



External Advisory Committee for the Northeastern States Research Cooperative 2026 Summary Report

Virtual meeting on April 22, 2026

Meeting and report organized by NSRC Team members: Margaret Fergusson and Elise Tillinghast (facilitator)

This report documents feedback from members of the 2026 Northern States Research Cooperative External Advisory Committee (EAC) during a two-hour virtual meeting held on April 22, 2026. The meeting included facilitated discussion and polling results. In addition to reflecting participants' comments during the meeting, this report also incorporates comments during the drafting process.

Information in this report is organized as follows:

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I. NSRC EAC Charge

The charge of the External Advisory Committee (EAC) for the Northeastern States Research Cooperative (NSRC) is to inform the NSRC Executive Committee about the priority issues facing forest stakeholders in the Northern Forest region and to provide guidance to the NSRC Executive Committee for crafting the 2026 Request for Proposals (RFP) in response to broader stakeholder interests and needs.

II. 2026 External Advisory Committee Members

Jennifer Ballinger, Tribal Relations Specialist, Northern Research Station & Forest Products Laboratory, U.S. Forest Service

Donna Cassesse, Forest Industry Consultant

Jackie Dagger, Program Manager, Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative

Patrick Duffy, Regional Director, WoodWorks

Savannah Ferreira, Forest Health Specialist, Forest Biology Lab, Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation

Patrick Hackley, Director & State Forester, New Hampshire Division of Forests and Lands

Cortney Koenig Worrell, Executive Director, Adirondack Mountain Club

William Martin, Assistant Director, Wood Products Group, U.S. Forest Service

Jeremy Miller, Regional Technical Manager, American Forest Management

Ellen Parent, Deputy Director, Maine Forest Products Council

Ian Prior, Director of Inventory and Planning, Seven Islands Land Company

Lisa Sausville, Executive Director, Vermont Coverts Woodlands for Wildlife

John Sinclair, Forest Supervisor, Green Mountains & Finger Lakes National Forests, U.S. Forest Service

Jasen Stock, Executive Director, New Hampshire Timberland Owners Association

Kenneth Zwick, Assistant Director, Forest Products Laboratory, U.S. Forest Service

III. Overview of Meeting Structure & Opening Remarks

The meeting was co-hosted by Margaret Fergusson, who provided guidance as well as technical support, and Elise Tillinghast, who served as facilitator. At the start of the meeting, following brief self-introductions by EAC members, there were welcoming remarks by Northern Research Station Acting Director John Rothlisberger and Northern Research Station Assistant Director of Research Deahn DonnerWright. NSRC Executive Committee members Aaron Weiskittel and Anthea Lavallee and NSRC Management Committee member Margaret Fergusson offered guidance on, respectively, the EAC's charge and history, feedback from the previous year's EAC members, and the basics of the NSRC grantmaking process and timeline.

In their welcoming remarks, Rothlisberger and DonnerWright emphasized the NSRC's important role for identifying high value issues for regional forest stakeholders. They also requested feedback on how research at experimental forests could support U.S. Forest Service priorities. Rothlisberger provided an overview of the U.S. Forest Service's eight "Back to Basics" priorities for the 2026 fiscal year, which include:

1. Safety
2. Wildfire readiness & response
3. Active forest management
4. Minerals & energy development

5. Disaster recovery
6. Recreation access & infrastructure
7. Deregulation & organizational efficiency, and
8. Partnerships & cooperative federalism.

Weiskittel briefly described the charge and history of the EAC and explained the purpose of a reference to digital forestry in this year's appropriation language. He explained that this term could include a range of decision support tools and other technology that have the potential to modernize or otherwise enhance forest-related work. Fergusson shared an overview of the logistics and timeline for NSRC grant making. Lavalley provided a recap of the 2025 EAC report, including the list of goals and priorities identified in that report.

Following these remarks, all participants except for Fergusson, Tillinghast, and the 2026 EAC members exited the meeting.

The remainder of the meeting was devoted to a wide-ranging discussion of northeastern forest-related research priorities. Tillinghast used these questions to prompt discussion:

1. What topics should be added or emphasized from the 2025 RFP?
2. What topics should be removed or de-emphasized from the 2025 RFP?
3. What are significant concerns, issues, or opportunities for northeastern forest stakeholders?
4. What are useful areas for research investment?
5. What kinds of technology would be helpful for forest stakeholders/should be a focus for research? (This prompt reflected the reference to digital forestry in the appropriation language.)
6. How should experimental forests factor into the NSRC grant making process? (This prompt reflected the request by John Rothlisberger and Deahn DonnerWright.)

IV. Key Discussion Themes

Most of the discussion connected to one or more of the following five themes:

Theme #1: Healthy and resilient forests and healthy wood markets are interdependent.

Without markets for low-grade wood, many foresters, landowners, and other forest managers have less financial leeway to pursue non-economic forest management goals such as wildlife habitat enhancement, aesthetic improvements, trail development, and invasive species treatment. Likewise, the forest industry relies on its access to sustainably grown forests that are resilient to climate change effects and other stressors.

Several EAC members expressed concerns about the decline of commercial uses for low-grade wood, especially as paper production has dwindled and there has been public pushback against biomass uses for heat and electricity. "If we can't find the markets for these low-grade products then we can't practice the silviculture that we really want to see...In the Northeast we run on tight margins. We don't have the value they have in the western U.S. or even the southern U.S., so it's very difficult economically to make things work."

EAC members pointed to several unmet needs to maintain and grow a regional wood market, including: the renovation and/or development of lumber mills and other infrastructure for wood processing; the development of new products that use low-grade wood, small diameter trees, and/or underutilized tree species (engineered timber and grease-resistant paperboard were specifically mentioned); enhanced marketing of regional wood products (both to the public and to people in the construction trades); and workforce development.

Workforce development concerns encompassed several forest-related professions including forestry, logging, trucking, and manufacturing. EAC members noted that the scarcity of workers impacted not just the forest industry but other forest-related sectors including outdoor recreation services, management, and land stewardship. “Who is going to manage the forest in the future is really a question for the entire forestry and conservation community. If we want healthy forests...we have to have people to do the management.”

Theme #2: Climate change is a pervasive and continuing challenge that requires continuous learning and adjustment. Severe droughts and forest fires are likely to occur with greater frequency.

Although for the most part, the discussion did not focus on climate change as an isolated topic, there was general acknowledgement that climate change considerations affect a broad range of forest-related decisions and activities. “Understanding better ways to assess climate change, to report on it, to have support on the trend of where we’re going in the future, and what it means for the forest in terms of species adaptation, species changes, all that sort of stuff is going to be of growing importance.”

EAC members discussed the growing risk of forest fires in the Northeast, connecting this risk in part to severe droughts. Questions raised in this context included: what are the most high-risk combinations of factors for ignition in northeastern forests? What are the risks from and to recreational forest users, and what are the opportunities for recreational forest users to help reduce these risks and build resilience? What species are fire adaptive? What forestry practices should change in response to fire risks and more frequent fire events? How can fires be used as a tool for forest management? What insights do Indigenous fire management practices offer, and how may these practices themselves need to adapt over time?

Theme #3: The post-Covid rise in outdoor recreation on both public and private forest lands requires thoughtful management to minimize impacts. This trend also offers significant potential benefits including opportunities for education and engagement.

What appears to be a permanent increase in recreational forest use in the wake of the Covid pandemic obligates recreation groups and forest managers to put more effort into managing impacts (for example, trail damage, safety issues, and harm to habitats, plants, and wildlife). There will be an ongoing challenge for public and private landowners, including tribes, to respond to public demand for access.

There are also potential benefits to this trend that merit exploration. For example, the presence of more people in the woods may lead to opportunities to cultivate greater public appreciation and

understanding of forests and forest uses, including regional wood production. Engagement of recreational users as forest stakeholders could provide benefits to other forest interests; for example, trails adjacent to sugaring operations could help support maple syrup producers.

Theme #4: The rapid spread beech leaf disease and emerald ash borer infestations will have profound impacts on forest health, wildlife habitat, and wood markets.

The rapid spread emerald ash borer, combined with the spread of beech leaf disease and the ongoing damage from beech bark disease, will likely create “aftermath forests” depopulated of mature white ash and beech trees. This change will have profound and hard-to-anticipate impacts on forest health, for example, on forest tree species composition, understory plant composition, mast supplies, and habitat for wildlife. There will be a flush of snags and downed wood on the landscape; this wood could present new product opportunities but may become a source of significant costs for landowners and land managers as well as present a significant carbon loss from the forest, safety hazards, and fire risks.

Theme #5: Communication about forests is challenging. There is a need for more robust and effective messaging, information sharing, and leveraging of existing networks.

EAC members described a variety of communications needs, including: messaging to help people understand the connection between healthy forests and healthy forest economies, coaching of forest stakeholders to communicate with peers and others in an effective and empowering way about forest issues, engagement of landowners to understand the benefits of multi-purpose active forest management, education of recreational users and engagement of these users in land management discussions and decision-making, sharing of past NSRC research results with forest stakeholders both directly and through peer-to-peer networks, promoting interest in regionally produced wood products and new wood products, engaging forest stakeholders in dialogue about recreation and public access, education of forest stakeholders about the value of recreation planning and management to reducing challenges, sharing Indigenous knowledge, promoting awareness of forest industry-related career opportunities, and recruiting a broad-based applicant pool to apply for NSRC grant opportunities (including students in programs related to low-grade wood product development).

Several process-focused suggestions related to this theme, including prioritizing NSRC proposals that emphasize communications plans, inviting research on effective messaging, and inviting studies of existing forest-related communications efforts and information sharing networks that could be duplicated, better used, or supported.

V. Additional issues

Several other issues surfaced during the meeting and report drafting process:

- Spruce budworm (a native tortricid moth caterpillar) is a major concern for the forest industry. The insect has already reached outbreak levels in Canada, and rising populations pose a significant threat to spruce and balsam fir stands, especially in Maine.

In addition to economic losses, widespread tree death from outbreaks may contribute to fire risks.

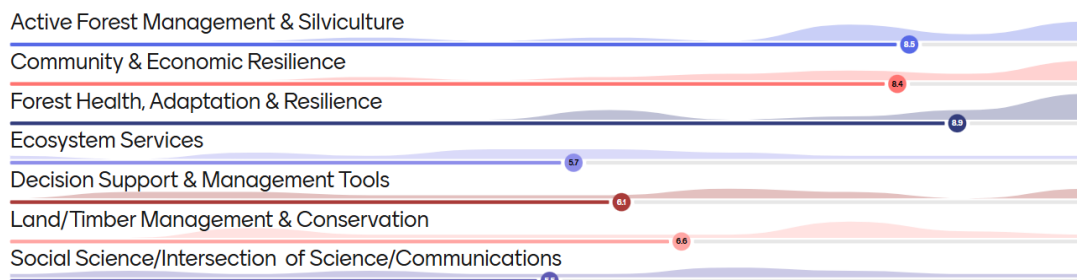
- Forestry certification standards require reporting monitoring and mitigation for climate change, but there is often inadequate information to support the reporting process.
- Declines in the forest industry (especially mill closures) have negative, long-lasting impacts on rural communities.
- The challenge of anticipating what words may offend political sensitivities and scrubbing those words from grant applications and websites is a burden; grant applicants should not be penalized for use of words such as diversity, equity, etc.
- Research opportunities may exist to coordinate work at more than one experimental forest site.
- Workforce development could be a challenging research topic that would, “require a concerted outreach effort to more specialized research organizations and practitioners of vocational or professional training/skills development to be successful. Without a strong commitment to bring in these types of actors, I don’t know how much new info/ideas research efforts on the workforce development topic would generate...”

VI. Straw Poll Results

EAC members voted in a straw poll that reflected both 2025 EAC recommendations and comments from this year’s meeting. The results indicated three top focus areas for future research, listed in order of preference:

1. Forest health, adaptation, and resilience
2. Active forest management and silviculture
3. Community economic resilience

These focus areas were ranked based on 1-to-10 scoring, with scores in all proposed areas shown below. In reviewing poll results, EAC members acknowledged that these categories overlapped, and that research proposals were likely to fall within multiple focus areas.



In a second straw poll, EAS members ranked specific research priorities, again choosing among options that merged last year’s priorities and this year’s discussion. As shown below, “wood products innovation & market development” scored as the clear top priority, with ‘invasive species & forest pests’ and “land use & sustainable forestry” tied for second place. Again, EAC members noted the interconnectedness of the poll options.



VII. Special Issues: Technology & Experimental Forests

This year, in addition to its general charge, the EAC was asked how NSRC grants could connect to two special issues:

- (1) Digital forestry, including decision support tools and other technology that have the potential to modernize or otherwise enhance forest-related work
- (2) Experimental forests

The EAC did not offer many suggestions in either category.

Digital forestry

One person offered a specific recommendation related to the gap between the needs of engineered wood products and the technology that lumber mills use. He noted that upgrading mills to provide different (smaller) sizes of stock would reduce engineered wood production costs and promote markets for low grade and small-diameter wood.

“There are technologies that are being utilized in Canada and Europe that are more able to efficiently select board sizes from trees,” he noted. “In the U.S. our standards are two-by-four, two-by-everything...however, in the engineered wood products field, we don’t need everything to be in a two-by form. We can utilize technology to remove smaller, less high-value trees from areas and produce high-value wood products from those trees.” In terms of a research project, he recommended research that focused on the benefits of implementing existing technology as means to encourage regional wood markets.

Experimental forests

One person noted that outside of the region, experimental forests have provided valuable information on the way that termites, mold, and fungi impact wood quality. As climate change affects the movement of termites and other species, there may be value in expanding these studies to experimental forests in the Northeast. A second EAC member suggested that there may be mechanisms to add points or provide a boost to NSRC proposals that incorporate experimental forests as partners. “That is something that I would advocate we do,” he said.

Another EAC member suggested that experimental forests can also serve as silvicultural demonstration sites to showcase different management strategies and the effects of long-term treatments. “People are afraid to do things on their own properties,” she said. “Any place that we can demonstrate some of the practices that we would like to encourage is really important.”

In a follow up note after the meeting, one person suggested establishing research plots across several experimental forests to increase the scope of research. “Each experimental forest is typically in a specific region, with specific forest conditions. Replicating research in different forests may provide a broader perspective on any applied research being proposed. Think of these unique forests as a network, and how to leverage the diverse forest conditions found across each of these forests and how they are related.”

EAC members also noted several concerns with focusing on experimental forests. Research priorities identified by the group, especially the strong interest in promoting regionally sourced wood products, did not appear to be compatible with collaboration with experimental forests. Experimental forests are not present in Vermont and New York, and two people noted that collaboration with other research forests, including those managed by state universities, can also be valuable.

VIII. Recommended Focus Areas and Priorities

The following list of focus areas and priorities is a synthesis of the feedback described above, recognizing the need for a limited, targeted research agenda. In terms of the U.S. Forest Service’s “Back to Basics” priorities, the list addresses: safety, wildfire readiness & response, active forest management, recreation access & infrastructure, and partnerships.

Focus Areas

1. Forest Health, Adaptation, and Resilience

Research should focus on understanding our changing forests with an emphasis on forest health, adaptation, and resilience. This includes predictive research on forest responses to climate change effects such as drought and fire, as well as the impacts of invasive and native pests and diseases.

2. Active Forest Management and Silviculture

Research should focus on forest management practices that promote one or more of the following: forest adaptation and resilience related to climate change, forest adaptation and resilience related to invasive and native pests and diseases, sustainable wood production, and accommodation of increased recreational use.

3. Community and Economic Resilience

Research should support community and economic resilience by focusing on opportunities to promote sustainable regional wood markets. Topics may include wood product development, workforce development, commercialization opportunities, market expansion opportunities, and technological or infrastructure improvements and innovations.

4. Communications

Research should focus on communications strategies that align with one of the three other focus areas and empower well-informed decision-making.

Priority Issues

1. Wood products innovation and market development

Research innovations in regionally sourced forest products and the development or expansion of sustainable wood markets. Emphasize innovative commercial uses of low-grade wood, small diameter trees, and underutilized species. Focus on improvements and innovations in wood processing infrastructure, including changes to facilitate the efficient production of new wood products. Emphasize strategies that enhance economic benefits of sustainable forestry practices.

2. Workforce development

Research recruitment practices, training programs, incentives, collaborations, and communications strategies related to workforce recruitment for forestry, logging, trucking, and manufacturing. Focus on strategies that include benefits for rural communities and promote awareness of the connections between forest health and viable forest economies.

3. Sustainable Forestry

Address issues related to sustainable forestry practices, including practices related to climate change adaptation and resilience, fire prevention and recovery, invasive pests and diseases, and impacts and opportunities resulting from increased recreational use. Research may explore strategies for balancing diverse management needs and for information sharing with landowners, other key decision-makers, and the public.

4. Invasive Species and Forest Pests

Study long-term impacts of beech leaf disease, beech bark disease, and emerald ash borer infestations on forest biodiversity, health, and resilience. This priority may also include research on innovative early detection and response strategies to address these threats and spruce budworm outbreaks.

5. Land Use and Forest Recreation

Study practices for managing forest recreation, including strategies for providing access to public and privately owned forests while ensuring safety and respect for natural resources and property rights, including tribal reserved and treaty protected rights. This priority may also address communications strategies, strategies for partnerships between forest managers/operations and recreation managers/trail organizations, and other strategies for engaging forest recreationists in forest stewardship activities and other beneficial forest-related activities.

6. Biodiversity and Connectivity

Focus on preserving biodiversity through the maintenance of intact habitat and connectivity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.

7. Climate Change Mitigation

Focus on research that supports the fulfillment of forestry certification requirements related to reporting monitoring and mitigation for climate change. This priority may also include the development of wood-based products that serve as more climate-friendly substitutes for other products.

8. Drought & Fire

Focus on research that helps forest managers anticipate and address the impacts of severe drought and fire in northeastern forests. This research may address drought and fire impacts on different species, management strategies for helping forests to adapt to these threats, risks for ignition, and strategies to minimize harms to forests and people.

9. Fire as a Tool for Management.

Focus on research related to the use of fire as a forest management tool. This priority may include a focus on Indigenous fire management practices, including strategies for adapting those practices over time in response to changing climate conditions.

IX. Additional Recommendations

- Emphasize timely and impactful results. Prioritize research that will deliver rapid, practical findings and empower people to make better informed decisions related to forest management and forest resources.
- Prioritize research proposals that in their content or collaborators, represent interests and perspectives that are under-represented in research awards. As part of this consideration, give special consideration for proposals that include more collaborators with limited capacity, who may have been under-represented in past rounds of NSRC grants.
- Emphasize communication. Prioritize applications that support effective communication about forest-related issues beyond academic and government audiences, including to land managers and/or the public.
- Prioritize technological innovations and applications of established technology for new uses.
- Promote collaboration. Prioritize research that leverages information and resources from experimental forests and other research forests, universities, forest stakeholder groups, and other potential partners.