
Name of Organization: The Nature Conservancy

Type of Organization: Other

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Project Title: Landscape-Level Conservation on the Tug Hill

Project Category: Habitat (Ecological) Protection and Rest

Rank by Organization (if applicable): 1

Total Funding Requested (\$): 48,900 **Project Duration:** 1 Years

Abstract:

Located just east of the eastern shore of Lake Ontario, the 200,000-acre core forest of Tug Hill is a hotbed of biodiversity. Tug Hill is the source of 11 different rivers, including the Salmon River, East Branch of Fish Creek, Deer River, Mad River, Sandy Creek, and South Sandy Creek; the third-largest intact landscape block in New York, behind only the Adirondacks and Catskills; and the site of thousands of acres of pristine swamps and wetlands. Adding to its importance, Tug Hill is the primary source of water for the marshes within the Eastern Lake Ontario Biodiversity Investment Area. (Tug Hill is entirely within the Lake Ontario drainage basin, with the exception of a small sliver of the Mohawk drainage.) With this information in hand, The Nature Conservancy's Great Lakes Program recently designated Tug Hill river systems as two of only five Phase I aquatic sites in the entire New York portion of the Great Lakes ecoregion.

The Central & Western New York Chapter of The Nature Conservancy -- working in close partnership with the Tug Hill Commission, forest products companies, and a local land trust -- proposes to launch a new community-based conservation program to protect the wetlands, rivers and streams, and working forests of Tug Hill. Located in a new field office to be established on Tug Hill, this project will serve as a catalyst to advance landscape-level conservation and restoration of critical lands on Tug Hill. The program also will integrate conservation and economic development by working with forest products companies and private landowners to apply conservation easements and sustainable forest management practices on Tug Hill forests. In addition, The Nature Conservancy will seek to build local awareness of the importance of Tug Hill. As always, EPA resources would be leveraged with funds from New York State and from private foundations and donors.

Geographic Areas Affected by the Project

States:

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Illinois | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | New York |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Indiana | <input type="checkbox"/> | Pennsylvania |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Michigan | <input type="checkbox"/> | Wisconsin |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Minnesota | <input type="checkbox"/> | Ohio |

Lakes:

- | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Superior | <input type="checkbox"/> | Erie |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Huron | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Ontario |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Michigan | <input type="checkbox"/> | All Lakes |

Geographic Initiatives:

- | | | | | |
|--|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Greater Chicago | <input type="checkbox"/> NE Ohio | <input type="checkbox"/> NW Indiana | <input type="checkbox"/> SE Michigan | <input type="checkbox"/> Lake St. Clair |
|--|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|

Primary Affected Area of Concern: Not Applicable

Other Affected Areas of Concern:

For Habitat Projects Only:

Primary Affected Biodiversity Investment Area: Eastern Lake Ontario

Other Affected Biodiversity Investment Areas:

Problem Statement:

Within New York's Lake Ontario drainage basin, the Tug Hill Plateau is one of the largest blocks of unfragmented forest and a top priority for biodiversity conservation. Tug Hill forms the headwaters of 11 different rivers; is the primary source of water for the marshes within the Eastern Lake Ontario Biodiversity Investment Area; and comprises the third-largest intact landscape block in New York, behind only the Adirondacks and Catskills.

The Nature Conservancy proposes to establish a new field office on Tug Hill to address the following threats to the region's biodiversity:

Conservation easements are needed to protect working forestland from subdivision so that these lands can continue to provide timber products to the local economy in an environmentally sustainable manner. Tug Hill is one of the last areas of New York where land is relatively inexpensive; as a result, large tracts of forestland are beginning to be subdivided into smaller lots. In addition, property taxes are rising steadily on Tug Hill, forcing landowners to re-evaluate their ability to continue holding large tracts of Tug Hill forest land.

Large blocks of forest need to be restored to pre-settlement forest conditions. With a few exceptions, past logging practices have removed the spruce-fir and hemlock-northern hardwoods forests from Tug Hill. In addition, there are few areas on Tug Hill that are not fragmented by logging roads or skidder trails. These changes have made Tug Hill forest less valuable as habitat to large mammals and other species that were once prevalent in northern New York.

Tug Hill's aquatic resources -- its pristine streams and river corridors and intact wetlands -- need to be fully protected. Both the NYS Natural Heritage Program and TNC's Great Lakes Office have identified Tug Hill's aquatic communities as critical to protecting the biodiversity of the Great Lakes and Northern Appalachian ecoregions. Yet the viability of these sites is threatened by logging within wetland areas and road crossings for logging equipment and motorized recreation. Conservation entities need to ensure that these aquatic features are protected, either by working closely with landowners to designate buffers that restrict timber harvest, by acquiring conservation easements on river corridors and wetlands, or by acquiring key areas outright.

State lands on Tug Hill represent nearly 15 percent of the core forest and need to be managed in a way that reflects their biological diversity. Currently, more than 95 percent of state lands on Tug Hill are logged.

The local community needs to embrace the idea that Tug Hill forest can be a source of jobs and economic revenue, but in a way that designates some lands as off-limits to logging and ensures sustainable harvest of timber. To be successful in the long run, conservation initiatives need to be designed, supported, and implemented by local residents and communities.

The economy of Tug Hill region needs to diversify so that timber production is not the sole determinant of the region's economic fate. Cross-country skiing, tourism, and snowmobiling need to become larger parts of the Tug Hill economy. In addition, value-added timber products need to be developed in order to enhance revenue from timber production.

Proposed Work Outcome:

The Nature Conservancy and its partners -- working out of a new community-based project office -- will pursue a comprehensive conservation program that takes aim at abating the above threats. Specifically, we will:

Work with the NYS DEC, Tug Hill Commission, and Tug Hill Tomorrow to ensure that state purchases of conservation easements on Tug Hill forests are targeted toward critical properties and include forest management restrictions that ensure sustainable forestry on Tug Hill.

Easements must be structured to prevent subdivision and allow continued recreational use by the public and by local hunting and fishing clubs. The state is currently negotiating on a 48,000-acre Tug Hill parcel and has asked TNC for assistance in crafting a conservation plan. (No EPA funds will be used for easement acquisition costs.)

Begin acquisition of forest blocks that can be placed on a longer rotation or set aside in order to restore Tug Hill's forest to pre-settlement conditions.

These reserve areas will be managed to restore long-absent spruce-fir and hemlock-northern hardwood forests to Tug Hill. Moreover, these reserves need to be large enough to become havens for large mammals like moose and bobcat and large enough to withstand windthrows and other natural disturbances. A consulting forester will be retained to identify sustainable forestry options that allow continued timber harvest from any properties acquired by The Nature Conservancy. (No EPA funds will be used for land acquisition costs.)

In partnership with Tug Hill Tomorrow, inform local communities about the ecological significance of Tug Hill and the contribution that working forests make to both local quality of life and economic well-being.

In order to achieve lasting conservation at a landscape level, The Nature Conservancy and its partners will develop local understanding of, pride in, and responsibility for the natural systems that surround and support the community's social and economic systems.

Work closely with state land managers to ensure that timber harvest programs on public lands avoid sensitive areas and are conducted in an environmentally sustainable manner.

We will seek to create forested corridors on state lands that protect aquatic resources and link forest reserves on adjacent lands.

In partnership with the Tug Hill Commission and local universities, convene a meeting of local stakeholders and experts who can explore economic development options that diversify the local economy.

Tourism is clearly one option, but we also will seek to develop ways to maximize revenue from timber production through value-added businesses that are located in Tug Hill communities. Finally, we will thoroughly explore whether forest certification through SmartWood or another certification program can provide a premium for Tug Hill forest products harvested in a sustainable manner.

This project can be used as a template for effecting conservation of other forest landscape sites throughout the Great Lakes Basin.

The Central & Western New York Chapter and Great Lakes Program of The Nature Conservancy have a long history of successful conservation in partnership with the EPA Great Lakes National Program Office, and are confident in our ability to continue to generate positive results.

Project Milestones:	Dates:
Project Start	09/2000
Complete Tug Hill site conservation plan	10/2000
Hire community-based project director	11/2000
Host economic development session	02/2001
Assist NYS DEC with easement	04/2001
Acquire first forest reserve parcel	05/2001
Retain consulting forester	07/2001
Project End	08/2001

Project Addresses Environmental Justice

If So, Description of How:

Tug Hill is an extremely rural area whose economy depends on a steady supply of forest products. Unsustainable timber harvests, while often embraced in the short run, could jeopardize the region's long-term economic health. Already, there is local community concern that several forest products companies on Tug Hill are harvesting beyond the forest's capacity. This project will not only seek to ensure that timber from Tug Hill forests is harvested in a sustainable manner, but also seek to diversify local economies and to create value-added businesses that convert Tug Hill forest products into goods that provide better jobs for local residents.

Project Addresses Education/Outreach

If So, Description of How:

A priority for this new community-based project office will be to build awareness of the ecological importance of Tug Hill. In order to achieve lasting conservation at a landscape level, The Nature Conservancy and its partners will develop local understanding of, pride in, and responsibility for the natural systems that surround and support the community's social and economic systems. We will target residents, local governments, officials at the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, and the forest product companies that control large portions of Tug Hill.

Project Budget:

	Federal Share Requested (\$)	Applicant's Share (\$)
Personnel:	26,000	10,000
Fringe:	9,750	3,750
Travel:	0	0
Equipment:	0	0
Supplies:	0	0
Contracts:	5,000	5,000
Construction:	0	0
Other:	0	0
Total Direct Costs:	40,750	18,750
Indirect Costs:	8,150	0
Total:	48,900	18,750
Projected Income:	0	0

Funding by Other Organizations (Names, Amounts, Description of Commitments):

The Nature Conservancy will be actively raising operating funds for this program over the next six months. Several potential donors have expressed interest in the project and will be entertaining proposals. Funding for landscape-level acquisitions of conservation easements and forest lands will be derived from private foundations and donors and from public sources such as the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation and North American Wetlands Conservation Act. No EPA funds will be used for land acquisition or easement acquisition.

Description of Collaboration/Community Based Support:

Partnerships, collaboration, and a broad base of support are fundamental to The Nature Conservancy's mission and instrumental in its success. This project continues that approach. Several Tug Hill-based organizations are already working with TNC and have expressed a strong desire to team up with us on a more comprehensive Tug Hill conservation program:

Tug Hill Commission -- This widely respected state agency has a mission of helping Tug Hill communities protect natural resources and strengthen their economies. The director of the Commission -- a former TNC trustee -- has promised to help involve local residents and stakeholders in this project's outreach components.

Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust -- The local land trust will be a full partner in our efforts to fashion a Tug Hill conservation program. While the new community-based project director on Tug Hill will be a TNC employee, Tug Hill Tomorrow will help determine the project's work plan and priorities. In addition, TNC has committed to build capacity in Tug Hill Tomorrow and is already assisting them in negotiating and site conservation planning.

John Hancock Timber Resource Group -- Owners of the largest property on Tug Hill, this forest products concern in 1999 provided TNC with full funding to inventory the natural communities and conservation significance of its Tug Hill lands. This inventory is being used to craft a conservation plan for 48,000 acres of forestland.

NYS Department of Environmental Conservation -- NYS's landholdings on Tug Hill are significant. TNC enjoys close relationships with NYS DEC officials at Tug Hill regional offices and in Albany. TNC and the NYS DEC will work together to target state land acquisition dollars at the most critical or threatened tracts, and to ensure sound natural resource management of state lands on Tug Hill.