PRESERVING A MAINE TRADITION

The Maine TREE Foundation has launched a new program to demonstrate landowners’ commitment to continuing the decades-long tradition of public access to Maine’s millions of acres of privately owned working woodlands.

The program, called Project LandShare, identifies land available for public recreation and encourages continued responsible public use of the state’s extensive privately owned forests.

The Maine TREE (Timber Research & Environmental Education) Foundation is a program of the Maine Forest Products Council (MFPC) that sponsors education and communications efforts aimed at increasing public awareness of the many values associated with Maine’s working forest. The MFPC itself is a statewide forestry association based in Augusta that represents over 500 forest landowners as well as loggers, foresters, processors, sawmills and other firms involved with Maine’s timber industry.

MFPC members account for over 11 million acres of working woodlands (more than half the area of Maine), 98 percent of which are open for public use. “We’d like people to know exactly how much forest land is currently open for public recreation,” said Chip Bessey, who as MFPC president spearheaded Project LandShare.

“For generations Maine forest owners, from those with ten-acre private woodlots to large forest management firms, have shared their private lands with the public,” he continued. “It’s a unique Maine tradition that we’re committed to continuing. Project LandShare exemplifies our commitment.”

The program is also designed to foster appreciation that Maine’s working woodlands are managed for timber production, and to encourage people to respect those forests as they would their neighbors’ land, according to Ted Johnston, MFPC executive director. “The MFPC,” he said, “hopes Project LandShare will encourage people to be mindful of the potential damage caused by on-road and off-road vehicle use, camping and campfires, trash disposal and other aspects of forest recreation.”

Recreational uses like hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, snowmobiling and cross-country skiing are compatible with managing land for timber production, said Johnston. “We’re reminding people to use common sense when enjoying the woods, like not stopping their cars in the middle of a logging road, or hunting around forest operations,” he said.

More people are recreating in Maine’s productive woodlands than ever before, according to Roger Milliken, chairman of the MFPC’s Multiple Use Committee. Rising public use, he said, is the result of two developments. First, modern forest industry practices have opened millions of acres to public use that were inaccessible in years past. “In the old days, logs were run down rivers to mills,” said Milliken. “Today, roads are used to get to the timber, and they provide easy access for the motoring public. Recreational use is pervading the woods like never before.”

The second development is a heightened public demand for forest experiences and outdoor adventure. Said MFPC President Bessey, “The cost of maintenance for recreational use can be substantial for owners of woodlands, particularly those with small- to medium-sized tracts.”

That expense, he said, gets added on to the already high costs of managing and harvesting working woodlands. And that makes responsible public use of those forests vital.

“We appreciate the vast majority of people who respect managed woodlands and exercise care when using them,” said Bessey. “Project LandShare is our commitment to keeping woodlands open for the public to enjoy.”

Maine Fish and Wildlife Commissioner William J. Vail applauded this program, calling it “just the type of private effort that is needed to improve relations between landowners and land users.” Vail added that “the long-term issue of public access to private land can best be addressed through a cooperative approach involving state and local governments, private landowners, and the land users.”

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