

CONSERVATION MATTERS

The Key to Clean Water: Collaborating to Conserve Open Spaces and Water Quality

By Rebecca Hanson, Newfound Lake Region Association

The Newfound Watershed is defined in part by its open spaces and unfragmented forests. The summit of Mount Cardigan and the forests that surround it; the open flat land in Alexandria; the Bridgewater Hills; the dense forests in the upper reaches of the Cockermouth River in Groton. These open spaces provide us with endless recreation opportunities, firewood and other forest products, maple syrup, and, of course, the peace and solace of the natural world. Linked together these open space areas allow for safe wildlife passage through different habitat types. Healthy, mature forests store carbon and filter stormwater to ensure our rivers, streams, and Newfound Lake are clean.

One of the best ways to preserve the quality of the water in Newfound Lake is to protect the lands surrounding it. Town forests, land owned by conservation groups, state land, and conservation easements all ensure this valuable open space will be protected in perpetuity. There are economic benefits too. A study from the Trust for Public Land found that every \$1 invested in land conservation returned \$11 in natural goods and services to the New Hampshire economy. And conserved land can lead to tax savings since open space requires less town infrastructure—schools, roads, and life-services—so they are less of a tax burden for taxpayers than residential development.

In 2007, a group of individuals concerned with the pace of development in the Newfound watershed met to determine how to balance new development with land conservation. From these efforts, the Newfound Land Conservation Partnership (NLCP) was established in 2009, and has now driven land conservation in the Newfound Watershed for over a decade. This group, comprised of local watershed residents, the Newfound Lake Region Association, Lakes Region Conservation Trust, Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, The Nature Conservancy (new to the partnership in 2017), and representatives from NH Audubon, has helped conserve 5,000 acres of land. Over 14,000 acres, or 24% of land in the Newfound watershed, is now protected.

The NLCP works with landowners to discuss their goals and the many options for permanent protection for their property, whether for wildlife improvement, to keep land in the family, or to continue farming and forestry. This can mean a number of things including donating or selling a conservation easement for the property or an outright sale or donation of the property.

In 2016 NLRA worked with state mapping experts and watershed representatives to identify areas most important for conservation. Representatives rated the watershed's wetlands, streams, wildlife habitat, and steep slopes, from most important to least important, resulting in a series of maps that identify conservation priorities. NLCP uses these maps to identify land that is important to conserve.

Notable NLCP projects include the conservation of the Kimball Hill property in 2018, which protected a vast stretch of the Cockermouth River. The partnership is currently working with landowners in all five watershed towns, and looking to protect property around the Alexandria aquifer, which provides drinking water to the town of Bristol, and supplies a significant amount of water to the lake through the Fowler River.

Learn more about land conservation and the work of the Newfound Land Conservation Partnership by visiting the NLRA website: <https://newfoundlake.org/landconservation/>

Photo caption: Goose Pond and Sugarloaf Conservation Area in Alexandria is one of the publicly accessible conservation lands in the Newfound Watershed.

