

News Release

North County Land Trust, Inc.

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CONTACT:

Janet Morrison
(978) 342-0174

Local Land Conservation Project Funded

The "Southern Monadnock Plateau" Forest Legacy Project, a project to conserve open space along the Midstate Trail in Westminster and Ashburnham, has received a \$2.5 million federal Forest Legacy Program grant. Congressman John Olver was instrumental in securing the funding. The money will be used to purchase conservation restrictions on privately owned land, which will permanently protect it from development. A permanent easement for the Midstate Trail will be included.

The Southern Monadnock Plateau Project is the result of a partnership that includes the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, Ashburnham Conservation Trust, North County Land Trust and the Westminster Open Space Committee. The project includes the protection of 1,000 acres of land in the Midstate Trail Corridor in Westminster and Ashburnham, as well an additional 1,270 acres in western Ashburnham. The \$2.5 million funding obtained will help pay for the protection of approximately 800 acres of land in Ashburnham and Westminster. Project partners must contribute a "cost share" of approximately \$900,000 to cover the full cost of protecting these 800 acres of land.

Landowners who choose to participate in the project are paid for the development rights on their land. The land under conservation restriction will remain in private ownership. Landowners can use the land and earn income from it. The land can be bought and sold but it can never be developed. Some landowners have agreed to a donation or a "bargain sale" of the conservation restriction on their land, which helps contribute to "cost share" and allows more land to be conserved at lower cost.

The Midstate Trail is an historic long-distance trail that bisects the state. Its northern-most section runs from Mount Wachusett in Princeton to Mt. Watatic in Ashburnham, a distance of about 22 miles. In Westminster, and Ashburnham, only 6 miles of the trail are on state forest land or town-owned conservation land. In these towns, most of the Midstate Trail runs through private land that is not protected from development.

The Southern Monadnock Plateau project accomplishes several objectives at the same time. It helps to preserve and protect the Midstate Trail, while also conserving hundreds of acres of open space for the benefit of town residents, trail users and wildlife.

Janet Morrison, Executive Director of North County Land Trust commented, "We would like to thank everyone who contributed to this project. Our project partners worked very hard, their communities were very supportive, and of course the project would not be possible without the landowners who participated. But we still have a lot of work to do, before each conservation restriction is conveyed and the project is completed."

"Development poses an increasing threat to our nation's forestlands," Congressman John Olver said. "Intact forests supply timber products, wildlife habitat, soil and watershed protection, aesthetics, and recreational opportunities. However, as these areas are fragmented and disappear, so do the benefits they provide. The Forest Legacy Program will help protect the integrity of this area and maintain its scenic beauty for generations to come."

North County Land Trust, Inc. is a non-profit, land conservation organization which works to protect open space in north central Massachusetts.

North County Land Trust, Inc., P.O. Box 2052, Fitchburg, MA 01420
Ph. (978) 342-0174; Fax (978) 342-0454; E-mail: northcountylantrust@verizon.net;
URL:northcountylantrust.org