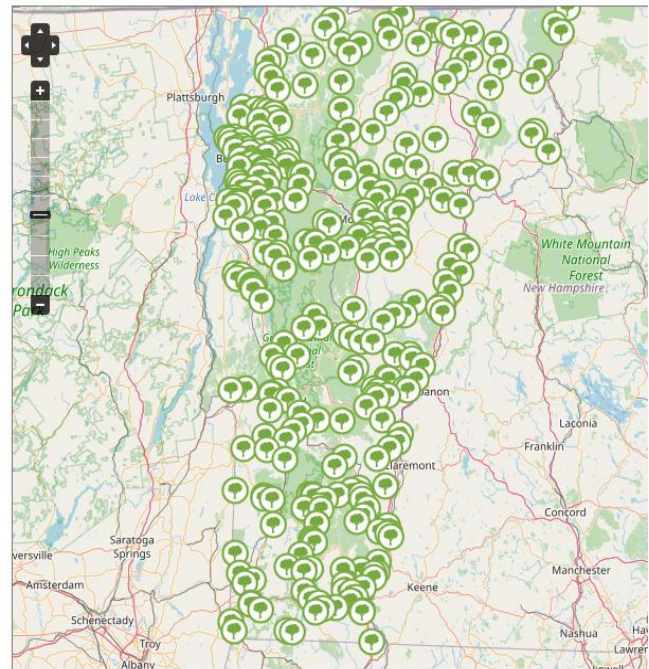# Vermont Town Forest Census for Covid, Carbon, and Capacity-Building

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Project Abstract

Town forests contribute to forest integrity, ecosystem services, and community well-being, and they can serve as models of sustainable forest management and conservation for diverse goals to family forest owners. Town forest acquisitions often add strategic pieces to regional conservation strategies to counteract the growing fragmentation of the Northern Forest and help sustain the forest products industry.

Many communities, however, find that managing these parcels can also bring challenges, as communities try to accommodate diverse public demands with limited resources. Town forests are identified in the Vermont Forest Action Plan as a priority landscape, and public and private initiatives in recent years have sought to build capacity of communities to meet the challenges.

Researchers have identified several needs hampering these efforts: lack of a complete inventory and key contacts for town forests, inadequate public maps and information on town forests, and uneven knowledge of community needs. This research project helps fill these gaps while asking novel questions about impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and potential for forest carbon markets to help finance stewardship activities. NSRC researchers with deep knowledge of town forests will provide a complete inventory of community forests in Vermont, a census of Vermont town forests that can be repeated in the future, an updated database with public interface, and an interactive, publicly available map. These products will enhance efforts to bolster the ability of communities to steward their forest resources to produce benefits that extend beyond their borders.

Current online map of Vermont Town Forests, which this research project will help redesign and update.

Progress in 2022

In 2022, the PI and co-PI Kate Forrer met regularly to review findings from previous town forest surveys (by Northern Forest Center and VT Urban and Community Forestry Program), review available contacts, and plan for expanding the contact list needed for a full, statewide town forest census. The PI worked with the Andrews Town Forest Committee, Richmond Racial Equity and two Abenaki tribes to better understand the key issues regarding land acknowledgements, indigenous use rights and meaningful role in town forest governance from Abenaki perspective. This work contributed to revisions of draft questions

for the town forest census and the identification of capacity-building needs. Review and deployment of the survey was delayed due to staffing challenges and changes described below.

Problems or Changes

This project had several personnel changes which slowed the project but is now back on track.

Plans for 2023

We will hire the graduate student in summer 2023 and an undergraduate summer research intern to catch up on project tasks and help the graduate student hit the ground running in the fall. In particular, we need updated information for the sampling frame, which builds upon the earlier governance survey. We will convene the advisory committee to review the draft of the census, solicit input from Abenaki tribes and the VT Land Trust, and finalize database structure, storage. and access. We plan to build out the project website and have a survey ready to deploy by the end of the year. Collection of census responses may continue into 2024, as we anticipate the need for repeated contacts to solicit responses from all municipalities with forests.

Andrews Community Forest, a town forest in Richmond, VT.

Collaboration

This project complements USFS-funded work led by the state to assist local municipalities in Vermont with town forest governance.