

# TUG HILL COMMISSION

*Celebrating*  
**45** YEARS OF  
*Collaboration*

East Branch Fish Creek

BY KATIE MALINOWSKI | PHOTOS BY ANTHONY MACHIA, UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

When most people think of Tug Hill, the first thought that comes to mind is snow. For locals, it's a source of pride knowing they receive the most snow east of the Rocky Mountains. Yet, people may not know that Tug Hill is the third largest forested area of New York State, after the Catskills and Adirondacks. In fact, the region's dense forest core is approximately 275 square miles in one of the remotest parts of the state.

## **A Unique Working Landscape**

Located between Lake Ontario and the Adirondacks, and bounded by Oneida Lake to the south and the Black River to the north and east, Tug Hill is a working landscape. Here, people balance conservation of natural resources with their use to create economic opportunities through recreation, forestry and

agriculture. Traditional land uses, including hunting and fishing, are highly valued by both residents and visitors.

Recognizing Tug Hill's unique character and natural resources, in 1972 New York State created the Tug Hill Commission—a small, non-regulatory state agency charged with “helping local governments and citizens shape the future of the Tug Hill region.” More than 45 years later, the Commission continues to work closely with local communities and residents to maintain the region's character and safeguard its natural resources.

Initially, the idea of the state's involvement in Tug Hill was met with significant resistance from local residents. The Commission held forums around “the hill” to listen to what people envisioned for the area. This led to a unique, grassroots

approach that provides assistance to local communities through community and economic development, natural resource protection, and technical assistance to local governments.

The Commission's nine commissioners (all unpaid volunteer residents of the region) are key to this grassroots approach, as is the model “circuit rider” program that provides staff to the region's five government councils. Being present in Tug Hill towns and villages on a daily basis allows the Commission to develop and nurture close working relationships with local citizens, and to understand their needs, issues, and concerns.

As a measure of how they are doing, the Commission conducts a survey of local leaders every five years. Results of that survey are reported to the Governor and the State Legislature.

## Balancing Resource Protection and Economics

Along with the unique local-state partnership between its towns, villages and the Commission, Tug Hill's working landscape supports important activities and projects. The Commission works with local municipalities, state agencies and nonprofit organizations to achieve common goals, such as preserving the integrity of the region's forestlands and headwaters. Here are two projects that illustrate the results of these partnerships.



Stavemill Hunting Club

## Salmon River Watershed

The Tug Hill aquifer and a watershed on the western side of Tug Hill provide clean, cold water for the Salmon River Fish Hatchery in Oswego County. The hatchery is a major supplier of trout and salmon for more than 100 waters across an 11-county region (including much of Tug Hill), creating a great outdoor experience for anglers of all ages and abilities.

The Salmon River is a top recreational fishing destination, drawing an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 visitors annually. Consequently, conservation of the Salmon River watershed is a priority for the towns on Tug Hill. In the spring of 2017, Governor Cuomo announced the state would acquire two separate tracts of land totaling more than 6,000 acres. One of these acquisitions involved the purchase of 3,236 acres of land known as the Kendall Tract, located north of the Salmon River. Purchased by The Conservation Fund in 2015, and later acquired by DEC using \$4,750,000 in state

Environmental Protection Funds, the tract includes working forestlands in the towns of Redfield and Orwell, and provides vital economic support to local communities.

During negotiations for the property transfer, the Tug Hill Commission worked with DEC and local landowners on an agreement for the best use of the land. The Commission focused on a key priority of local residents—preserving the Stavemill Hunting Club and the land it was leasing on the Kendall Tract in the town of Orwell so they could continue a tradition that had been shared by generations of Tug Hill families.

The Commission held meetings with the hunting club, DEC, The Conservation Fund and the Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust, and reached an agreement that allowed the club to keep its building and six acres of land. The Stavemill Club would purchase the land from The Conservation Fund and donate it as a conservation easement to the land trust. All parties were satisfied with the arrangement.

Fishing is a popular activity on the Salmon River.





Timber harvesting in West Leyden

## What is a Working Forest?

A “working forest” is a designated area that is capable of producing a variety of forest products (including timber or wood products), while also providing recreation, wildlife habitat, watershed protection, and carbon sequestration, among others. Working forests allow public and private forest owners to continue to practice active, sustainable management—such as harvesting trees or practicing agroforestry (e.g., growing mushrooms, ginseng, etc.)—on these lands to produce wood products. These working forests often operate under certain management controls, supervision or certification, and include almost a million acres in northern New York under conservation easements held by New York State.

The goal of working forests is to provide a balance that provides (and often preserves) a full spectrum of their benefits for present and future generations, such as wood products, habitat and wildlife conservation, and accessible public recreation.

### *East Branch of Fish Creek*

In Lewis County, the East Branch of Fish Creek watershed provides drinking water for the City of Rome. Much of the watershed land was historically industrial forest property that provided feedstock to the Lyons Falls Pulp and Paper Mill. When the mill faced financial problems in the late 1990s, the land was sold several times to timber investment management organizations, which worried many in the area, including the towns, hunting camp owners and lessees, snowmobilers and conservationists.

To address these concerns, the Tug Hill Commission organized diverse stakeholders to form the East Branch of Fish Creek Working Group. The group promoted the use of conservation easements, ensuring local property tax revenues to the towns, county, and school districts were maintained. In 1998, the state passed legislation to add the Tug Hill region to a list of locations where property tax payments must be paid on state-held conservation easements. Prior to that time, such payments were only required in the

Adirondacks, Catskills and an area surrounding the City of Rochester’s drinking water supply.

In 2002, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) purchased 45,000 acres of land that compromised approximately one-third of Tug Hill’s core forest. At the time, it was the largest land acquisition made by the nonprofit organization in New York. Ultimately, TNC retained ownership of approximately 14,000 acres and sold a conservation easement to DEC on this portion of the property. The conservation organization also agreed to a “payment in lieu of taxes” arrangement with the towns, even though it was not obligated to pay taxes due to its nonprofit status.

The state also purchased approximately 1,400 acres from TNC along the East Branch of Fish Creek, an area that is now a state forest. The remaining 30,000 acres were sold to a private timber company; DEC holds a conservation easement on this private timber land to prevent subdivision and development.

The end result is a unique mix of private, public, and non-profit-owned land, all protected from further development under a state-held

conservation easement. Public access for hunting and fishing is allowed on portions of the property, and snowmobile trails were secured as well. The East Branch of Fish Creek Working Group still meets periodically to hear from the landowners about ongoing activities and discuss solutions to any problems that arise.

### **A Bright Future**

Tug Hill has become a year-round destination for those who love the outdoors. From fishing and hiking to cross-country skiing and snowmobiling, the area offers a variety of activities on its scenic lands. Interspersed with this are working farms and forests that continue their traditions and help support the local economy and communities.

And while members and staff of the Tug Hill Commission may have changed during the last 45 years, the Commission remains committed to helping protect, manage and promote this unique and amazing region now, and well into the future.

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