

FOREST HEALTH WORKS PROJECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2009, the Rhode Island Natural History Survey (RINHS), in close partnership with the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM), was competitively awarded a \$673,000 ARRA grant through the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to meet ARRA's goals of job creation and strategic investment in national interests. The purpose of this grant was to control non-native invasive plants that threaten priority forests in Rhode Island by training "green industry" professionals such as landscapers and arborists. With this once in a lifetime funding, RINHS and DEM sought to create a lasting legacy of improved forest resources and increased capacity to address invasive species in the state.

The project was named The Forest Health Works Project (FHWP). "Forest Health" is a multidimensional concept that describes the sustainability of forests and includes ecological, economic and social components. Invasive plants were the principal forest health issue addressed through the FHWP. Other aspects of forest health were incorporated into the project, including wildlife management, native plant propagation and marketing, recreational usage, environmental education, and most importantly, the livelihood of forest-related industries in Rhode Island. The term *Works Project* is a reference to job creation. At commencement, Rhode Island's unemployment was 2nd highest in the nation. This problem was particularly acute in the nursery, landscaping, and related agricultural and horticultural industries, historically of large economic value in the state. The FHWP's goal was to provide workers in these fields with financial support and new professional experiences during the economic downturn as a means of expanding local capacity and business opportunities.

The FHWP was successful at meeting or exceeding expected goals. Intensive field surveys resulted in the most comprehensive inventory of invasives plants ever conducted in RI. Though proceeding throughout the state, efforts were concentrated in its western region based on stakeholder input and innovative GIS analysis. The FHWP provided job training to interested industry professionals. From this pool of certified contractors, invasive plant treatment projects and other projects were implemented through a competitive bid process. Over 166 acres were treated for invasives across over 40 sites. 15.5 FTE jobs were created and 16 green industry companies received contracts. A pilot Rhode Island Youth Conservation League was run under the auspices of FHWP. Deer exclosures were built to demonstrate over time the relationship between invasives, deer, and forest health. Finally, *Rhody Native*TM was developed as a groundbreaking approach to promote locally-sourced native plants in the consumer and restoration markets in alliance with the nursery industry.

New funding and partnerships have since been leveraged for many of these initiatives (e.g. the youth program and *Rhody Native*TM) and they will continue beyond the FHWP. Contractors trained by FHWP are now receiving private contracts for invasives work. The nature of this stimulus funding has been truly stimulative. Perhaps most importantly yet difficult to measure, the FHWP has elevated the issue of forest health, especially invasive plants, in the public consciousness. The project was well received by all, and RINHS and DEM are well-positioned into the future.

Also available from RINHS (401-874-5800, info@rinhs.org): a full, illustrated report with extensive documentation and a geodatabase of survey, mapping, and treatment data.

FOREST HEALTH WORKS PROJECT METRICS

Environmental Productivity

Transect miles inventoried	1063
Estimated acres inventoried	60,000
RI conserved areas inventoried	37 %
Number of species mapped	33
Acres of invasive plants mapped	2228
Point locations of invasive plants mapped	3081
Acres treated	166
Properties treated	41

Economic Productivity

Federal funds spent into the economy	\$673,000
FTE permanent jobs created	3.5
FTE seasonal jobs created	12
Directed to green industry contractors	approx. \$285,000
Green industry companies employed	16
Nurseries receiving <i>Rhody Native</i> TM support	12

2010 & 2011 Youth Conservation Crew Productivity

High school student applicants	205
Students employed	14
Acres cleared by crew	42
Miles of trail built/improved by crew	4.5

Public Outreach Productivity

Local organizations partnered with	21
FHWP public outreach events	51
Estimated # of attendees	2,300
News stories in local media	14
Unique outreach materials created	30

Major Leveraged Opportunities

Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education grant	\$122,335
National Fish & Wildlife Foundation grant	\$27,623
Non-federal NFWF match	\$29,233
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in-kind staff time	\$5,120
RI CSC invasive preparedness grant	\$12,000
Leveraged jobs for contractors due to FHWP	23
Value of these new invasives jobs for contractors	\$62,000

FINAL REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY

The FHWP was a unique conservation endeavor in Rhode Island due to the project's scale and complexity. A wide array of projects, systems, and institutional relationships were developed, and from these -- many valuable lessons were learned. The following are recommendations for relevant stakeholders. Further discussion of these recommendations can be found in the full report available from RINHS.

1. *Reconvene the RI Invasive Species Council*

This council has been defunct since 2005 due to lack of funding. In its absence there has not been a clear set of statewide policies for invasive species and this has broad implications.

2. *Closer coordination between Conservation Organizations on Invasives and/or Forest Health*
In a period of declining financial resources, but increasing environmental challenges, cooperation and partnership between stakeholders (inter and intra-state) is critical for success.

3. *Dedicate resources to follow-up treatment on FHWP-treated sites and others across the state*
Invasive plant control is long-term management activity that requires follow-up. A fund should be established (estimated \$15,000/annually) to re-treat FHWP sites and address new areas.

4. *Monitor and manage deer to improve Forest Health*

Deer densities have surpassed levels for sustainable forest regeneration in many areas of the state, which promotes many invasive plants, Lyme disease, and other issues.

5. *Permanently establish the RI Youth Conservation League*

Establishment would meet 3 goals: cost-effective natural area maintenance, environmental opportunities for youth in a state that has few, and improved public image of conservation.

6. *Expand and Promote Rhody NativeTM*

Rhody Native has proven a great potential as unique conservation agency/nursery industry partnership and should be prioritized in plant restoration and consumer outreach efforts.

7. *Continue Green Industry Workforce Development*

FHWP has trained a cohort of landscapers, arborists, nurserymen and others. This workforce should be utilized whenever possible and future trainings held.

8. *Analyze the FHWP GIS dataset*

The FHWP has generated an extremely comprehensive geodatabase which should be used for research and management purposes.