

Creating Jobs and Economic Opportunity Through Rural Destination Development



DESIRED OUTCOME: Expanded economic and job opportunities in rural Maine through a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach to development of marketable Rural Destination Areas where clustered amenities including natural attractions, trail systems, water access, service oriented businesses, transportation infrastructure, and vibrant downtowns attract visitors, businesses and new residents.

RATIONALE: The tourism and recreation industry is an increasingly important complement to the traditional forest products industry in rural Maine – employing one in every nine workers and accounting for roughly 10% of total economic activity in the Maine Woods region that stretches across Oxford, Franklin, Somerset, Piscataquis, Penobscot, Aroostook and Washington Counties.

Research indicates that quality experiences attract high spending visitors and generate quality jobs. Currently, significant private sector leadership and investments in high quality recreational amenities are creating emerging destination “clusters” in the Mahoosucs, High Peaks, Moosehead Lake, Katahdin, Aroostook and Downeast regions. Combined with historically significant public-private investments in conservation, these and other activities are creating important but still untapped opportunity to position the Maine Woods region as a world-class recreation destination.

The state has multiple destination-oriented support programs housed in various agencies including the Departments of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry; Transportation; Labor; and Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. Similarly there are several services available from the non-profit sector.

What is needed is a coordinated approach to ensure efficient delivery of services; leverage private investment and initiative; and deliver timely economic benefits from Rural Destination Areas.

PUBLIC LANDS AS DESTINATION ASSETS: Discussions within the Maine Woods Consortium and Keeping Maine’s Forests groups, have repeatedly identified three important issues related to the role of Maine’s state parks and public reserved lands in rural destination development.

- 1) **Improve Recreational Access** – A majority of recreationists, and particularly important first-time Maine visitors, are looking for easy to find, relatively short outdoor experiences in places with high scenic values. While the state has many recreation assets that potentially fit this category there is a significant need to develop these to meet growing interest and increase the rural economic opportunity of tourism. A recent report from the University of Maine School of Forest Resources places the following resources among the top three non-motorized recreation infrastructure “needs” for each of three population segments (Maine general population, Maine recreationists, non-resident recreationist):

- Easy trails in a natural settings
- Educational/Natural History Trails
- Moderate day hikes in nature

Maine’s state park system partially meets this demand, but would benefit from increased investment. The large land base embodied by the State Public Reserved Lands represents an important, and underutilized, opportunity to expand and improve important recreational infrastructure.

- 2) Reduce Risk of Conflicts with Forest Management – Maine has a long and strong tradition of public recreational access to private lands. Most private forest landowners, though, are highly conscious of the costs associated with public recreational access – both direct costs related to road use and maintaining basic infrastructure, and the indirect impact of common public misperceptions about timber harvesting.

Improving and promoting recreational opportunities on public lands where such use is a clearly defined objective, can help minimize costs and management conflicts for private forest landowners.

- 3) Link Destination Communities to Quality Recreational Assets – While outdoor recreation is an important element of the tourism experience in rural Maine, successful destination areas need to combine easy access to nature with equally easy access to vibrant downtowns that offer shopping, dining, and lodging opportunities. Given limited resources, and the value of limiting impact on private forest management activities, it is strategically important to concentrate investment in recreational infrastructure on parks and public land units proximate to local communities that offer additional visitor amenities – and opportunities to spend money in the local economy.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Given the growing importance of tourism and recreation to the rural Maine economy, and the state’s objective to manage for public recreational, wildlife and timber on Public Reserved Lands, and recreation in State Parks, we encourage the Commission to use available funding to pursue a pro-active and strategic approach to investment in recreational infrastructure built around the following Rural Destination Development considerations:

- 1) Integrate recreation planning into a multi-stakeholder approach to Rural Destination Development – engage with the Department of Economic and Community Development and other public and private stakeholders to identify and prioritize strategic investment opportunities that complement other destination development activities. Many have likely already been identified through the Public Lands Regional Management Planning process.
- 2) Invest in “high need” recreation infrastructure – ensure that recreational development aligns with infrastructure needs identified by the University of Maine School of Forest Resources, Bureau of Parks and Lands, and Maine Office of Tourism (much of which is captured in the State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan). This includes investing in easy to find recreational opportunities on public lands, and improving trail stewardship to make recreational assets more suitable for visitors and reduce maintenance costs.
- 3) Link recreation investments on public lands to nearby service communities – work with DECD and other stakeholders to identify geographic areas where recreation on public lands will leverage economic activity in local communities, and opportunities for joint stewardship and management of public lands. Ensure that visitors to service communities can easily find and use nearby public lands for recreation.

The [Maine Woods Consortium](#) is an independent network of non-profits, businesses and government agencies dedicated to advancing a “triple bottom line” approach to conservation and development in the Maine Woods. Since 2010 Consortium members have worked together to create new and expanded rural economic opportunities through a quality-centered approach to tourism and recreation development. To avoid any potential conflicts, participating state agencies including the Maine Office of Tourism and Maine Department of Transportation have not contributed to the development of the recommendations above.