

# INTO THE WOODS

NEW ENGLAND FORESTRY FOUNDATION | SPRING 2026

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## Dear Supporters and Friends,

We're in the midst of a big January thaw as I write this, which reminds me of my favorite time of year just around the corner: sugaring season.

I love the simple labor of making maple syrup. Gathering sap, stoking the fire, and watching patiently as the sugar concentrates and caramelizes in the pan. And I love the idea of the trees, spurred by warm, sunny days, pumping sap from its winter storage in the roots to the end of every twig, swelling the buds, soon to burst forth with another year's coat of leaves.

New England Forestry Foundation (NEFF) is experiencing a similar reinvigoration, and not a moment too soon. We recently learned the USDA has awarded us a \$32 million grant under its new Advancing Markets for Producers (AMP) program. I'm thrilled and relieved by this turn of fortune. Looking back, my outlook in this column was less rosy last spring, when prospects for federal funding were bleak.

I'm also excited to share that we are in the final stages of writing NEFF's first new strategic plan since 2019. Between rapid growth, a change in leadership, and a shifting political and funding environment, NEFF's past five years have been quite a roller coaster. That's why I think it's important to pause, take stock, and ensure we're doing the right things to advance our mission without overtaxing human and financial resources.

Planning began last summer with a comprehensive data-gathering process that included comparisons to peer organizations; an assessment of functional strengths and gaps; and surveys and interviews with NEFF board members, staff, supporters, peers, and partners. The findings were both gratifying and enlightening. On one hand, there was overwhelming respect for NEFF's vision, impact, pragmatism, and unique integration of conservation and forestry. On the other, several interviewees expressed concern that NEFF seemed overextended, which diluted the mission and posed financial risks.

So, what have we made of all this? I don't want to give away too much while the plan is not yet complete, but I can tell you that we've distilled NEFF, our challenge, and our opportunity down to these essential truths:

1. Ecological and human wellbeing are inextricably linked to forests.
2. Forests face numerous and increasing threats, including conversion to non-forest uses, climate change, and invasive pests and pathogens.
3. Sustainable, climate-smart forestry, like NEFF's own Exemplary Forestry approach, has the power to mitigate those threats, but it faces obstacles, including limited awareness and a lack of profitability.
4. NEFF, with increased focus, a healthy bottom line, and working with partners, is uniquely suited to providing solutions to these challenges.

Following that logic, we've identified three key strategies around which the plan is organized: modeling and demonstrating Exemplary Forestry on our own land and promoting it to others; selectively conserving more forests and stewarding those already conserved to the highest standard; and unlocking the economics of sustainable, climate-smart forestry. Remaining steps include developing specific goals for the next five years and an initial implementation plan.

The new strategic plan will be nearly complete by the time you read this, and eventually you'll have a chance to see it yourself. Once you do, I'd welcome your feedback, so feel free to drop me a line at [rowens@newenglandforestry.org](mailto:rowens@newenglandforestry.org). Ultimately, you're the reason we're so well positioned for this exciting time ahead. Thank you.

Ryan Owens  
Executive Director

Front cover photo credit: Lauren Owens Lambert

# LIVING WITH THE LAND

A FAMILY'S LEGACY OF STEWARDSHIP IN TOWNSEND

## WRITING BY

NEFF Marketing Manager David Ayers

## PHOTOGRAPHY BY

Sue West

At the end of a dirt road in Townsend, Massachusetts, an 18th-century farmhouse and red barn open onto fields and woods shaped by generations of use. For more than seventy years, this was home to Edwin and Mary West — a place where daily life, work, and care for the land were deeply intertwined.

When Ed and Mary settled here in 1951, they didn't just move into the farmhouse; they committed themselves to understanding the land's history and rhythms. They sought out former owners, became active in the local historical society, and learned how the fields, woods, and waterways had been shaped by generations before them.

"Our parents conveyed respect for land and wildlife through their daily actions," says daughter Sue West. "They lived lightly on the land and chose sustainable practices before the term was coined."

Year after year, the land was shaped by attention, effort, and learning. Summers were filled with vegetable gardens, native flowers, bees, grapes, and pear trees. Winters revolved around

Christmas trees — balsam fir and spruce that families cut themselves.

"My dad treasured his customers," says son Andy West. "He would remember their faces and call them by name. I have fond memories of marching through the snow with families to help them cut their trees."

For the West children, now grown and with their own families, the land was both playground and teacher. They roamed the fields and woods freely, learning the land's quiet complexity through stone walls, old roads, and shifting forest types.

"I remember the sounds, smells, and sights of high summer especially," says daughter Ginny West. "Fireflies everywhere, the smell of rich garden soil, the call of whippoorwills and barred owls in the evening, and, when everything else was quiet, the soft sound of wind in the trees."

Over time, the family came to understand that their role was not just to enjoy the land, but also to care for it for the long term. In 2006, when the opportunity arose to place a conservation restriction (CR) on the property, Ed and Mary embraced the idea, making a deliberate decision to protect the landscape they loved beyond their lifetimes.



Left to right: Ed West; Ed's sister, Margaret West Laun; Mary West

NEFF and North County Land Trust are current co-holders of the CR.

"It means a lot to me to know that this land will be protected and cared for," says Sue.

After Mary's passing in 2023, the family faced the difficult task of selling the property. In doing so, the siblings shared a common hope: to honor their parents' legacy by finding new owners who would respect both the land's history and its future.

Today, ownership has changed, but the story has not ended. The farmhouse and barn remain, the brook still runs, and the woods continue to grow, bearing the imprint of a family whose care shaped this land for generations. 🌿



Read more West Family stories:

[newenglandforestry.org/  
living-with-the-land](https://newenglandforestry.org/living-with-the-land)



Christmas trees in front of the barn and house



# NEFF RECEIVES UPDATED \$32 MILLION USDA AWARD

The USDA awarded New England Forestry Foundation (NEFF) \$32 million in December 2025 as part of its new Advancing Markets for Producers (AMP) program, which revises and replaces the Climate-Smart Commodities program that was awarded to NEFF in fall 2022. NEFF's AMP project will run through March 2028, and it seeks to incentivize improved forest management on approximately 50,000 acres across New England and to grow markets for regional wood.

The award enables NEFF to fund incentives for New England forestland owners who choose to implement qualifying forestry practices designed to support long-term forest health, ecological integrity, and timber productivity. It also supports NEFF's work with forestland owners, loggers, foresters, forest-products businesses, and wood consumers to improve the productivity of working forests and expand local markets for wood products.

“We are encouraged by the strong and sustained interest landowners across the region have shown in implementing good forestry practices. This award allows us to implement an innovative forestry incentive project to improve the long-term health and productivity of diverse forestlands across the region.”

**RYAN OWENS, NEFF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

## Award Supports Improved Forestry and Expanded Wood Markets in New England

“This renewed funding allows NEFF to continue our work with partners across the region and invest in the long-term health and productivity of New England's working forests,” said NEFF Deputy Director and Climate Fellow Andrea Colnes. “However, the timeline for implementation is compressed, so we'll all have to work together as effectively as possible to take full advantage of the funds available.”



## Forest Management Incentives

The new AMP program provides approximately \$21 million in direct forest management incentives to producers across the region. Currently, 23 larger-acreage forest landowners — with a mix of commercial, private non-profit, and public land — are enrolled with a focus on Maine, but also across New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. Some smaller-acreage landowners are also in the queue across the region, and NEFF encourages more to apply.

NEFF's AMP project also offers support to foresters and logging contractors. Through NEFF's partnership with the Professional Logging Contractors of the Northeast (PLC), logging contractors will have the opportunity to participate in Master Logger Certification programs and workshops that will offer training on a range of forest management and market topics.

NEFF has issued three RFP rounds for enrollment in this program. Applicants have been selected to implement a range of approved forest management practices as researched and defined by NEFF to focus on forest health and accelerate the development of high-quality wood products. Practices range from those that improve timber productivity, like pre-commercial thinning and early commercial thinning, to practices that grow more merchantable and better-quality wood, like planting, crop tree release, and implementing irregular shelterwood. New to forestry? Visit our glossary at [newenglandforestry.org/exemplary-forestry-resources](https://newenglandforestry.org/exemplary-forestry-resources) to learn these terms.

Members of NEFF's forestry team toured landowners' forests in Vermont, Connecticut, and Maine through fall 2025 to assess on-the-ground forest conditions and the suitability of applicants' proposed practices with NEFF's AMP award. What they saw was

a land base that held huge potential for implementing these practices, and forest management staff who were enthusiastic about available funds.

NEFF's forestry team is now working to move projects from the planning phase to implementation. Producers are completing the steps to ensure they remain compliant with federal environmental reviews while NEFF coordinates with federal regulatory agencies to ensure our projects comply with all requirements.



## Market Expansion

AMP supports a market development program focused on linking local producers with consumers of wood — forging strong connections between the landowners, loggers, and mills who produce our wood products and the project developers, architects, and builders that drive demand for wood in the building sector. Through outreach, education, and marketing, this work aims to advance markets for producers by increasing the volume and variety of wood products used in buildings, particularly housing, including increasing the prevalence of mass timber as a structural building material.

Several accomplished partners in the building sector are working closely with NEFF on this part of the AMP program. Wood Works, Leers Weinzapfel Associates, and Spiritos Properties are creating assessments of regional housing needs, as well as new design guidance and building prototypes that will inform how mass timber construction can satisfy that housing need efficiently and cost-effectively.

NEFF now has the funding, in-house expertise, and partners it needs to make an immense difference for New England's working forests — and the people who depend on them. We're excited to share our milestones and lessons learned with the NEFF community as we look to transform both regional wood markets and 50,000 acres of forestland over the coming years. Visit [newenglandforestry.org/amp](https://newenglandforestry.org/amp) for more information. 🌿



Twolined Studio

Planning is underway for educational workshops and events designed to reach building sector audiences with these resources over the coming year, with the goal of inspiring and equipping them with the information they need to do more with mass timber and locally sourced wood in their projects.

The NEFF team has been in conversation with contacts throughout the region to find prospective building projects with a unique story to tell about the use of local wood — with the goal of then publicly and compellingly telling that story. We want to motivate more people to use New England wood products by showing the beauty and warmth that comes from connecting people to place through natural materials. And, in a globalized economy where people can source nearly anything from anywhere, we can increase awareness about our region's incredible resources and the local communities that produce them.

Through the AMP project, NEFF staff will provide wood procurement support for some of these buildings, but they will focus primarily on showcasing these projects through digital storytelling that educates and inspires others to take the same steps with their projects. Part of this work includes leveraging new technology to provide wood supply chain transparency at scale and at lower cost through a recently launched partnership with tech firm Chainparency.

# WESTERN MAINE HABITAT PROJECT ACHIEVES MAJOR SUCCESS

APPLYING EXEMPLARY FORESTRY ON BEHALF OF WILDLIFE

WRITING BY Western Maine Project Manager Christine Parrish

One of NEFF's most impactful initiatives is tucked up in Maine's Oxford, Franklin, Somerset, and Piscataquis counties. In partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Western Maine Habitat Project Team works with family and other private forest landowners to use NEFF's Exemplary Forestry approach to foster forest management that improves and restores native fish and wildlife habitat across this ecologically crucial and beautiful landscape.

## How Does It Work?

NEFF does a lot as team leader, including:

- Building out the project from start to finish and delivering on its goals.
- Recruiting landowners and working with their foresters.
- Collaborating on forest and habitat management planning for enrolled landowners.
- Ensuring each management plan makes its way through state and federal reviews.

Partners, including Maine Audubon and the Maine Department of Inland Fish and Wildlife, provide advisory assistance, while the NRCS provides project oversight, ensuring NEFF's work aligns with federal requirements. They also handle all financial agreements with landowners.

In short, NEFF does most of the work, the NRCS pays most of the bills, and we all work together as a team to fill in the gaps when needed.



Large logs offer numerous habitat benefits but are rare on the forest floor. Large hollow logs like this one near Farmington, Maine, provide protection from harsh weather and predators and are used by frogs, salamanders, mink, fishers, birds, and other wildlife. A "Coarse Woody Material" NRCS Practice/NEFF Exemplary Forestry Practice pays landowners to add large fallen logs to forest stands in high-value wildlife habitat near water. Photo by C. Parrish

## Western Maine Habitat Project Accomplishments

In 2025, NEFF's Western Maine Habitat Team worked with 29 family and non-profit landowners who collectively own 25,318 acres. These landowners signed a commitment to long-term forest management as part of NEFF's project and, with NEFF's assistance, applied for NRCS funding to put that commitment into action.

Ultimately, eleven landowners were approved for NRCS funding for forest management plans, while another seven secured financial support for implementation. To navigate federal constraints related to last fall's government shutdown, NEFF collaborated with the NRCS to redirect some landowners to other funding sources, thus allowing four more landowners to apply for funding in 2025.

Western Maine Habitat Project performance has exceeded expectations. The team has completed tasks ahead of schedule and under budget, and it exceeded acreage targets by a factor of three. Though NEFF initially aimed to have 3,000 acres actively managed by 2028, by mid-2026 we will be on track to have approximately 10,000 acres under active management.

This recent success doesn't capture landowners or acres contracted under an earlier NEFF-NRCS Western Maine Partnership that ended in 2022. These landowners have already implemented forestry based on the NEFF model that supports wildlife habitat on an additional 10,000 acres in Western Maine.

In 2026, NEFF is turning toward analysis of the project to determine economic, social, ecological, and environmental lessons learned over the past seven years. We are particularly interested in the effectiveness of landowner outreach and retention. NEFF has an opportunity to investigate how and why outreach strategies we



Christine Parrish helps lead an Exemplary Forestry field trip focused on improving forest health, productivity, and globally important wildlife habitat. Photo by Twolined Studio

A former Crop Tree Release gave a neighboring tree room and light to grow, while also fostering forest complexity both in the above-ground forest structure and at the forest floor, where lichens and nutrient cycling happens beneath our feet. Photo by C. Parrish

used — including those from business, community organizing, and social services fields — kept landowners engaged through a long planning and NRCS review process in an atmosphere of growing landowner uncertainty about the reliability of federal funding.

Additionally, NEFF staff and Maine Audubon are completing a two-year bird habitat assessment on three properties near Bethel that are managed under Western Maine Habitat Project Team guidance, with findings expected mid-year. This project, funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, will provide baseline data for measuring bird habitat changes due to management practices. NEFF is also collaborating with Inland Woods + Trails to develop a demonstration trail of Exemplary Forestry practices. Details: [newenglandforestry.org/reading-the-acadian-forest](https://newenglandforestry.org/reading-the-acadian-forest)





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