservation goals.
- <sup>15</sup> US Energy Information Administration, *State Energy Data System*. Available at: <https://www.eia.gov/state/analysis.php?sid=MA#3>; US Census Bureau.
- <sup>16</sup> Twenty-eight other states have dedicated annual funding sources for land protection (Trust for Public Land, 2023).