

Suckfish Brook Conservation Area

Management Plan

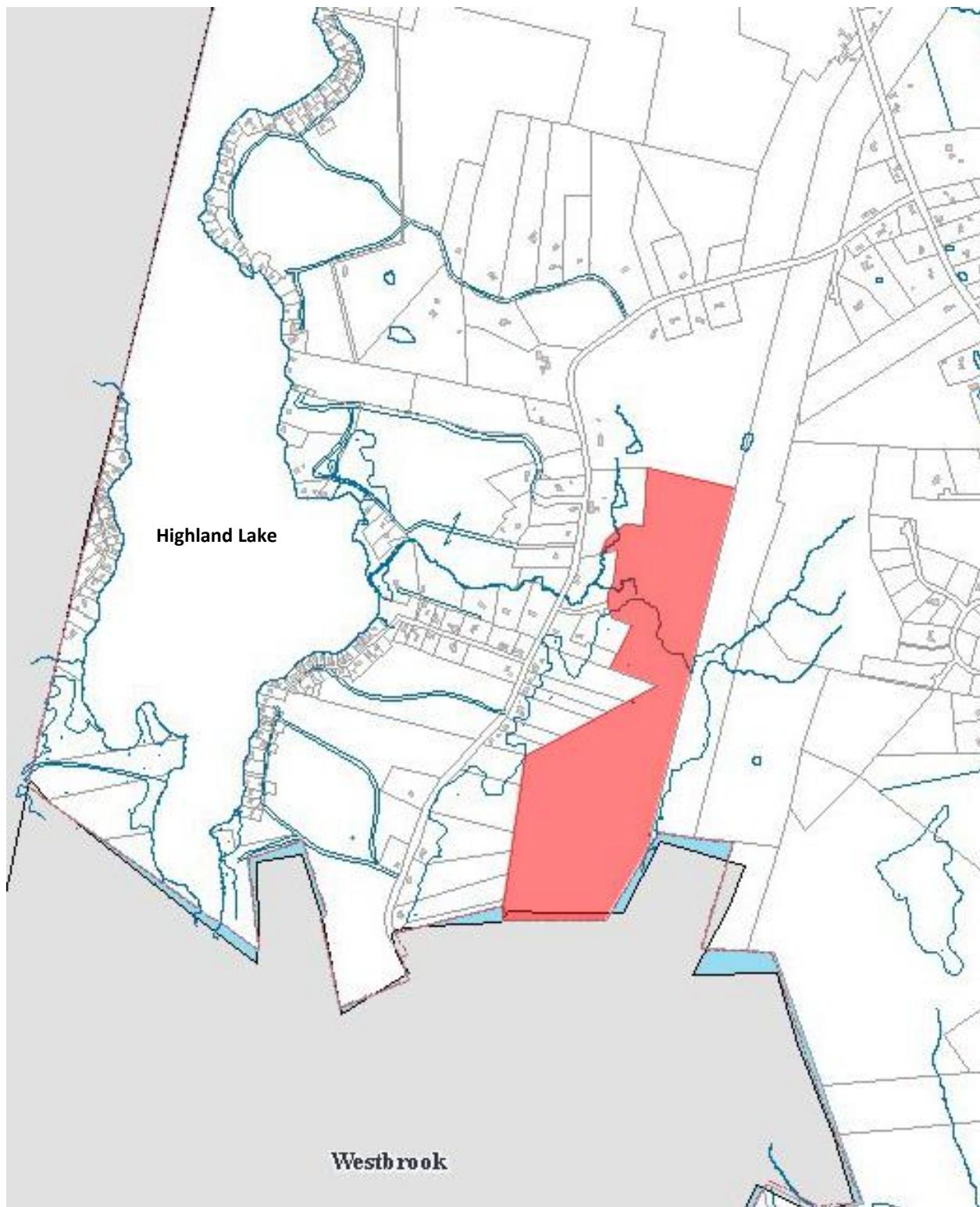


Town of Falmouth
March 2012
Revised January 2013

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Maine Natural Areas Program Survey	Appended as a separate file

Map I: Location



I. Summary

Suckfish Brook Conservation Area is one of the most diverse and interesting conservation properties the town owns. The freshwater wetlands, and the diverse plant and animal populations they host, are the most salient features of the property.

Suckfish Brook offers a rich experience to visitors who seek a personal connection with nature. Once a trail system is constructed on the property, it will offer an excellent recreational opportunity for hikers, snowshoers, geocachers, birders, cross country skiers, and others interested in natural history.

Since much of the precipitation that falls on the western side of Blackstrap Ridge between Hardy and Mast Roads flows through the wetlands, the property does much to protect the water quality in Highland Lake, Mill Brook, Presumpscot River and Casco Bay.

If circumstances permit, abutting properties should be added to this conserved area if they become available, especially the 38-acre parcel to the south of the property.

II. Description

Suckfish Brook Conservation Area is a 93.7-acre property located between Blackstrap ridge and Mast Road. It is permanently protected by a conservation easement held by the Falmouth Land Trust.

The property is composed of two lots, R09-048-001 and R09-055, and was acquired in 2012 with funding from the Maine Natural Resources Conservation Fund, the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership and the town of Falmouth.

The parcel is bordered by a Central Maine Power Company utility corridor to the west and privately owned land on the other three sides. The property includes access to Mast Road via Upland Way, and deeded pedestrian access from Mast Road to the south end of the property.

The most prominent feature of the property is its ±3.7 acre beaver pond and extensive emergent and peat bog wetlands. The latter is a unique community in Falmouth, populated by plants and animals only found in such an ecosystem. The northern portion of the property is upland hardwood forest. These unique wetlands made the property a high priority for acquisition as part of the town's open space plan.

Upland Way, a paved private way, provides access to a parking area that will be established in the summer of 2012. A woods road continues from there across Suckfish Brook and up to the utility corridor. This road is highly eroded over much of its

length and will be restored in the summer of 2012. Access to the lower end of the property is gained through a trail easement over private property abutting Mast Road.

A complete description of the property, prepared by the Maine Natural Areas Program, is appended. The boundaries of the property have been flagged by the surveyor and will be marked with town boundary signs this winter. There is a highly eroded woods road that crosses Suckfish Brook and connects the utility corridor to Upland Way, but otherwise there are no existing trails on the property. There are two large cast iron culverts in the brook that allow passage across the brook. A stonewall on the northeast corner of the property is the only remaining evidence of its past use as farm and pasture land.

Historically, this property and the land surrounding it were owned by the Huston family and a Huston family cemetery is located just beyond the northeast corner of the property. The original Huston settler was a Crown forester and Mast Road derives its name from the prevalence of King's pine trees that grew in the area in the Colonial period.



This monument to the Huston family is located just beyond the northern boundary.

White pine trees are still found, mostly along the eastern border. So too are pitch pine, black spruce, eastern hemlock and various deciduous species, particularly in the upland portion. These include red maple, red oak, white oak, American beech, and gray birch.

Invasive species are not a problem, but a small patch of *Phragmites* is located along the utility corridor boundary and some buckthorn and one knotweed plant can be found in the area near the beaver dam. The *Phragmites* likely got established as a result of the soil disturbance that occurred when the natural gas line was built along that corridor. An

uncommon poisonous plant, poison sumac, grows in the wetland area on the perimeter of the bog.

The pond was created as a result of a large beaver dam built on Suckfish Brook, above the road crossing. Several smaller dams are located in the brook as well. The brook itself, an important tributary of Highland Lake, should be inventoried by IF&W to determine what fish species live there.

III. Conservation Values

The conservation values being protected in the Suckfish Brook Conservation Area include:

- The large block of unfragmented habitat it provides for wildlife species that live and breed in the area, particularly in the wetland portions of the property.
- The watershed protection the property contributes to surface and groundwater quality. By moderating run-off and absorbing rainfall and snowmelt, and by buffering non-point pollution sources, the property contributes to the water quality of Highland Lake, the Presumpscot River, and Casco Bay.
- The aesthetic value such a large block of undeveloped property offers area residents.

IV. Visitor Experience

Suckfish Brook Conservation Area is one of the most ecologically unique conservation properties the town owns. Peat bogs are rare in this part of Maine and their flora and fauna largely unknown to lay people. Thus, it offers the visitor an opportunity to experience the beauty and diversity of the bog community.

Visitors to the property should have the opportunity to observe and identify native plants and animals. They should also be able to think and reflect in a quiet setting without disturbance.

This is accomplished by limiting the amount of available parking to 3-4 cars maximum at either access point and by a trail network that spreads visitors out around the property.

V. Easement Provisions

The entire Suckfish Brook Conservation Area property is protected by a conservation easement held in perpetuity by the Falmouth Land Trust. The terms of that easement include:

- Public access and trails are permitted.
- The property may be used only for conservation, non-intensive outdoor recreation, and forest management activities.



What appears to be a stream is a heavily eroded woods road that must be restored as a condition of the grant that paid for most of the property.

- No industrial, residential, quarrying, mining, large-scale commercial groundwater extraction, peat removal or building development activities are permitted.
- The property may not be sub-divided.
- Minor recreational structures are permitted (kiosks, observation platforms, trail bridges). All other structures are prohibited.
- Forest management is permitted if done under the terms of a forest management plan.
- Herbicides may be used to control invasive plants.



This beaver dam across the brook has created a large pond on the property.

VI. Management Goals & Activities

The primary management goal is to preserve the ecological integrity of the various wetlands located on the property while simultaneously providing limited human access to this unique ecological area through a network of pedestrian trails.

Specific management activities to be undertaken include:

- Restoring the eroded woods road north of the beaver pond.
- Posting the boundaries of the property with signage.
- Developing a trail plan for the property that extends into adjacent properties and possibly links to Blackstrap Hill Community Forest / Preserve. That plan will include appropriate signage, kiosk, and parking locations.
- Developing a forest management plan for the wooded portions of the property, particularly the upland forest.
- Widening the shoulder of Mast Road at the lower end of the parcel to permit safe trailhead parking in that area.
- Constructing a parking area at the end of Upland Way to facilitate safe access from the northern end of the property.
- Assessing the potential for containing the *Phragmites* population along the border with the utility corridor. Control other invasives as found.
- Conducting an in-depth inventory of the flora and fauna found on the property by means of a BioBlitz.

Recreation

Trails need to be constructed on the property, along with a parking area and signage. Trails might also be extended to abutting undeveloped properties to the north, east and south. A raised walkway into the bog on the southern end of the property would provide visitors with an up-close look at the flora and fauna living there.

Once trails are built, the access road should be plowed after snowstorms to allow for winter access to the property.

Hunting & Trapping

Hunting and trapping are allowed on the property. Signs notifying visitors of these activities will be posted at the trailhead kiosk in season.

Education

Public educational events should be conducted on the site, sponsored by Parks & Community

Programs and the Falmouth Land Trust. Other organizations, such as Maine Audubon Society and the Biodiversity Research Institute may also use the site for programming.

Forestry

Selective harvesting on the 39-acre upland hardwood forest portion of the property some decades into the future would help retain this particular habitat type (this is one of the few pure hardwood stands found on town conservation properties). All other areas of the property should be left forever wild. A forest management plan needs to be developed for this area.

Stewardship

As the easement holder, the Falmouth Land Trust has the legal obligation to monitor the property to insure it is being managed according to the terms of the easement.

The Ombudsman has overall stewardship responsibility for the property, but a volunteer steward(s) needs to be found to monitor the condition of the trails, parking area, etc. on a periodic basis.

VII. Future Opportunities / Plans

The property lies squarely within one of the *Greening of Falmouth's* target conservation areas, areas in which 250 or more acres of unfragmented habitat can still be preserved. The property to the north, ±40 acres in size, is currently in the Tree Farm program. Should the family ever consider placing an easement on that property or selling it outright for conservation purposes, the town should be prepared to act. To the east, across the utility corridor, 54 acres owned by Skillins Greenhouses are used as a Christmas tree farm. Skillins is willing to allow public access via trails on the property, but is not interested in permanent protection at this time.

Since the peat bog portion of the property extends into the town of Westbrook, there is an opportunity to protect this portion of the bog as well. Conservations have been initiated with the Presumpscot Land Trust to try and interest them in acquiring and protecting this property.

Another ±22-acre parcel, across from Mast Road on the Westbrook boundary, is also available. It contains several vernal pools and might be a good candidate for a mitigation grant.

VIII. Budget Summary

The budget to attain the management goals for this property is as follows:

Raised bog walk (w/access trail)	\$10,500
Parking area	4,000
Kiosk/signage/blazes	700
South end trail	<u>2,500</u>
Total =	\$16,700

IX. Long-term Management Issues

Until the property is developed to create trails and permit public access, there are no long-term management issues at the present time.

As on other properties, trail structures will be built with pressure treated lumber with an expected lifespan of 15-20 years. Blazing and You Are Here kiosks will likely need replacing in 10-15 year intervals. Should funding be found for a bog walkway, it will be built with aluminum dock sections on metal posts. Its expected lifespan will be 30 years or more.

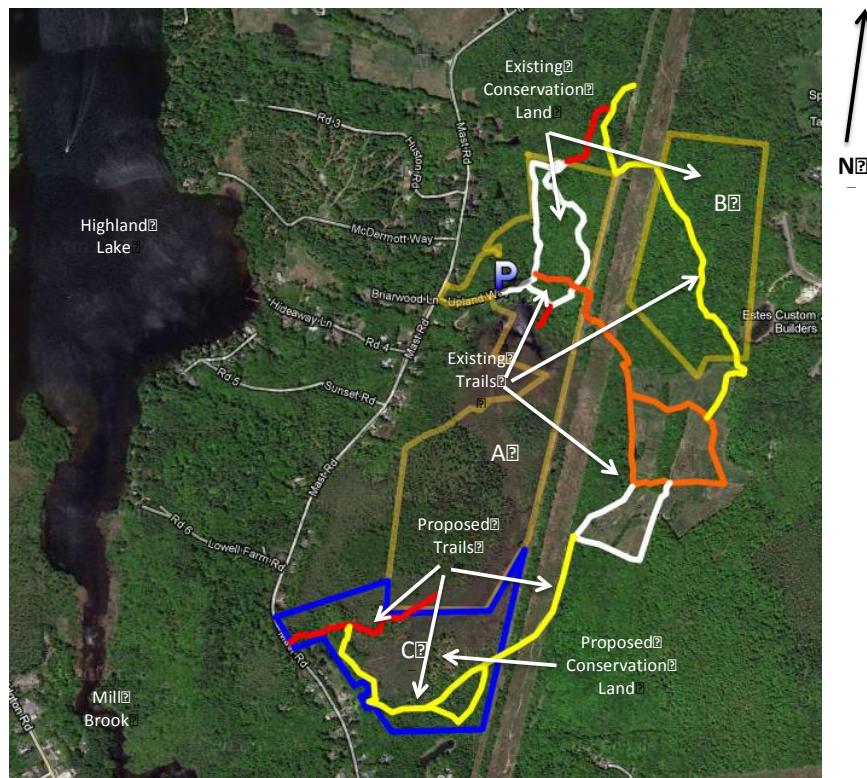
Few water crossings will be needed, but replacing the bog bridge will be moderately expensive.



This old stonewall attests to the fact that this area was once farmland.

Table I: Summary of Management Tasks						
Goal	Task	Action Steps	When	Who	Cost	Other
<i>Create a trail network on the property, with associated parking, signage, etc.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Determine the location of the proposed trails on the property. Get permission of adjacent landowners to locate trails on their property (Hilfrank, Skillins). Get DEP permit. Construct trails, kiosks at trailheads, parking areas, etc. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> GPS trail locations. Get DEP permit. Raise needed funds. Construct trails. Construct kiosks, post signage, blazes, etc. Construct parking area. 	Summer 2012 Summer 2013 Summer 2013	Ombudsman, Falmouth Conservation Corps	\$14,000	Major cost will be raised trail beds over the bog.
<i>Develop forest management plan.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Get funding and expertise needed to create the plan. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Acquire Project Canopy funding for a plan. Contract with a forester to create the plan. 	2014	Ombudsman	\$1,500	
<i>Delinete property boundaries and post access point with appropriate signage.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Post the boundary with signage. Erect property identification signs at both ends of the property. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Organize a Conservation Work crew to do this work. 	Spring - Winter 2012	Ombudsman	\$300	Funds available from town management account.
<i>Institute a long term monitoring plan for the property.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Find a Land Trust member to steward the property on a regular basis to monitor trail conditions, boundary encroachment, signage, vandalism, invasive plants, unauthorized uses (e.g., ATVs), etc. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Land Trust will identify a steward willing to serve both processes (done). 	March 2012	Land Trust and town staff		Dan Foley, an abutter, has volunteered to take on the stewardship role for the trails. Mila Plavic will be the FLT steward.
<i>Pursue protection of the remaining bog land in Westbrook.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Meet with landowner & Westbrook officials. Develop funding proposals. Secure \$\$, close the deal. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Set up meetings. Write funding proposals. Secure \$\$, close the deal. 	Ongoing until successful.	In process. Ombudsman, Westbrook planner.	\$85-95,000	A 2 nd MNRCP grant will be applied for, along with CBEP & foundation funds.

Map I: Suckfish Brook 2013 Existing & Projected Trails

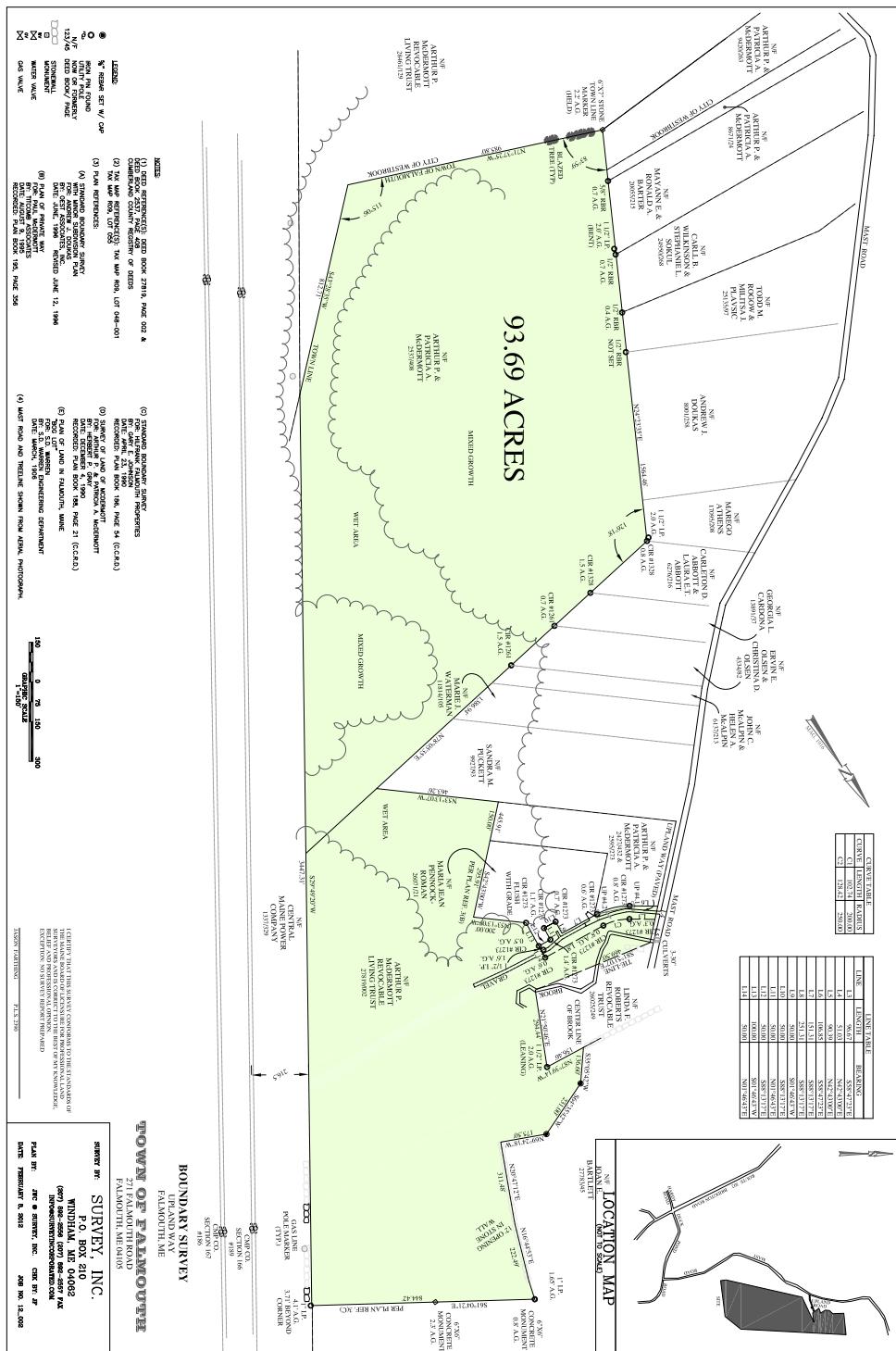


A - Duckfish Brook Conservation Area (existing)

B - Falmouth Land Trust Conservation Area

C - Proposed Acquisition Property (outlined in blue)

Parcel Survey



Initial plan developed March 2012
Revised February 2013

Approved by the Land Management Team: _____ (date)

Approved by Parks & Community Program Director: _____ (date)

Approved by the Town Manager: _____ (date)

Approved by the Town Council: _____ (date)

2013 Progress Report

February

A great deal has been accomplished since acquiring this property in March, 2012. Most notably, an extensive trail system encompassing it and abutting properties has been established, including a parking area, kiosk and appropriate signage (see Map II). Much of this work was done as part of Jay Lessor's Eagle Scout project during the summer of 2012. In the fall, trails were extended to the Hilfrank property to the north and Skillin's Tree Farm and the Stone Ridge subdivision conservation land to the east. As a result, there are now over three miles of trails that originate at the parking area, including expansive views of the Presidents from the upper edge of Skillin's tree farm.

Town and DEP permits have been acquired to build a raised walkway into the bog at the southern end of the parcel. A Recreational Trails Program grant has been written to acquire the needed financial support. If successful, work on it will commence in the summer of 2013.



The eroded woods road was restored in October 2012. With Maine Natural

Resource Conservation Program funds, the eroded woods road has been completely restored and runoff diverted in such a way as to eliminate the cause of the erosion problem. Annual reports monitoring the condition of the restored area must be submitted to the Program by December 31st each year until 2016.

The city of Westbrook has shown a strong interest in protecting the 38-acre property that contains a lot of the bog land and other high value habitat and an agreement has been reached with the owners to acquire the property.



A second MNRCP grant was unsuccessful this year, but \$55,000 has been raised from the city of Westbrook and the Casco Bay Estuary Project. Other grants have been written to obtain the balance needed to acquire the entire property. Failing that, there will be sufficient funds available to acquire the 30 acres of wetlands. In this scenario, the other 7 acres of upland will be lost to development.

Once acquired, the property will be managed jointly by Falmouth and Westbrook, with Conservation Corps volunteers building and maintaining trails on both the Westbrook and Falmouth parcels.

Fishery biologists from the Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife surveyed Suckfish Brook in August. The results revealed a healthy brook trout population and the presence of juvenile largemouth bass, pickerel, yellow perch, catfish, and bluegill sunfish. Not found were any minnows, or white suckers, the namesake fish of the brook. Trout fry were also found, indicating that that species is reproducing in the stream.

The Biodiversity Research Institute conducted saw-whet owl banding operations on the southern end of the property in the Fall of 2012. They caught and banded 48 saw-whets in three nights of banding. Maine Audubon and the Wild Bird Center have also made the area a destination for bird watching trips.

July

The RTP trails grant was awarded and the entry trail to the southern (Westbrook) end built, including the elevated bog walk.

Funding has been secured to purchase the entire 38-acres; sale of the property should close by mid-September.