

Vinton Furnace

Partnership Protects Ohio's Largest Privately Owned Forest

The Challenge

Forest land in Ohio has changed significantly since the time of European settlement when the State was 95 percent forested. After reaching a low of 12 percent forest cover in the 1940s, Ohio experienced significant reforestation to reach its current state of 30 percent forest cover. With its significant forest land base, the State has a strong forest industry that consistently ranks in the top 15 States in the country for a variety of timber and nontimber forest products.

However, recent restructuring of the forest industry led to large areas of industry-owned timberlands being sold to timber investment management organizations (TIMOs), real estate investment trusts, and sometimes developers. MeadWestvaco's divestiture of substantial forest lands in Ohio to a TIMO in 2005 threatened many of the benefits they provide. These benefits include public recreation and hunting areas, sustainable timber production, wildlife habitat, and one very unique aspect of one of their properties: a federally designated experimental forest. The Vinton Furnace Experimental Forest, one of two federally designated experimental forests on private lands in the United States, has been supporting ongoing forestry research for almost 60 years.

The Solution

A coalition of partners, including the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Forest Service, and many regional conservation organizations, worked together to permanently protect the forest. Their secondary goal was to protect the surrounding forest area known as the Raccoon Ecological Management Area. Together, these two areas represented the largest privately owned forest block in Ohio.

The 4-year effort began in late 2006 when the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (DNR) purchased a conservation easement on a portion of the property. The designated experimental forest area was excluded from this initial easement, however, and the partnership's effort continued. Forest Service Forest Legacy Program project grants totaling \$5,136,250 were combined with \$2,560,881 in State cost-share funding to purchase 6,966 acres. An additional \$7,402,869 came from the Ohio DNR Division of Wildlife and Division of Forestry, Land and Water Conservation Fund, National Park Service, American Electric Power, Rockies Express Pipeline, and the U.S. Fish



The Vinton Furnace Experimental Forest will continue to be a site of important forest research and forest-related educational opportunities. Photo Credit: Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

& Wildlife Service. Together, these contributions helped purchase the remaining 8,528 acres. The Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy, and many other partners were also critical to the success of this effort.

Resulting Benefits

This multipartner effort resulted in Ohio's newest forest and wildlife area—the Vinton Furnace State Experimental Forest and Wildlife Area. These two adjacent properties will be managed jointly to provide public access for recreation. They will also be used to promote native wildlife, maintain ongoing forestry research, provide sustained timber production, and protect water quality. The forests on the properties support the largest population of bobcats in the State as well as numerous rare species, including timber rattlesnakes and cerulean warblers.

Sharing Success

In addition to the benefits provided by the land itself, the success of this project required collaboration among many agencies and organizations working toward a focused goal. This resulted in stronger partnerships among many of Ohio's key conservation groups that will carry forward to future projects. Forest Legacy Program funds were the cornerstone around which the other funding sources for this project were built. This project has the distinction of including the 2-millionth acre protected by the Forest Legacy Program since its first project in April 1993.



U.S. Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Northeastern Area
State and Private Forestry
www.na.fs.fed.us

January 2012

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