



**Rensselaer Plateau Alliance**  
***Rensselaer Plateau Regional Conservation Plan***

**Forest Products Industry Meeting**  
**June 7, 2012**  
**Pineridge Cross Country Ski Area – 6:30 PM**

## **Meeting Summary**

### **I. Public Presentation**

This was the third in a series of stakeholder meetings to be conducted in May and June as part of the development of the Regional Conservation Plan. Forest products industry representatives - loggers, foresters, large timberland managers, industry association leaders, sawmill operators, etc. - with interests around the Rensselaer Plateau were invited to attend this stakeholder meeting. About a dozen people attended the meeting which was facilitated by Behan Planning and Design. Michael Welti from Behan Planning and Design gave a PowerPoint Presentation that started with an introduction to the Plateau, the RPA, and the purpose and process for preparing the Regional Conservation Plan.

Following this introductory discussion, the focus of the presentation turned to specific areas of research for the plan - study of the Plateau's natural areas and an analysis of the economic importance of the Plateau. The natural area's discussion focused on the extensive inventory work being done on the Plateau's flora and fauna and how that work will be presented in the plan. The economic discussion highlighted the preliminary results of two studies that are being prepared as part of this project - the economic impacts for select industries operating on or near the Plateau, and the economic value of ecosystem services on the Plateau. The first study looked at the number of jobs and the fiscal impacts of several industries such as food services, forestry and tourism. The second study estimated the economic value of natural systems on the Plateau by analyzing how they offset the need for engineered solutions to environmental issues - for example how much would a water treatment system cost to treat X gallons of water in lieu of the natural water treatment provided by Y acres of wetlands on the Plateau.

The remainder of the presentation focused on some of the preliminary ideas that are being considered for inclusion in the conservation plan document. In addition to the background and the natural and economic information, the plan will have a section about the history of the plateau, a section describing the future of the plateau in the context of sustainability, and a section that will serve as a "Guide for Decision Makers". This section will provide a "toolbox" for landowners, municipalities and other organization and agencies to use to advance the goals of the plan. Finally the plan will contain an implementation or "next steps" section highlighting what the RPA and other involved groups can do to help move the goals of the plan forward.

### **II. Open Discussion**

During and following the presentation, attendees were invited to provide feedback and ask questions about the topics being presented. Two questions, provided to focus the discussion, were offered at the end of the presentation:

- In terms of the ideas presented this evening - what questions, concerns, suggestions do you have?
- How can the RPA and this plan be helpful to you? How can the plan assist in:
  - Assuring that the resources for sustainable forestry are maintained?
  - Providing strong markets for local forest products and strengthening economic reasons for continued stewardship of the forest?

The following is a summary of the discussion that occurred both during and following the presentation.

- **Comment:** The construction industry should be included in the analysis of the economic impacts of selected industries on the Rensselaer Plateau.
- **Comment:** Most thought that the annual economic impact number for the forest products industry on the plateau was somewhat low.
- **Comment:** Mining/Quarrying Stone - we shouldn't judge the importance of this industry by the estimated jobs supported. There was a question about what is included in the numbers - for example, are truck drivers considered in the jobs supported numbers?

**Response:** We can ask Brian Zweig about that.

- **Question/Comment:** What about windmills and hydroelectric - are there opportunities to do more of this on the plateau? Opportunity to offset the cost of land ownership (taxes) so that landowners can keep forest undeveloped. Would think that the wind resource might be good in some locations. Not so sure about the streams - most don't have very consistent flow.
- **Question/Comment:** Question about the Economic Value of Ecosystem Services Study - in particular, what is included in determining the value of habitat services? How were the economic values of non-market ecosystem goods and services determined in the original studies used here?

**Response:** We can follow-up with Sarah Parks regarding the details about that. There is, of course, much more information in the actual report which can be found on the RPA website ([www.rensselaerplateau.org](http://www.rensselaerplateau.org)). The study report does include a discussion about the limitations of this type of analysis; but it should also be recognized that the study is intended to provide an idea of the general magnitude of the economic value of ecosystem services provided by the plateau - approximately \$300 million each year. It offers another way of thinking about the value of the Rensselaer Plateau to residents here and to others in the much larger region that the plateau impacts.

- **Comment:** The Empire State Forest Products Association has also conducted economic studies as part of its work - for example, a recent study found that about 7 to 8 jobs are supported per 1,000 acres of forestland in NYS. He will send us a copy of this study so that we can incorporate their findings in our work.
- **Question/Comment:** Would it be possible for us to determine the number of harvestable acres on the Rensselaer Plateau? Removing state parklands or areas of environmental constraint (riparian corridors, etc.) - how much timberland is there?

- **Discussion:** Regarding the NYS 480-A program - why is it not more popular with landowners? What is not working?
  - One concern is that landowners don't want to be told what to do with their land. However, it was noted by another participant that this is a misconception - forest management plans are created based on the landowners goals for the property.
  - Participation in the program does require the landowners to lock-up their options for several (9 or 10) years - withdrawing from the program early results in stiff penalties. Requires landowners to consider their long-term goals if they are going to sign-on to the program.
  - The Empire State Forest Products Association has several legislative initiatives underway that are intended to make this program more useful for landowners and, therefore, more successful at conserving forestland in NYS. Some of these initiatives were briefly summarized.
  - It was noted that it can be difficult to get local municipalities to agree that this (making the tax incentive program more effective) is a good idea - in these cash-strapped times, local governments are not eager to further limit their revenue. That is a political reality that impacts the legislative initiatives.
  - One difference between the NYS program and the programs in Vermont and Massachusetts is that in those states the forester must work for the landowner.
- **Discussion:** about the tension that sometimes exists between loggers and foresters - who decides which trees to harvest?
  - It was noted that these are not/should not be competing jobs - foresters and loggers can work together.
  - Loggers sometimes feel insulted by foresters, though it is not meant to be an insult.
  - It was generally agreed that there is a need to cooperate - get the message out that we need to work together.
- **Comment:** Maybe we need more small companies making wood products here - more people to sell would to. Mentioned the Amish example in western NYS.
- **Comment:** At some point, the forest cannot sustain the tax burden. People cannot afford to keep their land in forest because the value to timber (and the length of time it takes to renew) cannot keep up with the rising costs. Also, wealthier residents who move into the area from downstate are not always aware of the need to manage forestland - "working forest is like a garden".
- **Comment:** Subdivisions of larger lots into smaller ones (such a narrow, deep "spaghetti lots") can be problematic - makes it difficult to manage the forest resource. Cannot log efficiently on these smaller lots and need to work with multiple owners to bring together several to make it worthwhile.
- **Comment:** Hunt club leases, allowing recreational access to certain groups/clubs - these are other ways for landowners to generate income to offset the cost of taxes. Could be tools to suggest to landowners to help them keep their land undeveloped.
- **Comment:** Wind Farms - there probably will be some opportunities for these on the plateau in the future. Claimed that the state limited local home rule with regard to wind

farms through legislation last year. Income to landowners from such facilities could help the forest stay forest.

- **Comment:** Regarding tax incentives - state and local government should recognize that in addition to encouraging the protection of the forest resource, such incentives are also valuable because they conserve open space, provide places for recreation, etc.
- **Comment:** Back to the NYS 480-A program - New York State's program is definitely more complicated than the programs in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. New Hampshire and Maine's programs are the easiest to work with. Importantly, they are based on the landowner's plans/goals for their land.
- **Comment:** From the Empire State Forest Products Association standpoint, the best/fairest property tax assessment programs in the country are based on the land's ability to produce income (rate proportional to productivity of the land - soils and aspect). Similar to the agricultural assessment program. This would eliminate the need to tax incentive programs such as 480a.
- **Comment:** Succession Planning - important for individuals and for businesses to plan properly in order to avoid estate taxes. Most people don't think about this until they are too old or too sick. How to manage your estate? RPA can help provide information.
- **Question:** What is the average age of a large (forest) landowner on the plateau?
  - It was stated that for NYS as a whole, the average age of a large forestland owner is 91. (There was some questioning of that figure)
- **Comment:** From a young landowner - he likes to manage his land. Does not like being told what to do with his land - some people from the state are very set in their ways.
- **Comment:** A lot of people here have good relationships with their local officials. You do not see that everywhere in New York State. Those relationships between landowners and town officials need to be maintained. The Empire State Forest Products Association, in their work around the state, sees many adversarial relationships between large land owners and towns. Here the towns seem to understand and value the importance of forest management and the landowner's important role as stewards of their own land. This is positive - helps to maintain sensibility in terms of local laws. Don't want local government to make it harder to do business. Things like local harvest ordinances can be a real problem in some communities around the state.
- **Comment:** Perhaps a value of this plan is that it could be used to address SEQR - a comprehensive look/approach to forest management on the plateau. In some parts of the state, logging applications are reviewed under SEQR on a project by project basis. Should not have to do this - too costly and cumbersome.
- **Comment:** Another thing that people on the plateau really value are the scenic views. Landowners like this about the landscape.
- **Comment:** It was suggested that kids today are not out on the land as much as they used to be. It's important to get kids into outdoor activities such as hunting and fishing - fresh air and appreciation for the forest.

- **Comment:** One thing that might be useful for a logger - more information about things like the rare plants, etc. that are being identified through this study. Should provide private landowners with the findings of these studies as it pertains to their land. They might want to know what is special about their property. Most landowners want to do the right thing and would want to be aware of these things. That could be a real value of this plan.

**Response:** It was noted that one idea that has been discussed for the plan would be to make David Hunt, or other ecologists, available to walk with landowners (at the landowners request) to show them the ecological resources on their property.

- **Comment:** In terms of the business question...raising awareness about the forest products industry is great; but not sure how the plan can help build local businesses.

**Response:** Perhaps a "buy local" campaign for retail products produced here.

- **Question:** How are we going to pay for this? How can you do things like provide tax incentives without shifting the tax burden to somebody else? If local governments still have to provide services, reducing the tax on some landowners will result in increasing the tax on others.
- **Comment:** This forest is still intact despite all of the development that has occurred in the region.
- **Comment:** Concerned about good intentioned programs turning into nightmares (i.e. Adirondack Park)
- **Comment:** Bringing more people to the plateau is fine but those people do not always respect private property. Need for education.
- **Comment:** The Empire State Forest Products Association has advocated for a better assessment system in New York State. Our current system is a problem - other states have done a better job of this. Because our assessment system is so flawed, we institute all of these various open space programs which, as was mentioned, end up shifting the tax burden. Need a fairer assessment system but it is very difficult to get state representatives to even initiate this conversation.
- **Comment:** It was also noted that local assessors do not utilize a consistent approach. It's different in every community.
- **Comment:** Taxes are what increase the development pressure.

Are there things that the RPA can get out in front of?

- **Comment:** Perhaps something like a right-to-farm law? Could have a local "right-to-forestry" law. Without a state program - an initiative of the towns.
- **Comment:** Concern that if we tell the towns that timber has value they will want to tax it.

**Response:** The importance of RPA's work with the towns was pointed out again - the local towns do understand the value of the forest products industry.

- **Comment:** Concern about the numbers indicated in the economic impact study - \$9 million looks like a big number on that chart. But it is not that much when you consider all of the forestland on the plateau. The industry is important but it is not wealthy. It is also undergoing very difficult economic times.
- **Comment:** Land is equity, but it is only realized when you sell - this is true for agricultural land and for forest land (land rich, cash poor)
- **Comment:** It was also noted that people's connection to the land is important - they have to wait a long time to get money out of it. Forest is renewable but it takes time.
- **Comment:** Estate planning takes time. Has been working on this for two years - trying to make it easier for the next generation to take over. It is a real concern.
- **Comment:** Should explain to people who come to the plateau to hike or for other recreational purposes that what loggers and foresters do is a good thing for the land.

### **III. Adjournment**