

ISSUE PAPER SERIES

## Land Ownership and Protected Lands in the Tug Hill Region

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NEW YORK STATE TUG HILL COMMISSION

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The Tug Hill Commission Technical and Issue Paper Series are designed to help local officials and citizens in the Tug Hill region and other rural parts of New York State. The Technical Paper Series provides guidance on procedures based on questions frequently received by the Commission. The Issue Paper Series provides background on key issues facing the region without taking advocacy positions. Other papers in each series are available from the Tug Hill Commission. Please call us or visit our website for more information.



Tug Hill Wildlife Management Area, Montague, NY.  
Photo courtesy NYS Department of Environmental Conservation.

# Land Ownership and Protect Lands in the Tug Hill Region

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# Land Ownership and Protect Lands in the Tug Hill Region

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## Introduction

Protected lands are lands in their relatively natural forms with ownership or legal protections that will keep them that way for the foreseeable future. They are protected for many purposes, including open space and water quality protection, recreation, wildlife management, forest management, and a variety of ecosystem services. These lands can be owned by either private or public landowners, and protection can be provided in the form of fee (outright) ownership or through a conservation easement. Public agencies like the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) or private not-for-profits such as The Nature Conservancy (TNC), The Conservation Fund or local land trusts like Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust (THTLT), can own protected land or hold conservation easements. This paper identifies and describes protected lands in the Tug Hill region.

For this analysis, protected land will be considered property owned outright (in fee) by a public entity or a private land conservation organization for conservation purposes. Land will also be considered protected if a conservation easement exists for the property, held by a public agency or private organization in perpetuity, with the underlying ownership maintained by a private landowner. Please see the commission's issue paper, [Conservation Easements](#), June 2017, for details on easements.

The New York Protected Areas Database (NYPAD), which is a Geographic Information System (GIS) layer of lands protected, designated, or functioning as open space, natural areas, conservation lands, or recreational areas ([www.nypad.org](http://www.nypad.org)), was used as the basis of this analysis along with information from THTLT, NYSDEC and county real property tax parcel databases.

The NYPAD is not complete for Tug Hill. As a result, and as accurately as possible given the accessibility of data sources, much information was added or corrected for this analysis, providing a good snapshot of protected land ownership in 2020. Still, due to variations in source data, please note that all figures and acreages provided herein are approximate. An interactive NYPAD map is available at [www.nypad.org/InteractiveMap](http://www.nypad.org/InteractiveMap).

## Geography

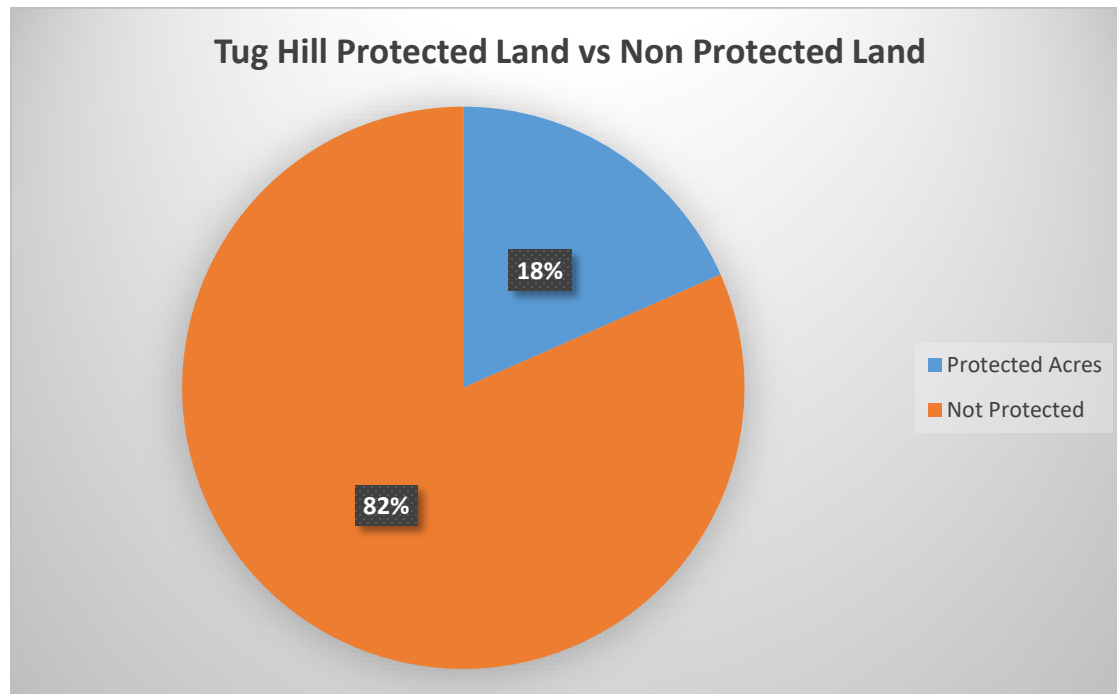
According to NYPAD, approximately 20% of land in New York State is protected. These lands may be held in public or private ownership and may have varying degrees of protection, ranging from forest preserve, which is publicly owned, forever wild and accessible for recreation, to land owned privately by an individual with protection from development via a conservation easement. Protected lands can also have varying public uses and can have permanent or long-term protection that can be subject to modification through legal processes.

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### Protected Lands

There are 1.38 million acres in the Tug Hill region. By the commission's calculations, 18.4% of those acres are considered "protected" and include both privately owned and publicly owned lands with some means of protection from development.

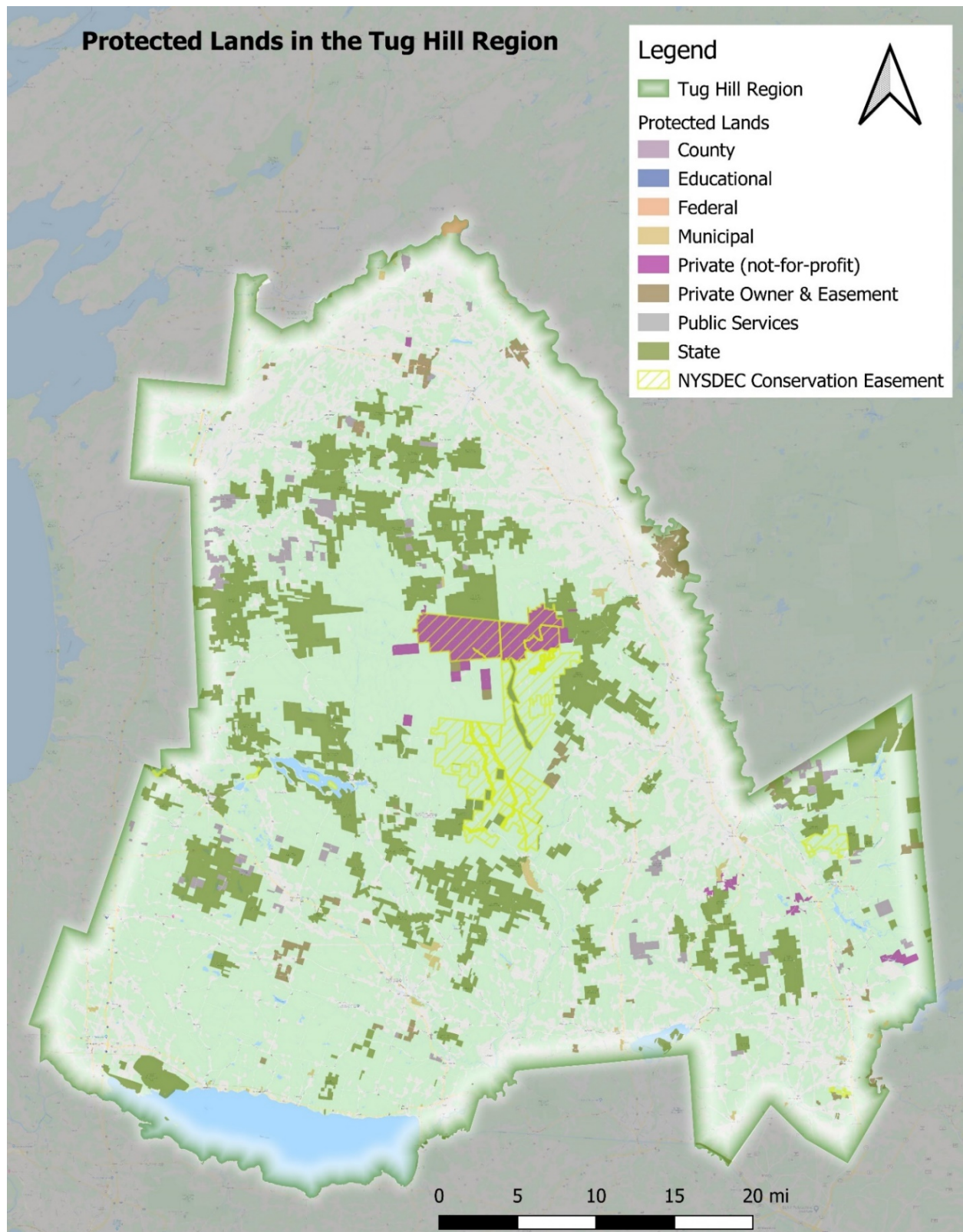


About 67% of the protected land in the Tug Hill region is owned by New York State, and primarily managed by NYSDEC and the NYS Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP).

Easements, which are permanent, legal agreements between a landowner and state or local government or a non-profit land trust, make up 24% of the protected land on Tug Hill. NYSDEC holds easements on approximately 47,000 acres and THTLT holds easements on approximately 12,944 acres in the region.

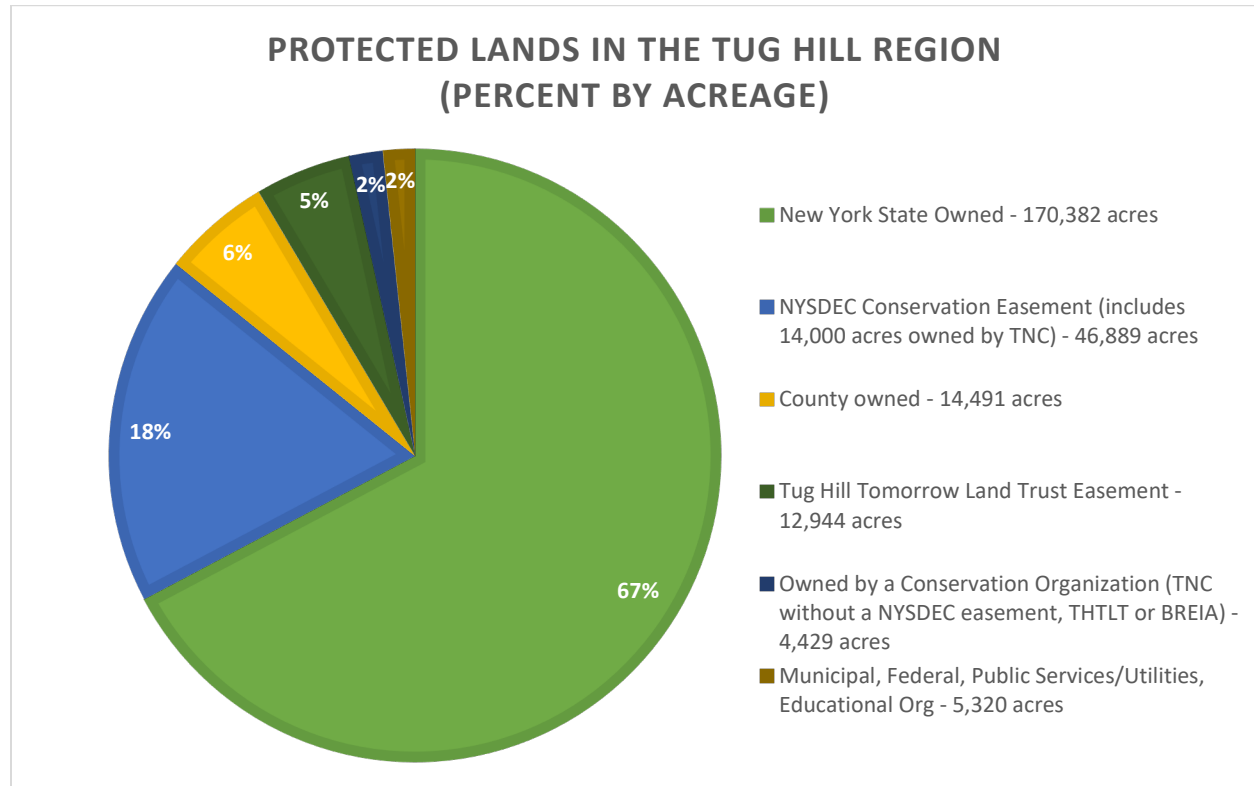


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Interestingly, easements can include acres owned by conservation organizations that are also eased by a public agency, and in the case of the Tug Hill region, about 14,000 acres owned by conservation organizations (i.e. TNC) are also protected by a NYSDEC easement. So as not to count these acres as “double protected,” the lands shown as “Owned by a Conservation Organization” above do not include the lands also protected by a NYSDEC conservation easement. Municipalities (towns, cities and villages), the federal government, public utilities and educational institutions own about 2% of the remaining protected land on Tug Hill.

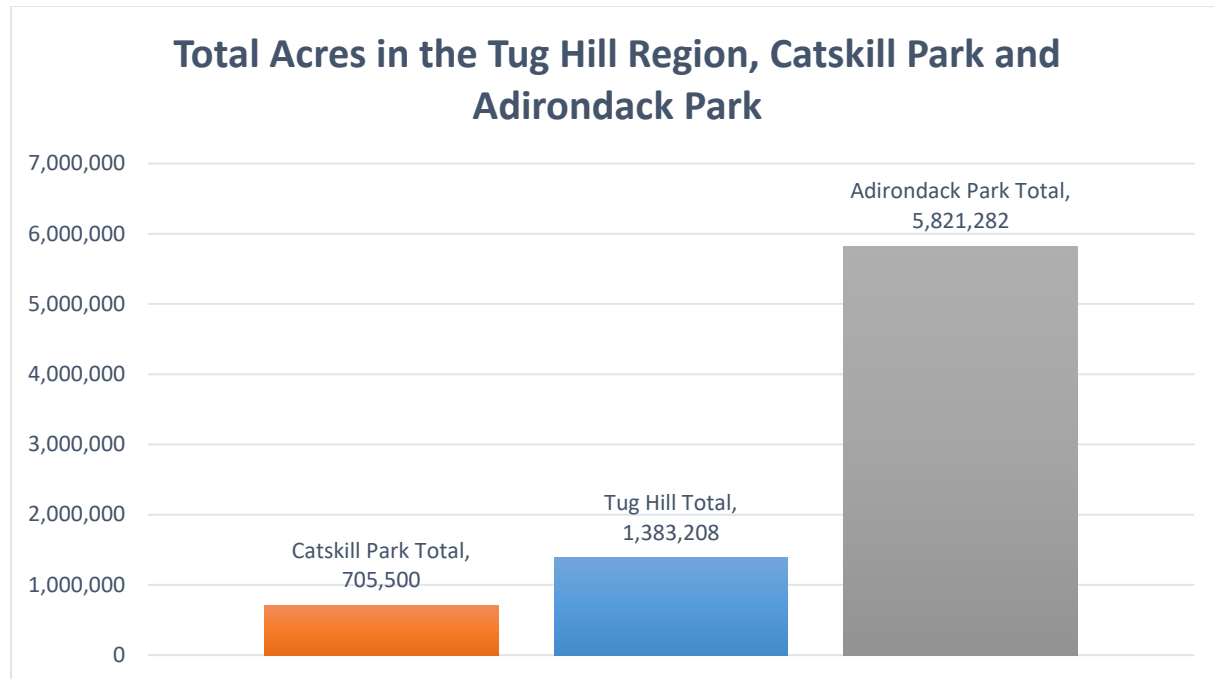


## Comparisons to Other Areas of the State

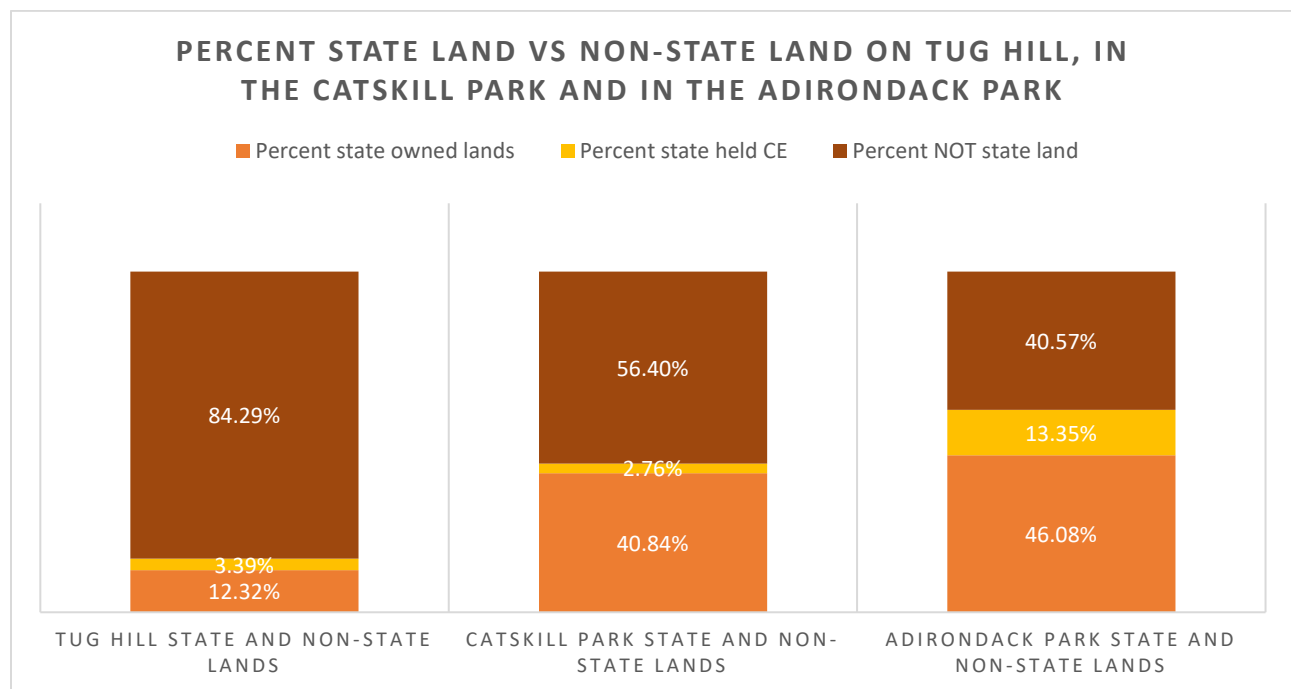
The Tug Hill region, as the third-largest forested region in New York State, is often compared with the Adirondack and Catskill Parks, which are the first and second largest forested regions in the state, respectively. In many ways, however, Tug Hill is very different from both constitutionally defined State Forest Preserves.

In terms of overall size, however, Tug Hill (1.38 million acres) is almost twice as big as the Catskills, but only about a quarter of the size of the Adirondacks. In state ownership patterns, Tug Hill has roughly 16% of its land in state held fee properties or easements.

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This differs greatly from the Adirondack Park, which is 5.8 million acres in size and is almost 60% owned by the state or in state-held conservation easement<sup>1</sup>. This also differs greatly from the Catskill Park, which is 705,500 acres, and nearly 44% held in state owned or eased lands<sup>2</sup>.



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/59645.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/59645.html>

### Why are some Tug Hill lands protected?

A public or private landowner may limit development on their property for many different reasons. These may include maintaining or increasing wildlife diversity, protecting water quality to support public water supply, securing recreational opportunities, passing property on to future generations, or maintaining land for agricultural and forestry uses, to name just a few. Conserved land can contain any number of cover types, such as forest, pasture, grassland, cropland, shrub land, wetland, stream, or pond.

In some instances, landowners and organizations may work together to protect a larger, contiguous area. Maintaining a blend of different types of habitat throughout a large geographic area helps provide for a larger diversity of wildlife species. Large blocks of forested land make forest management easier and more profitable. Contiguous agricultural lands maintain a necessary acreage of tillable land to support dairy and other farming operations.

New York State makes clear its conservation goals in the statewide Open Space Conservation Plan, first adopted in 1990 and most recently updated in 2016, available at [www.dec.ny.gov/lands/98720.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/98720.html). The state's open space conservation program was designed to ensure citizen input to the land acquisition decisions made by NYSDEC and OPRHP. The state's conservation goals, as they apply to the Tug Hill region, can be found in the plan's Appendix A, [www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands\\_forests\\_pdf/osp16a.pdf](http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/osp16a.pdf). Tug Hill falls into NYSDEC Regions 6 and 7 of the regional advisory committees' reports.

- Important Habitat Connectivity
- Species and Habitats of Greatest Conservation Need
- Important Bird Areas
- Town of Western "Wilderness Camp"
- Fort Drum Army Compatible Use Buffer Project
- Black River Valley and Corridor
- Inman Gulf
- Tug Hill Core Forests and Headwater Streams

Private conservation organizations state their reasons for conserving lands in their individual mission statements and strategic plans. They may or may not use the terms "land trust" or "conservancy" in their organization's name. These organizations work with willing landowners who negotiate the terms of sale or easement according to the landowners' needs and how well the project fulfills the conservation organization's mission. Most private land trust organizations are certified as 501(c)3 charitable organizations to accept donations of land or conservation easements from landowners, and to be able to provide income tax charitable giving benefits to those landowners.



### What tools are used to protect land in the Tug Hill region?

To protect land, a landowner may choose either to sell or donate all or part of their property to New York State or to a qualified not-for-profit organization whose mission includes conserving land in a manner consistent with the landowner's wishes. Additionally, a landowner also may choose to enter into a conservation easement agreement with the State or a qualified not-for-profit organization, which maintains the landowner's ownership of the property but provides additional protection from the outside organization. A conservation easement agreement has monetary value, as determined by independent appraisal, and so can be sold or donated to a government agency or not-for-profit conservation organization.

### What public agencies protect land, and by what methods?

#### **State Owned Conservation Lands**

The state owns approximately 170,000 acres in the Tug Hill region, largely comprised State Forests and Wildlife Management Areas (all managed by NYSDEC), and State Parks (managed by OPRHP). Salmon River Falls in the town of Orwell and the Raywood forest property in the town of Lewis are the only State Unique Areas in the Tug Hill region. The Von Steuben Memorial in the town of Steuben is the region's only State Historic Site, and the region contains three State Parks: Whetstone Gulf, Pixley Falls, and Delta Lake. Interestingly, a few parcels of NYS Forest Preserve land are found in the region, often referred to as Detached Forest Preserve parcels. Those properties were acquired before the Adirondack Park's boundary was delineated, when the entirety of all those counties were considered Forest Preserve in the late 1800s.

#### **County Conservation Lands**

The Tug Hill region consists of portions of four counties: Jefferson, Lewis, Oneida, and Oswego. Each county owns a certain amount of county forest land, with varying management goals.

Jefferson County's forest properties are managed by the county's Soil and Water Conservation District for multiple purposes, including timber harvest and recreation. The county's board of legislators approves the management plan for the county's approximately 5,465 acres of forest, all within the Tug Hill region. Management involves a sustained yield of forest products annually, in addition to maintaining several miles of trails, including the Washington Park Day Use Facility in the town of Lorraine.

Oswego County owns approximately 2,092 acres of county reforestation properties, all in the Tug Hill portion of the county. The Oswego County Soil and Water Conservation District is responsible for these properties and manages the lands according to a sustainable forest management plan.

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Lewis County owns approximately 4,067 acres of forest land with about 1,245 acres within the Tug Hill region. Most of the properties are conifer plantations of Norway Spruce, Red Pine, Scotch Pine and White Pine. Lewis County forests are managed primarily for recreation.

Oneida County owns approximately 6,300 acres of forest land, with approximately 5,780 acres in Tug Hill.

### **Town Conservation Lands**

Towns can also protect land for specific purposes, such as recreation. In the town of Trenton, for example, private landowners with adjacent ownerships have protected their properties with conservation easements, and the town has designated its adjoining property as park land. It would take an act of the New York State legislature to change this designation by the town, and so ensures that the land will likely stay in its current use.

## What private conservation organizations work in the Tug Hill region?

The three main conservation organizations that conserve land in the Tug Hill region are the Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy and the Adirondack Land Trust.

### **Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust (THTLT)**

THTLT is a regional, private, nonprofit organization founded in 1990 by a group of Tug Hill residents, and incorporated as an independent, nonprofit 501©3 organization in 1991. THTLT primarily serves the Tug Hill portions of Jefferson, Lewis, Oneida, and Oswego counties. They also work with landowners outside the region if there are no other organizations available, the landowner goal fits into THTLT's mission, and the property has public conservation values (such as the Army Compatible Use Buffer program around Fort Drum north of Watertown, and the West Canada Creek in Herkimer County). THTLT was formed for two purposes:

- to help increase awareness and appreciation of the Tug Hill region through educational materials, field trips & special events; and
- to help retain the forest, farm, recreation and wild lands of the region through voluntary, private land protection efforts.

As of June 2020, THTLT has worked with landowners to protect 12,944 acres (an increase of 652 acres since 2015) on Tug Hill using conservation easement agreements. THTLT also protects an additional 6,643 acres outside the Tug Hill region through conservation easements. The 142-acre Joseph A. Blake, Jr. Wildlife Sanctuary, located in the town of Rutland, is the first property that the land trust owns. For more information, visit [www.tughilltomorrowlandtrust.org](http://www.tughilltomorrowlandtrust.org).

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### **The Nature Conservancy (TNC)**

Established in the early 1900's, TNC is a global conservation organization that works to protect ecologically important lands and waters for nature and people. The TNC chapter that covers Tug Hill is the Central and Western New York Chapter (CWNY), headquartered in Rochester, NY. Staff at the CWNY Northern New York field office in Pulaski oversees their Tug Hill program. TNC CWNY was a major partner in protecting the 44,500-acre East Branch of Fish Creek watershed area, assuming outright ownership of 14,000 acres of headwaters, and transferring land and easements to the DEC that protect the remaining 31,850 acres. TNC subsequently negotiated conservation easement agreements on its 14,000 acres to be held by the DEC, which are also now in place.

The East Branch of Fish Creek conservation easements resulted in approximately half the watershed being placed under permanent protection from subdivision and building development. The East Branch of Fish Creek easement and acquisition program continues to be TNC's largest easement project in New York State. For more information about TNC visit [www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/new-york/](http://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/new-york/). More information about the East Branch of Fish Creek is available at [www.tughill.org/services/natural-resource-management/east-branch-of-fish-creek/](http://www.tughill.org/services/natural-resource-management/east-branch-of-fish-creek/) and [www.dec.ny.gov/lands/8052.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/8052.html).

### **Adirondack Land Trust (ALT)**

ALT currently holds conservation easements protecting the Black River Environmental Improvement Association's lands near Boonville. Public access is granted on these lands for hiking, cross-country skiing, and horseback riding. More information about ALT is available at [adirondacklandtrust.org/](http://adirondacklandtrust.org/).

## Summary

The amount of protected land on Tug Hill has increased since the commission first analyzed the issue, from 249,221 acres in 2015 to 254,495 acres in 2020, an increase in 5,274 acres. Some of this increase may be attributed to improved and corrected data sources but is also due to the state acquiring the Stave Mill State Forest property (see a short video here about this property at [youtu.be/fEj0dgUNO24](https://youtu.be/fEj0dgUNO24)) and lands below the Salmon River Reservoir along the river. Only 12% of land on Tug Hill is owned by NYS. Private landownership still dominates Tug Hill, especially as compared to the Adirondacks and Catskills, which points to the importance of private landowners and their land management goals and objectives in maintain Tug Hill's open space.