

The Massachusetts Woodlands Cooperative: Poised for Expansion

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Original Publication: Damery, David, Jay Healy, Susan Campbell and Arthur Eve. 2004. "The Massachusetts Woodlands Cooperative: Poised for Expansion" *The Woodland Steward* 32(6), Spring, 2004 4-5

The forest of northern hardwoods, white pine and hemlock that blankets much of the western Massachusetts landscape is in reality a patchwork quilt of non-industrial family plots--about 220,000 of them in all, ranging in size from several dozen to several hundred acres. In 1999, a group of forest landowners recognized that a cooperative structure would enable them to strengthen their bargaining power, pool their resources, add value to their forest products, enrich the local economy, and maintain the region's rural quality of life. With help from the University of Massachusetts, they surveyed nearly 1,000 of the region's small landowners in order to develop a list of potential services the co-op might offer. Priority was given to forest and wildlife management, preservation and protection. In 2001 these landowners incorporated as the Massachusetts Woodlands Cooperative, LLC and since then they have continued to research and learn, develop their land, and plan their business.

The Massachusetts Woodlands Cooperative is a forest landowner management, processing and marketing cooperative organized by and on behalf of forest landowners in western Massachusetts. The mission of the Cooperative is to maintain the environment and character of western Massachusetts through the protection, enhancement and careful economic development of one of the region's most plentiful resources, the forest. The Massachusetts Woodlands Cooperative is a business that is owned and controlled by members who use its services. People typically unite in a cooperative to: (1) get services otherwise not available; (2) obtain quality supplies at the right time; (3) gain access to markets; and (4) increase their bargaining power. When profits are generated from efficient operations or adding value to products, these earnings are returned to members in proportion to their use of the cooperative.

The Cooperative became "green certified" under the group certification process provided by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in the spring of 2003. Green certification is similar to organic labeling of produce. It is an independent assessment of forestry practices to determine if the management is sustainable. Green certification will enable the Cooperative to sell forest products with a label showing that these products are from an environmentally friendly operation. The green certification principles and criteria established by FSC support the values, beliefs and operating principles of the Cooperative. Obtaining FSC certification will assist the Cooperative in its efforts to: (1) set high standards in our approach to forest stewardship; (2) provide an internationally accepted way of assessing the extent to which these standards are met; and (3) add value to the products that are produced and marketed through the Cooperative.

Membership in the cooperative is by invitation to forest landowners who meet the following criteria: (1) accepts the values and operating principles of the cooperative, (2) remains in good standing by paying membership fees and patronizing the cooperative, (3) owns 10 or more acres of forestland in western Massachusetts, and (4) has in place (or is willing to develop) a forest management plan that meets the green certification standards that have been set by the cooperative.

In January of 2004, the Massachusetts Woodlands Cooperative was awarded a three year, \$499,253 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The goal of this grant is to expand niche markets for the Co-op that focus on Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) green certified materials and other value-added forest products. Project activities will include:

1. Develop Niche Markets: Develop and implement niche markets for flooring, timber frame materials, and residual wood products (e.g., bark mulch, firewood, and pallet wood). This will be accomplished by gathering, sorting and marketing logs according to grade and species and processing selected logs into value-added products.
2. Green Certification: The Co-op is already green certified under the group certification process provided by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). However, in order to market the Cooperative's value-added products as green certified, the Co-op will also need to apply for and receive group Chain-of-Custody certification from FSC. This will require: (1) development of a system for monitoring forest materials as they are transformed into value-added products; and (2) establishing a network of value-added producers who are interested in obtaining FSC certified wood from the Cooperative.
3. Database Development: We plan to expand the Cooperative database so that it will: (1) provide detailed information on forest material that is available for harvesting from members; (2) monitor forest materials as they are transformed into value added products; (3) organize information needed for the Cooperative to function as a business (cost of goods purchased, inventory, sales, marketing, etc.), and (4) link the database with the Cooperative's website so that members and those who work on their land can have password access to information about the property.
4. Expand Membership and Land Base: The Cooperative currently has 27 members who together manage 3500 acres of forest land. During the next three years, the Co-op will expand its membership base to 125 members with over 20,000 acres of forest land and identify 25 regional artisans, craftspeople, area businesses and other woodworkers who will: (1) become associate members of the Co-op; (2) receive Group FSC Chain-of-Custody certification as a part of their membership; and (3) create value-added products from FSC green certified material that is harvested from member forests.
5. Biomass Assessment: The Cooperative will assess the market potential for the use of forest based biomass fuels in Southern New England by analyzing supply and cost data for forest based biomass fuels.
6. Information Dissemination: We will compile, organize and disseminate information about the project and the Cooperative.

The USDA grant will provide the Cooperative with the working capital needed to accomplish the above tasks. With this grant, the Cooperative has employed a management team and opened an office at One Sugarloaf Street in South Deerfield in conjunction with CISA (Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture). Those interested in learning more about the Massachusetts Woodlands Cooperative should check out the Co-op's website (masswoodlands.coop).