

CHANGING LANDOWNERSHIP IN THE NORTHERN FOREST: EFFECTS ON BIODIVERSITY

John M. Hagan¹, Andrew L. Whitman¹, and Lloyd C. Irland²

¹Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences, 14 Maine Street, Brunswick, ME 04011

jmhagan@ime.net

²The Irland Group and Yale University, Wayne, ME

For most of the 20th century, private landownership in the Northern Forest of New York and northern New England was relatively stable. The roster of major owners included the leading forest industry companies in the Fortune 500, financially strong companies with leading positions in their industries. Indeed, these companies had been founded in this region, one of the culture hearths of modern papermaking in North America. Industry growth began to slow in the late 1980s and by the 1990s, the industry was facing slowing demand growth and stiff competition on all fronts. In a period of about two decades, the landownership picture in the Northern Forest has been dramatically re-arranged. As of early 2005, there remain no major U.S. publicly traded paper and wood products companies owning more than nominal acreages in this region.

This ownership shift gave rise to serious public concerns about the future of undeveloped landscapes across the region. One concern is the effect of new ownership conditions and management practices on biodiversity. Funded by the National Council on Science for Sustainable Forestry, we are conducting a preliminary study of this issue. We compiled a detailed database of land transactions larger than 5000 acres since 1980. We then interviewed sellers and buyers of a sample of properties to see how management practices may have changed.

Preliminary results are available. First, we recognize that the shifts in landownership may not yet be finished, and many changes in management occur slowly and are not yet visible. Also, many of the changes in use of properties, especially at the smaller end of the size spectrum, took place in response to growing demand for exurban lands, and would have occurred even had there been no change in ownership by the large companies. Mere totals of lands sold are misleading, because for many of the larger sales, only minimal changes in ownership and management occurred. Also, we are finding it difficult to devise a convincing classification of owners by economic situation and motives. The situation is often too ambiguous and fluid for that. Many of the largest ownerships consisted of clusters of towns in diverse areas and were not tightly blocked up. When the pieces are sold off to separate buyers, as occasionally occurs, actual fragmentation of contiguous tracts may not occur. Finally, the process of ownership change has led to significant gains in public ownership and conservation group ownership, especially for easements.