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**Conservation Grants Boost Land Protection in Cross-state Region
*Blue Sky Award Honors MassConn Sustainable Forests Partnership***

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WALES, MA, January 30, 2018: The MassConn Sustainable Forest Partnership, a regional coalition of land conservation organizations serving 39 towns in south central Massachusetts and northeastern Connecticut, is advancing land protection in the region with the support of two grants totaling \$145,000 from the Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust. The first award of \$100,000 in 2017 led to the creation of the MassConn Regional Conservation Fund, which in its first grant cycle supported four land protection projects totaling 472 acres of land. As one of its closing gifts, the Cox Trust recognized the innovation and momentum exhibited by the MassConn collaboration with one of two “Blue Sky Awards” of \$45,000 announced at the 2017 RCP Network Gathering in Nashua, NH.

“The [MassConn Regional Conservation Fund](#) created with the seed grant from the Cox Trust fosters the donation of land of ecological importance to local land trusts and supports private landowner’s investment in their community,” said Ed Hood, MassConn’s coordinator and also the Executive Director of the Opacum Land Trust based in Sturbridge, MA.

While communities benefit from permanent conservation of land, the process of donating land has significant costs, primarily in the form of surveys, legal fees and other expenses associated with the transfer of land to a qualified conservation organization. The Cox Trust provided a total of \$1.1 million in funding to promote innovation and the direct conservation work of Regional Conservation Partnerships such as MassConn across New England, with emphasis on reducing transaction costs.

The first round of grants from the MassConn Regional Conservation Fund was announced in November 2017, going to four projects that will permanently protect 472 acres of land. Recipients of this funding include the East Quabbin Land Trust for an 85-acre project in West Brookfield, MA; the Minnechaug Land Trust for a 33-acre project in Hampden, MA; the New England Forestry Foundation for a 310-acre project in Stafford, CT; and the Opacum Land Trust for a 44-acre project in Wales, MA. Each grant recipient is committing its own time and resources to implement their conservation projects, with funding from the MassConn Regional Conservation Fund going to cover the transaction costs of surveys and other related expenses.

“As an all-volunteer organization serving Wilbraham and Hampden, the Minnechaug Land Trust depends on the generosity of those who support our work to permanently protect critical open space,” said Sherry Himmelstein, President of the Minnechaug Land Trust. “This gift from the Cox Foundation allows us to protect sensitive land that borders Minnechaug Mountain Conservation Land on two sides, enhancing an important local treasure.”

“The Northern Connecticut Land Trust (NCLT) greatly appreciates the work of MassConn and the New England Forest Foundation to protect the 310 acre forested area in Stafford, CT. The Stafford property is strategically located abutting 93 acres of forest owned by the land trust,” said Jim Gage, treasurer of NCLT, a seven town regional conservation organization with a mission to preserve the natural resources of the northern Connecticut region including agricultural land and other ecologically important open space.

In late 2017, the Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust completed 35 years of charitable giving to several sectors, including environmental protection (www.gmafoundations.com/cox-trust-closes-philanthropy). Michael Hill, the President of the Jesse B. Cox Charitable Trust, notes that the Directors of the Cox Trust wanted to do something significant as they retired the Cox Trust. Using the remaining funds from the Cox Trust grant program for Regional Conservation Partnerships, they awarded two organizations with a final “Blue Sky Award” of \$45,000 each to continue their especially innovative conservation work. The High Peaks Initiative of the Appalachian Trail Land Trust in Maine and the MassConn Sustainable Forest Partnership were the recipients of this award.

“The MassConn Steering Committee is still exploring its options for using this award, with the goal of maximizing this investment from the Cox Trust for regional land protection,” said Hood. “Everyone can help by supporting their local land trust. The rural character and fragile environment of our region are under threat from sprawling development and the impact of climate change – in a generation, much of our remaining wildlands and woodlands may be lost if we don’t act now to protect important parcels of land today.”

MassConn, one of 42 Regional Conservation Partnerships in New England, developed in response to the “Wildlands and Woodlands” vision for regional forest conservation developed by Harvard Forest (www.wildlandsandwoodlands.org) and with support from the Highstead Foundation (www.highstead.net). Highstead worked with the Cox Trust to use the grant program to advance the entire field of collaborative regional conservation.

“These awards from the Cox Trust are strengthening and diversifying the tools Regional Conservation Partnerships use to help individuals and families permanently conserve their land. This strategic approach to collaboration is inspiring a new era of community-based conservation, and paves the way for future innovation in land protection,” says Bill Labich, Senior Conservationist for Highstead and coordinator of the RCP Network, who serves as an advisor to MassConn,.

Supported by, and based at the Norcross Wildlife Foundation in Wales, Massachusetts, the MassConn Sustainable Forest Partnership helps to coordinate regional conservation activities and secure funding to protect and enhance the forested landscape in south-central Massachusetts and northeastern Connecticut. In 2016 and 2017, MassConn partnered with local, regional and national partners to provide 25 public programs on sustainable forestry and conservation options for private landowners, reaching more than 300 individual participants. MassConn is a lead partner with the Last Green Valley and the Northern Rhode Island Conservation District to implement a five-year Regional Conservation Partnership Program that will provide over \$12 million in support for sustainable forest management practices and working forests conservation.

For more information on the MassConn Regional Conservation fund, please go to <http://www.opacumlt.org/massconn/rcf/>. To find your local land trust visit Connecticut Land Conservation Council (<http://www.ctconservation.org/>) or Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition (<http://www.massland.org/>).

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