

[SB.549](#) / [HB.1005](#) **An Act investing in natural and working lands**

Sponsored by Senator Jo Comerford and Representative Joan Meschino

Only by harnessing the power of nature can Massachusetts reach Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions goals

THE CHALLENGE

Since 1970, Massachusetts lost over 600,000 acres of forest, bringing our state's forest cover down from a peak of 3.5 million acres (68% of MA) ([Harvard Forest](#)) in 1970 to 2.9 million acres (56% of MA) ([MA Climate Report Card](#)) in 2021. More recent data from the MA 2023 Climate Report Card calculated that "forest land, the largest component of NWL and a primary indicator of the state's carbon storage and sequestration capacity, declined by 15.2 thousand acres between 2016 and 2021, with losses averaging 3.0 thousand acres per year." **The loss of this much forest has a tremendous impact on the ability of our natural and working lands to sequester and store carbon, among many other benefits.**

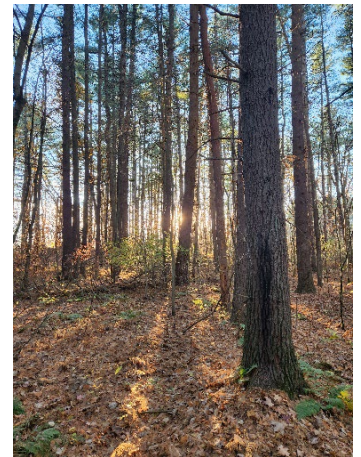
THE SOLUTION

The NextGen/RoadMap Law directed the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs to:

- Measure the carbon stored by and released from natural and working lands,
- Set a numeric goal for reducing carbon emissions and increasing the carbon sink on our lands,
- Create a plan to reach that goal, and
- Enact policy and funding changes needed to make it happen.

In the same way that the Commonwealth has emissions reductions targets, **the Commonwealth should have a goal of not losing forest lands and farmland.** These **natural and working lands provide myriad benefits**, such as promoting social equity and healthier communities by mitigating air pollutants, capturing stormwater, enhancing water quality, increasing shade cover, reducing energy costs, and providing respite and recreation in natural areas. Smart land use and natural climate solutions also weave a **fabric of resilience through our communities** to help withstand the impacts of flooding, drought, and extreme temperatures.

Natural and working lands play an essential role in a comprehensive strategy to tackle climate change. In addition to immediate cuts in fossil fuel use, we must remove carbon pollution already in the air. **Natural climate solutions are currently the only technology that can do so at scale and at cost.** This bill is needed now to launch innovative policies, programs, and incentives to realize this carbon gain. Investments made today will accrue greater climate benefits into the future.



Massachusetts Land Status as of 2025

5M ACRES: 28% conserved, 25% developed, 47% undeveloped and unprotected

STATE GOALS: 30% conserved by 2030 and 40% conserved by 2050

60+ % FORESTED: absorbs 11% of MA-generated CO₂ @ 7MMT/year



WHAT THIS BILL DOES

This bill would ensure that state law and state agencies work to preserve forests and farms while respecting local land use and planning authority. The bill would require the Commonwealth to place a value on forest lands and farmland for the totality of the services they provide, including their contributions to the fight against climate change.



Amends the state's existing greenhouse gas and climate change laws (Chapter 21N)

- Requires the Commonwealth and its agencies to advance the **mission of preventing the degradation and loss of natural and working lands and wetlands**.
- Requires EEA to **adopt GHG sublimits for natural and working lands**.

Establishes a local opt-in program under EEA called Natural and Working Lands Friendly Communities

- **Incentivizes municipalities to make land use and planning decisions and bylaws** that further the state's overall goal of preventing the loss of natural and working lands and wetlands.
 - Sets **eligibility requirements** to include municipalities developing a natural resource protection zoning ordinance (analogous to the Green Communities Program).
 - Requires EEA to **provide technical and financial assistance to municipalities** that qualify for the program to finance the costs of studying, designing, and implementing the local ordinances and bylaws required by the program.
- **Requires the state to track the cost, participation rates, and results of the program** for the 5-year emissions reduction reports required by the Next Generation Climate Law.

Provides payments to communities for nature's services

- Instructs EEA to coordinate with the Department of Revenue to provide members of the program a **higher rate of reimbursement under the state-owned land PILOT program**, as well as an annual credit for each agricultural preservation restriction in the municipality.
- Requires **recurring reviews of incentive rates paid for land conservation**, including PILOT payments, and specifies that rates should adjust with the value of the land and further the goals of preventing the loss of natural and working lands and wetlands.

Establishes thresholds for state permitting

- Directs the state's **Environmental Policy Act office (MEPA) to determine a review threshold that would be scaled for different environments**. Projects above this threshold that engage in a certain level of conversion of natural and working lands and wetlands would be required to undergo an environmental impact review.

For more information, please contact:

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