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Coverts 14 Year Evaluation

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The Massachusetts Coverts Project has been educating motivated and influential forest owners and community members in issues of Forest Stewardship since 1988. This program was developed as a joint venture by the Ruffed Grouse Society and state Extension Services, and is now found in 14 states. Since its inception in Massachusetts it has been facilitated by David B. Kittredge Jr. III, Extension Forester and Associate Professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The participants, Coverts Cooperators, are provided with meals, housing, reference materials and are exposed to three days of high-quality educational programming on forest management, conservation and public outreach. Feedback on the workshop has been highly positive, with Cooperators going so far as to say that the experience was “life changing”. Cooperators are asked to actively engage in outreach or educational activities in their home communities. In the Fall of 2003, an evaluation was undertaken to assess the success of this program. Goals of this assessment were to determine how effective it has been and how best it may be improved.

In October 2003, all prior participants of the Coverts Project in Massachusetts were invited to attend one of five “listening sessions” in November. Twenty-five Cooperators attended the meetings and gave input on the Coverts Project. Insights gained from these meetings were incorporated into a survey instrument. This survey was mailed to all 291 Coverts participants in March of 2004. Two waves of mailings were sent. By the end of April 2004, 249 addresses of the original 291 were found to be accurate and 146 surveys were completed and returned. The number of responses has been adjusted to 145, due to the duplication of surveys sent in by one respondent (N=249, rate of return=.58.) Thirty-five percent of the respondents took part in the Coverts workshop between 1999 and 2003, 41% took part between the years 1993 and 1998, and the remaining 24% took part prior to 1993. The responses have been tabulated and are attached to this summary along with text of the questions as they appear on the survey. Appendices contain the full text of one open-ended essay question and responses to “other” categories for three questions. The summarized results follow.

Coverts Cooperators are in the position to affect the management of large amounts of forested land in Massachusetts and to provide models of land management for other land owners. Of the 145 respondents, 126 reported owning a total of 12,734 acres of land with an average of 106 acres per respondent. Forty-six percent of these respondents reported that their land had a management plan, and 21% indicated that this was due to the Coverts Program. One-hundred and seven respondents reported being involved with the management of 524,345 acres, though this number included 20,000 acres in WI and also the entirety of the Deerfield Watershed. After subtracting the WI land and the South Deerfield Watershed, the adjusted total is 78,745 acres. Forty-one percent of these respondents indicated that the land they were involved with managing had a management plan (with an additional 10% reported that at least some of the land had one), and 21% also responded that this was due to Coverts. Forty-five percent of the total 145 respondents indicated that they were currently involved with an organization in the position to advocate forest stewardship. Forty-five percent reported being part of a land trust organization, 39% reported being part of a conservation commission and 33% indicated they were on an open space committee.

Results of the survey indicate that the Coverts Workshop training is highly valued by participants. Seventy-four percent of respondents rated the Coverts Workshop high value overall, with an average response of 3.76 (1=No value, 4=High Value). When asked about the various parts of the training, 72% rated the presentations as having high value, 67% gave this response with respect to written materials received. Sixty-four percent indicated that introductions to natural resource professionals during the Workshop held high value for them, and 68% gave this response with respect to field excursions. Follow-up materials and contact with other Cooperators received weaker endorsements with only 39% choosing high value for each category, indicating areas that may need improvement.

Respondents reported that Coverts increased valuation of stewardship and related issues and imparted to them a sense of personal empowerment. Sixty-four percent of respondents reported viewing issues of forest stewardship and conservation as much more important than prior to their participation. When asked about levels of confidence Cooperators felt in their own abilities to enact forest stewardship principles on land they manage, in their community or to educate others about these issues, 46%, 34% and 37% reported having much higher levels of confidence in each of these areas respectively.

This sense of empowerment has been translated into action by the Cooperators surveyed. Seventy-three percent reported that they had made wildlife habitat improvements on land directly under their influence for management decisions. Of these respondents, 23% indicated that they had definitely done so because of Coverts. More than half of all respondents indicated that they had set goals for their forest land, permanently protected acres and made recreational improvements on land whose management they influenced. Forty-nine percent

and 48% respectively had a map made and made timber improvements. Of those who had not enacted some management activity but who wanted to do so, the most frequently cited reason for not doing so was “not enough time”. Forty-two percent of respondents chose this response, 31% indicated an “other” response (see Appendix B: Responses to Question 8f: Other), and 27% chose “not enough money”.

The respondents also reported high levels of ongoing outreach activity. Sixty-three percent of respondents indicated that they had spoken with someone about forest stewardship in the last year. Since approximately 65% of respondents took part in the program over five years ago this indicates that Coverts Cooperators continue to spread the word about wise forest stewardship long after their participation. Twenty-eight percent of respondents reported having taken part in land use or land protection actions 10 or more times since taking the Coverts training, and 48% reported having done so at least once in the preceding year. Fifty percent of respondents indicated that they had contacted a natural resource professional in the last year, and 42% reported referring someone else to a natural resource professional in the same time period. Fifty-percent of respondents had a Coverts “Success Story” which they shared in an open-ended essay question. Personal accounts reflected a wide range of activities, from having increased understand and ability to implement forest stewardship plans on their own land, to organizing educational events in their community. Cooperators reported participating in successful efforts to protect land through public and private organizations or groups, creating a forest owner cooperative and also a program that brings under-served urban youth to the outdoors. One respondent had successfully introduced wildlife protection legislation. The full text of responses may be found in Appendix C: Responses to Question 10.

In addition to helping us assess how successful the Coverts Project has been in the past, the respondents gave valuable input on changes or improvements that may be made in the future. Forty-six percent of respondents indicated that they believed participants in the Coverts Workshop would benefit very much from online resources and also from advanced Coverts trainings. Other additions to Coverts that were seen to be beneficial were ongoing trainings or classes (39% chose “very much” for this category), and email newsletter (34%) and a list of contact information for other Cooperators (32%). There was moderate interest expressed in further contact with other Cooperators. Twenty three percent of respondents indicated that they strongly agreed that they had not had much contact with other Cooperators and would find more valuable. When asked what format for the training they felt to be most convenient, 39% ranked the weekend-long option as their top choice, with 14% more choosing it as their only (non-ranked) choice. In response to questions about alternative funding sources for Coverts, 38% indicated they would be willing to make a tax-deductible donation to Coverts, and 88% indicated that they believed they would have been able to attend Coverts if it had had a fee of approximately \$50. When asked if paying a fee would have reduced their desire to volunteer after participating, 62% agreed

that it would not have reduced their desire, and 72% disagreed that it would have done so. However, 59% indicated that they felt they would not have been able to attend if a fee of \$300-\$500 had been charged, and many respondents made marginal notes to the effect that a higher fee could have made them unable to participate at all.

Based on the results of this evaluation, there is evidence that the Coverts Project in Massachusetts has been successful at the following tasks: 1) creating a sense of empowerment in its participants, 2) inspiring Cooperators to enact forest stewardship on land they own or are involved with managing and 3) motivating Cooperators to disseminate information to others and participate in community forest stewardship efforts even long after they have taken part in the Coverts Workshop. Areas that could use development are establishing ongoing resources for Cooperators and facilitating further contact between Cooperators.

Recommendations based on the results of this survey include the following: 1) Continue offering the level of programming currently provided, 2) implement improved follow-up and continuing access to resources especially via the internet, 3) provide participants with contact information for other Cooperators, 4) change the structure of the Workshop back to the full-weekend format and 5) consider requesting a \$50 fee for participation in the program.