



12,000 ACRES OF PRIVATELY OWNED MAINE FORESTS CONSERVED

Sebago Clean Waters coalition advances protections for the Crooked River headwaters and Portland's drinking water, while enhancing trail access and climate resiliency

Oxford County, ME – December 15, 2021

Maine's forests play a critical role in filtering and supporting some of the cleanest drinking water in the country, as well as securing recreation opportunities and access to nature. These reasons are why a group of conservation-minded organizations, federal agencies and private landowners have been working together in the Sebago Clean Waters coalition to protect thousands of acres of high priority forests in western Maine.

Today, Mahoosuc Land Trust, Sebago Clean Waters, landowners Mary McFadden and Larry Stifler and The Conservation Fund, in partnership with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Portland Water District, announced the conservation of 12,268 acres of forestland in Oxford County. A conservation easement, held and stewarded by Mahoosuc Land Trust on this privately owned property will permanently protect the vast forestland from development and fragmentation, and preserve its ecological, recreational and water quality benefits for the community.

The vision and dedication of married philanthropists Mary McFadden and Larry Stifler spurred the acquisition of this land, known to its owners as Northern Retreat. In the 1970s, the couple started acquiring parcels of forestland in Albany Township with a plan to conserve them for future generations. In a region where forest fragmentation is common, McFadden and Stifler made it their goal to "un-fragment" the property to keep it conserved and available for public recreation, establishing numerous hiking and biking trails designed by Bruce Barrett.

When building out their legacy of land, McFadden and Stifler discovered the rich mineralization of Oxford County, famous for its tourmaline, quartz and beryl. This effort became a starting point for their inspiration to establish the Maine Mineral & Gem Museum in 2012.

McFadden and Stifler donated the vast majority of the conservation easement's value to make this collaborative effort possible and to inspire others. "Our donation on this land was to ensure it will be permanently conserved," McFadden and Stifler said. "We and our three children are also pleased to protect the Sebago watershed and the extraordinary resources and beauty of this area for generations to come. We're excited to share this land with the public and make this statement for conservation."

The landowners worked closely with various nonprofit partners to make this goal a reality. Kirk Siegel, Mahoosuc Land Trust's executive director said, "Western Foothills Land Trust and Inland Woods + Trails jumped at the opportunity to work with The Conservation Fund and our other partners to help conserve the Chadbourne Tree Farm lands last year. The creativity that came out of that partnership is what made it possible to complete this historic project with McFadden and Stifler, while we continue working on conservation of the entire 15,000-acre Chadbourne Tree Farm lands."

Over 7,500 acres of this project are located within the Crooked River watershed, and the easement project is called the Crooked River Headwaters. The Crooked River is the largest tributary to Sebago Lake. The lake is the primary drinking water supply for over 200,000 Maine residents in the greater Portland area and one of only 50 public surface water supplies in the U.S. that requires no filtration before treatment.

The property is located in the territory of the Wabanaki people in what are now the towns of Waterford, Greenwood, Norway and Albany Township. It contains exceptional forests that the landowners have left to mature for 40 years, optimizing the forest's ability to grow and sequester carbon and filter water. The landscape is abundant with critical wildlife habitat and awe-inspiring mountain views, and features nine pristine ponds, approximately six miles of frontage on the Crooked River and intact forestlands that are crucial for local resiliency against the effects of climate change.

Identified as a top conservation priority by Sebago Clean Waters, this property achieves 21 percent of the coalition's goal to conserve 35,000 acres in the Sebago Lake watershed. "This historic project marks a significant milestone in our efforts to conserve Sebago region forests to protect water quality, wildlife and the Maine way of life," said Karen Young, partnership director of Sebago Clean Waters. "It demonstrates the power of collaboration and the collective Sebago Clean Waters vision to inspire action to protect places that are critical to our well-being."

Sebago Clean Waters was able to contribute major funding for this project using a portion of a five-year award from the NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Alternative Funding Arrangement (AFA) program, which was authorized through the 2018 Farm Bill. Spencer Meyer of the Highstead Foundation and co-chair of Sebago Clean Waters said, "NRCS has generously invested in our vision and partnership and we are pleased to be able to kick off a new five-year initiative with such an impactful conservation project working with so many partners."

"This conservation easement is critical in assuring healthy drinking water for the greater Portland area for future generations. It's a great example of the power of partner-driven approaches to conservation and agriculture challenges in Maine," said NRCS-Maine State Conservationist Matt Walker. "Throughout its history, RCPP has leveraged partner contributions of more than \$1 for every \$1 invested by USDA."

Maine's Congressional delegation recognizes the many benefits this remarkable achievement—made possible through the NRCS RCPP award—will offer the state. "Our natural resources are one of our state's greatest assets, and it is incumbent on all of us to safeguard them for the enjoyment of future generations," said Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) and Sen. Angus King (I-Maine) in a joint statement. "Sebago Lake is a critical habitat for fish and wildlife, a destination for outdoor recreationalists and a source of clean drinking water for 1 in 6 Mainers. We strongly advocated for the grant that supported Sebago Clean Waters' purchase of thousands of acres of forest in Oxford County for conservation. This investment will continue Maine's longstanding

tradition of public-private conservation partnerships and protect the long-term health of Sebago Lake's watershed."

"Maine's Sebago Lake watershed is an essential part of Maine's way of life, providing clean drinking water to 200,000 Mainers and supporting countless forestry and outdoor recreation jobs in our state," said Rep. Chellie Pingree (D-Maine), who serves on the House Agriculture Committee. "I'm proud to support this federal funding for Sebago Clean Waters and their partners, which will protect forestland in this vital watershed from development, improve forest stewardship and habitat for wildlife and sequester more carbon. This project is another example of how federal investment can support locally led efforts to meet the goals of Maine's Climate Action Plan."

"Mainers' access to clean drinking water and the outdoors is vital for communities in Oxford County and across the state," said Rep. Jared Golden (D-Maine). "I'm glad to see individuals, nonprofits and the federal government working together to help preserve our state's mature forest and ensure it continues to benefit Mainers for years to come."

The national nonprofit The Conservation Fund responded to the landowner's interest in securing the conservation easement, which includes approximately 1,300 acres of the former Chadbourne Tree Farm acquired in 2019 by The Conservation Fund and its subsidiary White Pine Forest LLC to allow time for permanent conservation solutions. "Protecting these large forest landscapes is one of the most effective strategies we have against climate change right now," said Tom Duffus, vice president and northeast representative for The Conservation Fund. "The foresight of Larry Stifler and Mary McFadden in seeking the permanent protection of this property will have immense benefits in that fight, as well as for our drinking water supply and local economic opportunities. I hope others will follow their lead."

As part of their efforts to conserve the forests that filter the water flowing to the lake, Sebago Clean Waters founding member Portland Water District provided additional funding. Their support was made possible by a loan from the Maine Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Fund.

"Undeveloped forests treat our drinking water naturally and are a critical first step to providing clean, safe and affordable drinking water," said Carrie Lewis, general manager of the Portland Water District. "As the local public water supplier, we are pleased to be able to join forces with Sebago Clean Waters, landowners and others to support conservation efforts like this. We all benefit from clean water."

Funding was also provided by Maine Community Foundation, The Nature Conservancy and Maine Mountain Collaborative, along with additional Sebago Clean Waters funding.

...

About Mahoosuc Land Trust

Mahoosuc Land Trust is an accredited land trust founded in 1989 that has conserved 9,000 acres to benefit the communities of the Mahoosuc region and its globally significant ecosystem in Maine and New Hampshire. MLT welcomes visitors at Valentine Farm Conservation Center, 13 preserves and four Androscoggin River boat landings, and engages hundreds of volunteers each year to care for them. www.mahoosuc.org

About Sebago Clean Waters

Sebago Clean Waters is leveraging the power of partnership to conserve 35,000 acres of Sebago region forests for water quality, community, economic and ecological benefits. Established in late 2017, the 10-member coalition has engaged 10 business partners, secured nearly \$10 million in funding, inspired landowners to conserve over 14,000 acres of high-priority forestland and received national recognition as a model water fund.

www.sebagocleanwaters.org

About The Conservation Fund

At The Conservation Fund, we make conservation work for America. By creating solutions that make environmental and economic sense, we are redefining conservation to demonstrate its essential role in our future prosperity. Top-ranked for efficiency and effectiveness, we have worked in all 50 states since 1985 to protect more than 8.5 million acres of land across the U.S., including nearly 480,000 acres in Maine. www.conservationfund.org

About Western Foothills Land Trust

Western Foothills Land Trust protects farmlands, wetlands, forestlands, unique natural resources and open space in the greater Oxford Hills area of western Maine. The Trust holds conservation easements on privately owned lands and owns working forestlands and preserves in the region. The trust also manages recreational trails on its preserves and collaborates within its community to create healthy opportunities. www.wflmaine.org

About Inland Woods + Trails

Based in Bethel, Maine, IWT has conserved nearly 1,000 acres, and is dedicated to creating permanent protection for recreational trail corridors for economic growth and prosperity by connecting communities through the development, maintenance and promotion of a multi-use recreational trail network. www.woodsandtrails.org

Media Contacts:

Kirk Siegel, Mahoosuc Land Trust, (207) 824-3806, kirk@mahoosuc.org

Karen Young, Sebago Clean Waters, (207) 351-0039, kyoung@sebagocleanwaters.org

Val Keefer, The Conservation Fund, (703) 908-5802, vkeefe@conservationfund.org

NRCS, FPAC.BC.Press@usda.gov

Map & Images: <https://bit.ly/31HJvIQ>