From the Field

EASEMENT STEWARDSHIP NEWSLETTER • SPRING 2019

MFT and Public Policy  Federal, state, and municipal-level policies have a profound impact on Maine farmers and our food system. These policies affect the ability to protect farmland, keep farmers in business, develop markets for agricultural products, protect our natural resources, and to transition farmland to the next generation of farmers in Maine. At MFT, we keep our finger on the pulse of policies that affect Maine farms, and engage in those policy areas that directly affect our ability to protect farmland, support farmers, and advance the future of farming. We also conduct research and prepare reports and articles to help educate policymakers and the public about issues affecting Maine agriculture.

MFT would like to partner more with farmers and landowners in our policy work. Look for a survey in our holiday cards this winter to share what policy issues and activities you would be interested in working on more closely with us in the future. In the meantime, if you have any questions about MFT’s policy work or want to get involved sooner, feel free to reach out to our Policy and Research Director, Ellen Stern Griswold, at egriswold@mainefarmlandtrust.org.

Conservation Easements Requiring Farm Plans Some of MFT’s conservation easements require that your agricultural operations are conducted in accordance with a farm plan. The easement may refer to these as management plans, conservation plans, or ALE plans and, depending on your easement, they may be prepared by NRCS, MFT, you, or another entity. When required, these documents are intended to describe management practices, address specific resource concerns, and ultimately provide guidance for you as you implement the practices identified in the plan.

As with a forest management plan you decide how your farm should managed. The plan simply outlines the steps to take in order to achieve these goals. It describes when you will bring in professional, technical assistance when needed. Plans can change as often as is necessary to meet the needs of your farm, but should also be updated when you buy or sell a farm or when the overall type of management changes (i.e. if you transition from veggies to livestock).

Stewardship staff use these plans to better understand how a landowner is working to enhance the agricultural productivity of the farm and protect the conservation values that are described by the conservation easement. They help identify best management practices, nutrient management, and others. Most importantly, they help us get to know you and your farm, and work with you to keep the farm active and sustainable for many generations. If your easement requires a farm plan, please help us keep it up to date and contact your steward if you have any questions.

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In this issue:
Forestry on your Conservation Land
When to Contact MFT
New Land Steward

Check out the MFT website to see our Stewardship Page!

When you are planning to sell your property

When you are planning a timber harvest

When planning of new permanent structures

When planning a construction of

When your farmland requires a permit

When you are unsure whether an activity is allowed by your easement

When your easement requires approval from MFT for an activity you have planned

When your easement requires you to seek

Check out the MFT website to see our Stewardship Page!
When landowners grant a conservation easement to the Maine Farmland Trust (MFT), they entrust us with managing their vision for their land and protecting the conservation values that make each property valuable from an agricultural standpoint. At MFT these values include the combination of open fields, agricultural soils, water resources, and forestland.

Most of the protected farmland that we work with encompasses at least some forestland and, because of this, our conservation easements typically include requirements related to forestry practices. We ultimately choose to address forestry in our easements because we believe that forestland is a valuable asset to any working farm. We aim to ensure that, just like the productive farmland we protect, the forest is managed in a way that will ensure its availability for future generations to manage in support of their agricultural operations.

MFT staff are not foresters, at least not at this point in time. While we do have experience and knowledge in working forestland and Best Management Practices (BMPs), we leave it up to landowners working in conjunction with professional foresters to decide exactly how to manage their woodlot. The forestry terms in MFT’s most recent conservation easements outline a set of standards by which we are able to determine whether proper forethought, planning, and professional oversight have played a role in a larger-scale timber harvest, whatever the goal of that harvest might be. These are the tools that the easement gives us in order to make sure that the forest is managed sustainably.

Our stewardship staff of three currently monitor over 200 protected properties annually. If a timber harvest is planned, staff will schedule a visit around the time of the harvest in order to view the conditions on the ground and confirm whether the harvest was carried out in the intended manner. Having advance notice of any forest management activities ensures that we have enough time to review plans and ask questions of landowners or foresters before any work begins.

In allowing the professionals and the landowners to execute the details of a harvest, along with MFT’s site visits, we feel confident that the forested acres of our protected farmland are managed in such a way that they will continue to be available for future generations to manage too. In this way, MFT upholds its promise to past, current, and future landowners that their farmland and forest will be protected forever.

Within the past year, we’ve noticed an uptick in the number of forestry-related issues and we want to work proactively with each of you to help you avoid potential issues and meet the terms of your conservation easements. In 2019 we’re planning to take a little extra time at monitoring visits this year to ensure we are answering your questions, responding to requests, and helping you understand the terms of your easement. Our stewardship team has a responsibility to enforce the terms of our easements, and we also have a commitment to working with each of you.

Kyle Warren, New Land Steward for Southwestern Maine

After nearly a decade of working in the woods of my native Western Maine as a Registered Master Maine Guide and later a land surveyor and environmental permitting professional, I discovered my true passion when I became the land steward for a local land trust preserving parcels in the Royal River watershed in Cumberland and Androscoggin Counties. During my nearly nine years in that role, the collaborative partnerships I developed with project partners were the most rewarding part of the work. I learned that by taking time to understand what is most important to project partners, we are able to develop trust and common purpose, allowing us to achieve both landowner and conservation goals.

My family and I live in Portland with our three small sons and our enormous German Shorthaired Pointer. We prefer to spend our free time swimming, skiing and campfire cooking at our off-the-grid camp in Alder Stream Township or exploring New York City and Costa Rica.

MFT has several different “generations” of conservation easement language that we’ve developed over the past 20 years, meaning that the requirements surrounding forest management may be different from easement to easement. The best way to find out what you need to do before a timber harvest is to check the specific terms of your easement.