

Funding Needs at the Bureau of Park & Lands: *Investing in Maine's Rural Economies & Stewarding Our Public Resource*

Maine's 600,000 acres of Public Reserved Lands are an unparalleled public resource. From the habitat-rich Nahmakanta unit in the North Woods, to the high peaks of the Bigelow Preserve in the west, and the breathtaking seaside cliffs on the Cutler Coast, these lands represent the best of Maine. Since 1973, the Bureau of Parks and Lands (Bureau, BPL, Lands) has been charged, by law, to manage these lands for outdoor recreation, wildlife habitat, and sustainable forestry. But as a wholly self-supporting agency in cash-strapped times, Lands has long focused on sustainable timber harvesting in order to pay their bills. But today, for the first time in the agency's history, Lands has the resources to turn their attention to the outstanding recreation opportunities available on our Public Reserved Lands and in turn help to support Maine's rural economies, while continuing to steward the resource in the exemplary fashion Lands is known for.

Investing in Maine's Rural Economies: Improving Public Access & Increasing Public Awareness

Maine's Public Reserved Lands belong to all Maine citizens and should play a lead role connecting residents and visitors to the outdoors. Connecting people to Maine's outdoors presents real economic opportunity, particularly in rural Maine where natural resources abound. But rural Maine has historically underinvested in recreational infrastructure. Recently, in response to market demand, communities in Maine's North Woods have engaged in efforts to use their natural assets to improve their regions as destinations for outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism. *Maine's High Peaks*, for instance, is an effort spearheaded by the Flagstaff Area Business Association and is dedicated to "making aware to all, the beauty, adventure, and endless possibilities of the High Peaks Region."¹ Similarly, the *Moosehead Region Branding Initiative* seeks to brand the Moosehead Lake region, known for its outstanding natural resources, as "America's Crown Jewel." Other initiatives led by chambers of commerce, economic development groups, tourism groups, businesses, and landowners are working together to shape their communities as outdoor recreation destinations and show incredible promise. But the Bureau of Parks and Lands has not had the resources to contribute to these efforts and to help create these destinations, until now.

Public Reserved Lands are the backbone of recreation opportunities in many rural communities. For instance, the Richardson, Bald Mountain, and the Four Ponds units frame the Rangeley Lakes region, conserving much of the shoreline on Richardson and Mooselookmeguntic Lakes and snowmobile trails that connect Rangeley to Weld. Similarly, the Moosehead Lake, Little Moose, and Big Spencer Mountain units right outside of Greenville offer the area's best hiking trails up Mount Kineo and within the Little Moose Range. The 13,000 acre Seboeis unit, located just south of Millinocket, contains prime deer, moose, bear, and waterfowl habitat. By improving access to these areas and increasing public awareness of Public Reserved Lands and what they offer, the Bureau of Parks and Lands stands to be an indispensable partner in improving rural Maine economies through recreation destination development.

Public Reserved Lands are scattered across Maine, from as far south as New Gloucester in Cumberland County to Eagle Lake in northern Aroostook County, in units ranging in size from 500 to over 42,000 acres. Though open to the public for uses ranging from hiking and hunting to camping and fishing, these lands are often difficult to locate and access. Furthermore, the vast majority of the public is not aware that Public Reserved Lands exist and are available for their use. Specific investments in infrastructure, marketing, and

¹ For more information about *Maine's High Peaks*, visit <http://www.maineshighpeaks.com/>.

additional staff will increase visitation to Public Reserved Lands and in turn help to improve rural Maine as an outdoor recreation destination.

1. **Recreational Infrastructure Improvements.** In a September 2015 article², George Smith described enjoying a beautiful drive with his wife from Oquossuc to Mexico. Though they drove through at least two Public Reserved Lands units he said that "except for one very badly battered sign, we never would have known we own property up there." Public Reserved Lands are notorious for being easy to locate on a map, but nearly impossible to find on the ground due to poor signage. Mount Abraham, located only a few miles from downtown Kingfield, offers rewarding views of the High Peaks region for the experienced hiker, but getting there is no easy task. Hikers must locate a grassy pullout after several miles of poorly maintained roads, only to have to cross two streams before reaching the trailhead. Trails on the Cutler Coast, a very popular destination in Downeast Maine, are badly eroded and in need of maintenance. Experiences and conditions such as these prevent people from enjoying Public Reserved Lands. BPL must invest in significant capital improvement projects so that these lands can be enjoyed to their fullest extent. These projects include signage, trail maintenance, parking, etc. Each Lands region should prioritize their recreational infrastructure needs and decisions should be influenced by whether the project is within the Bureau's vision, as well as the needs of the surrounding community.
2. **Road improvement.** More often than not, private roads are used to access Public Reserved Lands. Lands holds rights of ways on these roads and has reserved the right to maintain them for public access, but has not had the resources to maintain or improve the roads. Instead, Lands has relied on private landowners to maintain the roads during logging operations on adjacent private lands. But when logging operations are finished, these roads slowly degrade and public access is lost. A survey by the Maine Office of Tourism found that the availability of public access is a "very important" factor in selecting a fishing or hunting destination.³ BPL needs to invest in road maintenance and improvement so that Public Reserved Lands are consistently accessible by road to the average visitor.
3. **Road acquisition.** Though private roads used by permission of the landowners are most often utilized to access Public Reserved Lands, there are instances where it would make more sense for BPL to purchase legally guaranteed access. For example, BPL would like to purchase guaranteed access on a road often used to access the Nahmakanta unit from Greenville. Often road upkeep can be shared amongst landowners, but if the state has no fee interest in a road it is difficult to justify public dollars into maintaining such roads.
4. **Marketing and promotion.** The average Maine resident and visitor is not aware of Public Reserved Lands. This is a major barrier to increasing use of these lands and visitation to rural Maine communities. The Bureau of Parks and Lands has struggled to increase public awareness about opportunities on Public Reserved Lands. Effective public communication is needed to provide better information about available recreation opportunities; better marketing and messaging is needed to inspire activity; and BPL needs to adapt to modern communication technology and trends.

² For a copy of this article, go to: <https://www.centralmaine.com/2015/09/16/new-commission-debating-future-of-our-600000-acres-of-public-lands/>.

³ To see a presentation on the results of this survey, go to <http://legislature.maine.gov/legis/opla/MoTPresentationHuntingFishingMarket8182015.pdf>.

5. **Outdoor recreation planner.** BPL needs to hire an additional Recreation Planner to facilitate conversations with regional rural economic development groups, plan and oversee development of recreational infrastructure improvements, and oversee a marketing and promotion campaign. Much of the on-the-ground labor, such as road building and trail construction, could be performed by contractors. Consultants could be hired to implement a marketing and promotion campaign. However, this work must be overseen by BPL staff in order to ensure that the work meets the agency's goals and is within the scope of the agency's mission.

Stewarding the Resource

The Bureau of Parks and Lands' management directive for Public Reserved Lands is three-fold: sustainable timber harvesting, ecological and wildlife protection, and outdoor recreation. Public Reserved Lands are held in public trust, and as fiduciary of the trust, BPL must not diminish the value of the asset: the land and its resources, from big, old trees, ponds, and bogs that provide wildlife habitat, to the wildlife itself.

The Integrated Resource Policy, the management plan for all of Maine's Public Reserved Land, sets forth a number of goals regarding the timber resource, including "[retain] primary forest and old-growth, "[maintain] an adequate area in mature forest of mid and late successional character," and "identify stands with mature components of long-lived species . . . to provide connectivity of habitats for plants and animals which benefit from this forest condition."⁴ Mature forests have significant positive economic value, since they are more valuable as saw logs and veneer, than as pulp for paper-making or biomass.

Mature, well stocked forests located on Public Reserved Lands also have important ecological and wildlife benefits. Many of Maine's wildlife species, including pine marten, the Black-backed Woodpecker, and many species of song birds need old, fully stocked forests for part or all of their habitat requirements. Within and alongside these forests are the majority of trout and heritage ponds in Maine, as well as 31,000 acres of deer wintering areas.

For 30 years, BPL has practiced exemplary forestry and managed their lands for wildlife habitat protection. In a time where the Bureau has increased the amount of standing timber on its lands and has an interest in utilizing new and different technologies and marketing strategies, the Bureau must increase its investment in silvicultural management, while continuing to conserve its outstanding wildlife habitat.

1. **Foresters.** Lands needs to hire at least one additional forester in each of its three regions because the cut level has been increased from 141,500 cords/year to 160,000 cords/year.⁵ Though Lands was able to cut 166,500 cords in 2014 at their current staffing level, 2014 was an exceptional year with regard to weather. The weather allowed Lands contractors to cut over the course of a longer season. Furthermore, the contractor was motivated to cut more because s/he wanted to avoid having to plow a long road (to access the timber) in the winter of 2015. In addition, Lands entered the 2014 harvesting season with a back-log of stands that had harvesting prescriptions ready to be implemented.

Additional foresters are needed to maintain a high level of oversight, including marking trees, supervising the cut, laying out and supervising road building, writing prescriptions, and performing post-harvest evaluations to determine whether the harvest was successful (for example, that the forest is regenerated as expected).

⁴ Integrated Resource Policy, Maine Department of Conservation, Bureau of Parks and Lands, Dec. 18, 2000.

⁵ "Except as provided in this section, timber harvesting on public reserved lands and nonreserved public lands may not exceed in total an average of 160,000 cords per year over any 3-year period." 12 M.R.S.A. §1807 (2015).

Lands is also in the process of shifting from stumpage sales to Contract Logging Services, which requires Lands foresters to also market their wood. Currently, there is no back-log of prescriptions as there was in 2014. Lands has hired contractors to write their prescriptions on the Bigelow Preserve. Lands foresters should be writing their own prescriptions, because they are most familiar with Lands' multiple use management mandate.

Retaining a high level of oversight will help to ensure that Lands continues to practice exemplary forestry. Exemplary forestry produces high quality, high value timber, while also managing for wildlife and recreation.

- 2. Contract Logging Services.** Lands is shifting to a CLS model. In this system Lands has a number of up-front costs, such as paying for roads and other infrastructure improvements in an effort to realize direct mill prices. Over the long term, CLS will increase Lands' revenue, but the upfront costs are significant. The majority of these costs are road building.
- 3. Stream Crossings.** Many existing roads in the North Woods have culverts or other stream crossings that do not allow for adequate fish passage or otherwise restrict the aquatic habitat. In order to protect brook trout and other aquatic habitat, BPL should inventory existing roads and replace all inadequate culverts and additional or improved roads should be outfitted with culverts constructed based on the best available science.
- 4. Timber-base Data Collection, Stand Typing, and Modeling.** Lands is facing a serious need to improve its ability to do timber modeling. Improved modeling requires better data including the age-class and compositional structure of the forest, and inventory information in a format that allows for updating growth, harvest, and mortality information. The technology should be able to mix imagery and data and allow management modeling and simulation capability. The improved technology would allow BPL to achieve the industry standard of being able to track their timber-base and to get a better understanding of stand level habitat impacts, as well as how to better take advantage of timber markets.
- 5. CFI Plot Establishment.** Continuous Forest Inventory (CFI) is a series of uniformly spaced permanent sample plots that are measured periodically to quantify forest conditions and changes. By better quantifying and qualifying forest conditions and changes, Lands can better manage its holdings.
- 6. Boundary Line Maintenance & Establishment.** As parcels are added or taken away from Lands' holdings, boundary lines change. In many cases, boundary lines are not accurate. Good boundary lines are important for timber management, for establishing the timber inventory, and to avoid timber trespass. It is important for Lands to prevent encroachment on their holdings, but also for Lands to avoid encroachment onto private holdings. There have been several instances where Lands has trespassed onto private property, resulting in significant pay-out.
- 7. Contingency Fund.** Lands needs to maintain an account balance that is at least one half of their annual operating expenses. This balance would operate as a contingency fund. Because most of Lands' timber harvesting takes place during the winter, there is a significant seasonal fluctuation in income. A contingency fund enables the program to operate during the first half of the fiscal year when income is low and expenses are relatively constant. It also serves as a buffer to cover operating costs

when expenses exceed revenues. Furthermore, because the Bureau's largest source of revenue is timber, incomes fluctuates from year to year in response to the amount of wood harvested and economic conditions that effect timber markets. The balance is drawn down when expenses exceed revenues.

- 8. Chop and Drop Projects.** "Chop and drop" refers to the method of strategically adding fallen trees to streams in order to improve overall fish habitat quality by providing cover, increasing insect population density, creating or enhancing pools, varying the streambed floor through scour, and slowing flows during high water events. Because the Bureau lands contain a great deal of trout and Atlantic salmon habitat, the Bureau is well situated to invest in such projects in order to continue to retain and improve fish habitat.
- 9. Deer Wintering Areas.** The Bureau of Parks and Lands manages 31,000 acres of deer wintering areas, under the review and recommendation of the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (IF&W) through an IF&W Wildlife Biologist permanently and exclusively assigned to the Bureau. Deer wintering area management should be a part of timber harvesting planning. For example, planned timber harvests in deeryards can provide a sustained yield of forest products and deer browse, while maintaining the winter shelter value of these areas. The Bureau needs to have the resources to integrate management for deeryards into their timber harvesting management decisions. Currently, the Bureau works with a single wildlife biologist on these management decisions (as well as management related to Canada lynx, waterfowl, etc.) and would benefit from the addition of another biologist position.
- 10. Ecological Reserve Science.** Within the Bureau of Parks and Lands' holdings are 17 Ecological Reserves, totaling approximately 94,000 acres across eight Maine counties. Ecological Reserves encompass some 1,600 acres of deer wintering areas and nearly 80 miles of brook trout streams. The Reserves harbor some of the last and largest tracts of old forest in the state, including remote stands of trees more than 250 years old. More than 500 permanent long-term ecological monitoring plots have been established by the Maine Natural Areas Program on Public Reserved Lands. These monitoring plots are revisited on a ten year cycle and yield insights into forest growth and change over time as well as important comparisons to managed forestlands. Ecological Reserves have been used for more than 15 ecological research sampling projects by 8 universities, ranging from the University of Maine at Presque Isle to the University of Missouri, and research institutions ranging from the New York State Museum to the National Institutes of Health. This important resource must continue to be stewarded so that it may further contribute to research projects and findings.
- 11. Senior Planner to Manage Easements and Leases.** The Bureau of Parks and Lands holds 365,258 acres of conservation and recreation easements and enforces 9,815 acres of Forest Legacy conservation easements, delegated to them by the U.S. Forest Service. Additionally, the Bureau is the back-up holder of 378,140 acres of third-party conservation easements. The Bureau also leases portions of their property to camp owners, commercial sporting camps, and campgrounds. The Bureau also manages utility corridor, agricultural, telecommunication, boat access, and several other types of leases. Overall, the Bureau administers 364 leases. Currently, a single position at BPL is responsible for easements and leases, as well a portion of Lands' acquisitions. Easements are best monitored on the ground, by a person who has both technical and interpersonal skills. Good easement monitoring is achieved by developing long terms relationships with landowners, which is best done

by year round, stable staff. BPL needs to hire an additional staff person in order to adequately manage these areas.

12.Scholarship Fund. In recent years, Lands has had a difficult time finding good job candidates. This problem could be addressed by establishing a scholarship fund that would go to Maine students at Maine universities studying forestry, wildlife biology, and other fields that are central to the Bureau's mission. Lands could also fund a scholarship to Maine's community colleges, where students would learn the most current forestry technology.

Summary

The Bureau of Parks and Lands holdings are managed for multiple uses: sustainable timber harvesting, outdoor recreation, and wildlife habitat. By law, no use is prioritized over another. But as a self-supporting agency in cash-strapped times, the Bureau has long focused on timber harvesting in order to keep their head above water. Today, with an unprecedented surplus of funds, the Bureau has the opportunity to invest in outdoor recreation and wildlife habitat while contributing to Maine's rural economy and improving the way that they steward the resource that they tend for all Maine people. The money within the Bureau of Parks and Lands management account must remain with the agency, by funding additional Bureau positions, acquiring additional properties, and investing in timber modeling, as well as by hiring contract positions to create new outdoor recreation infrastructure, to establish a marketing and promotion campaign, and to improve wildlife habitat, as well as for other purposes discussed above. There is no guarantee that the Bureau will have comparable funds in the future. Let's invest this money in the Bureau today in uses that will bring returns to the Bureau and the people of the Maine for years to come.