



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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Cover photo: East Branch of Fish Creek by Mickey Dietrich.

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 www.tughill.org for more information.

Introduction

Protected lands are lands designated and managed for the purpose of conserving their natural, cultural, recreational, or ecological values through legal or institutional mechanisms that restrict or prohibit development. These protections support a range of public policy objectives, including safeguarding drinking water supplies, preserving biodiversity, managing forests and wildlife, and providing recreational and scenic resources. Ownership may be public or private, and protection can be achieved through fee title acquisition or through legally binding conservation easements. In New York, public agencies such as the Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC), as well as private conservation organizations including The Nature Conservancy (TNC), The Conservation Fund, and regional land trusts like the Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust (THTLT) play central roles in land protection efforts.

According to NYSDEC, approximately 22% of the state's lands, inland waters, Great Lakes, and ocean areas are considered conserved either through fee or conservation easement ([NYSDEC, 2024](#)). These lands may be held in public or private ownership and may have varying degrees of protection, ranging from forest preserves, which are 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 subjected to modification through legal processes.

This paper provides a current and updated inventory and assessment of protected lands within the Tug Hill region, focusing on ownership types, protection mechanisms, and their implications for regional land use planning and conservation policy.

Methodology

For this analysis, protected land is considered property owned outright (in fee) by a public entity or a private land conservation organization for conservation purposes. Land is also considered protected if a conservation easement exists for the property. A conservation easement is defined by the NYSDEC as a “voluntary legal agreement that protects the natural resources of a parcel of land by restricting future land use and/or development on the property in perpetuity (permanently). This agreement is held between a private landowner and a governmental agency or land trust, with the landowner maintaining ownership. The conservation easement can be either sold or donated, resulting in a variety of tax benefits for the landowner ([Conservation Easements, NYSDEC](#)).” Please see the commission's issue paper, [Conservation Easements](#), February 2022, for details on easements.

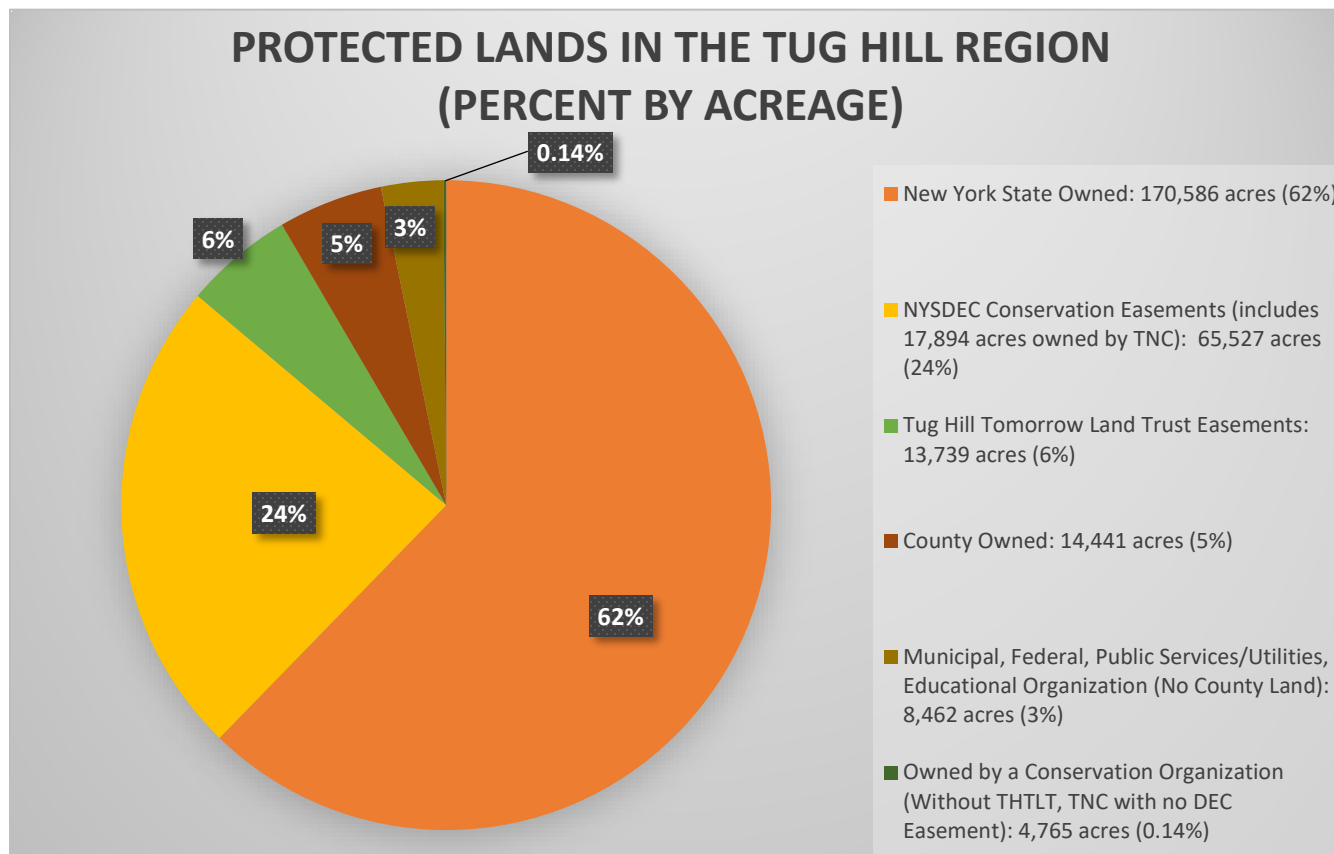
The [United States Geological Survey](#) (USGS), has a Geographic Information System (GIS) layer of U.S. terrestrial and marine protected areas. This was used as the basis of this analysis, along with information from THTLT, NYSDEC, New York Protected Areas Database (NYPAD), and county real property tax parcel databases. The USGS and NYPAD data are 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 2025. Still, due to variations in source data, all figures and acreages provided herein should be considered approximate and for informational purposes only. An interactive version of the [NYPAD map](#) was also consulted to help validate and cross-reference land protection status in the Tug Hill region.

Land Ownership and Protected Lands in the Tug Hill Region

Tug Hill's Protected Lands

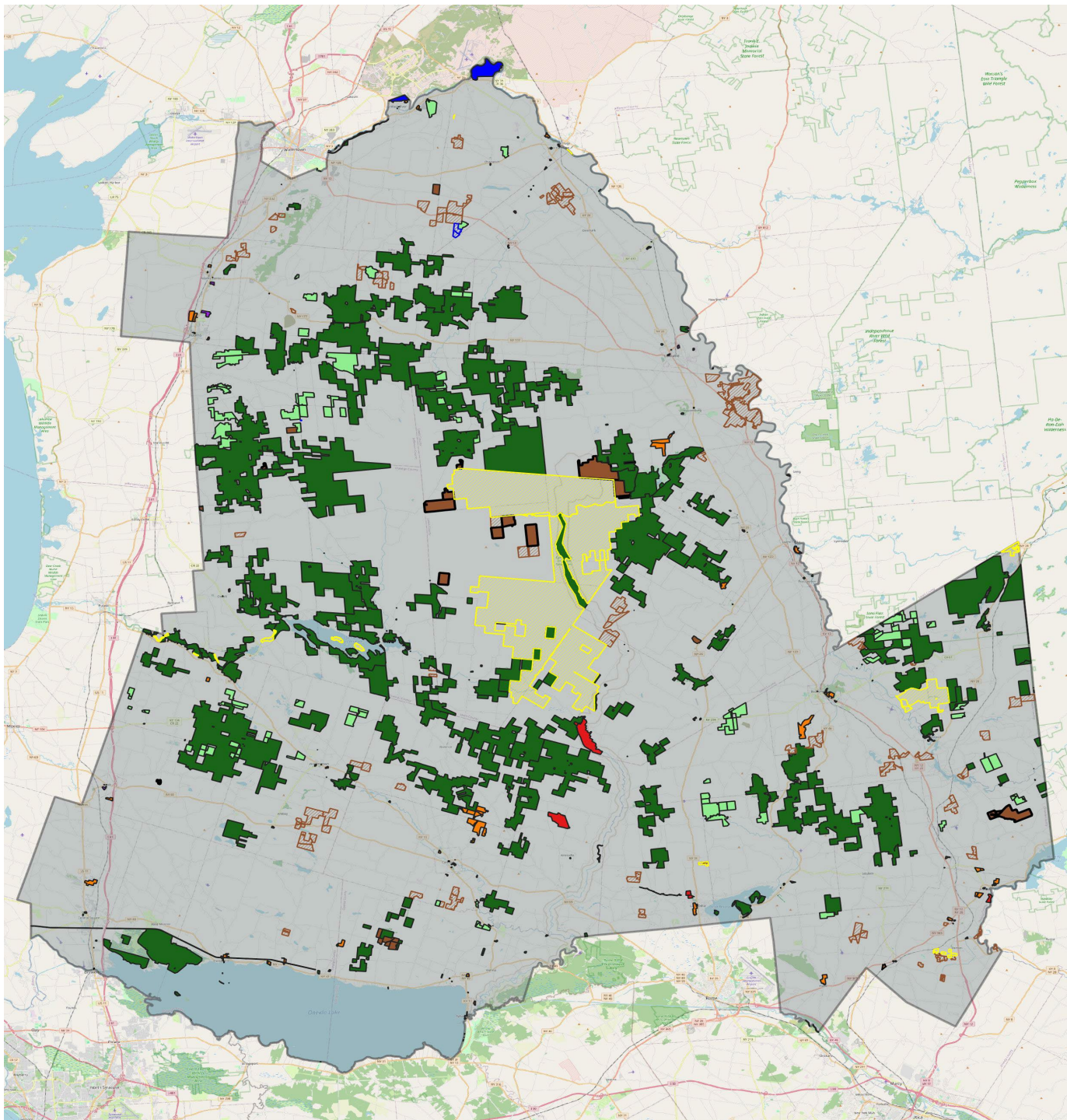
There are 1.38 million acres of land in the Tug Hill region, and by the Tug Hill Commission's calculations, 19.8% of those acres are considered protected. When the commission published the first version of this paper in 2020, 18.4% was protected. The 1.4% growth in protected acreage has come from increases in state-owned land, land with conservation easements held by the state or conservation organizations, and other municipal, federal, public service, and educational organization-owned land.

About 62% of the protected land on Tug Hill is owned by NYS and primarily managed by the NYSDEC and the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP). Easements make up about 30% of the protected land on Tug Hill. This includes NYSDEC-held easements on approximately 65,527 acres on both privately owned land and land owned by not-for-profit organizations. THTLT holds easements approximately 13,739 acres in the region, and an additional 9,133 outside Tug Hill but within the four-county area.



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 18,265 acres are owned by conservation organizations (i.e., TNC) that are also protected by a NYSDEC easement. Municipalities (towns, cities, villages, counties), the federal government, public utilities, and educational institutions own about 8% of the remaining protected land on Tug Hill.

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Protected Lands in the Tug Hill Region

Legend

Tug Hill Region	Public Services	NYS DEC Conservation Easement
County	State	Federal Conservation Easement
Municipal	Federal	Nonprofit Conservation Easement
Educational	Conservation Nonprofit	

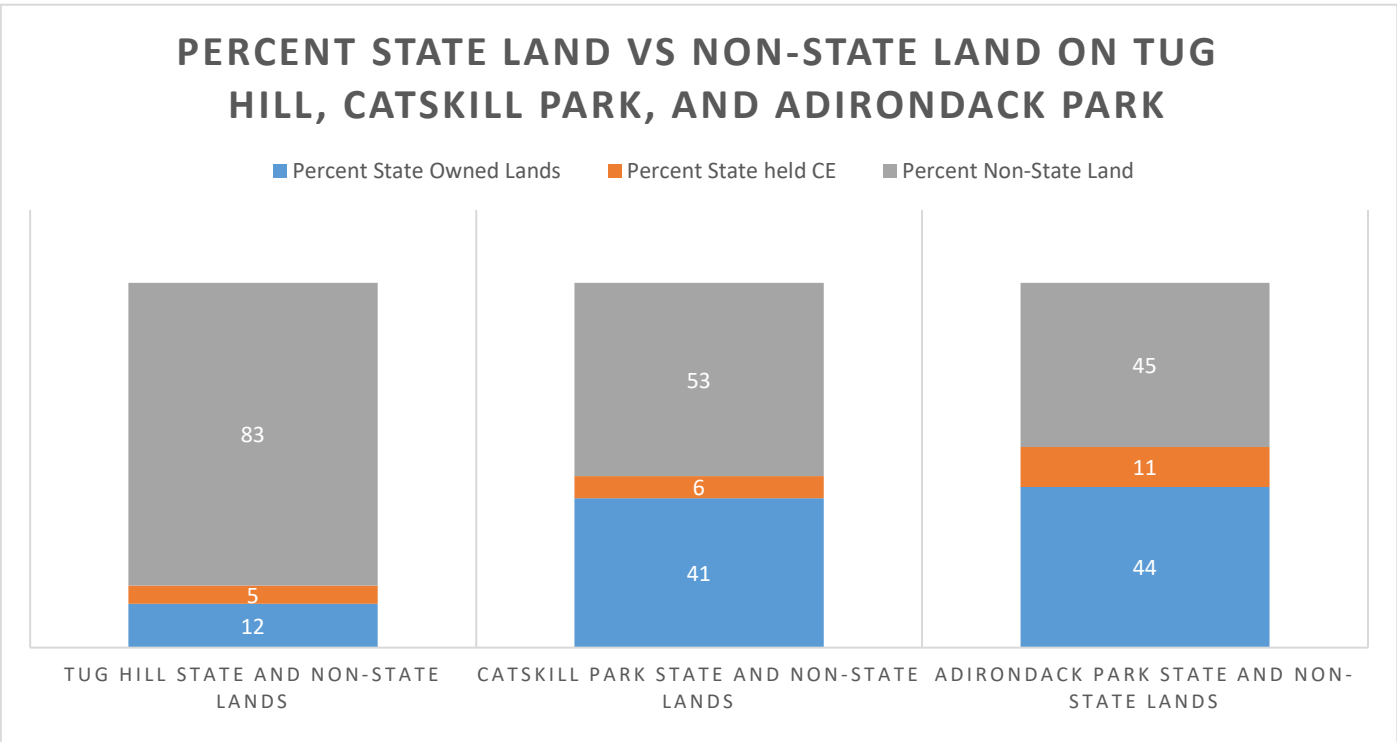
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Comparisons to Other Areas of the State

The Tug Hill region is the third-largest forested region in NY, and 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 different from both constitutionally defined state forest preserves. In terms of overall size, Tug Hill (1.38 million acres) is almost twice as big as the Catskills (700,000 acres), but only about a quarter of the size of the Adirondacks (6 million acres). In state ownership patterns, Tug Hill has roughly 17% of its land in state-held fee properties or easements, compared to 55% in the Adirondack Park and 47% in the Catskill Park. ([Adirondack Park Agency and New York State DEC, 2019](#)). ([New York State DEC, 2008/2014](#)). Private land and its management have a large role to play on Tug Hill. Comprehensive and reliable data sets are lacking for the Catskill Park and Adirondack Park, across both state-owned and non-state lands, to sufficiently delineate the proportion of privately owned and not-for-profit conservation easements, thereby limiting the ability to undertake a meaningful comparative analysis at that level of detail.



Reasons to Protect Tug Hill Lands

A public or private landowner may limit their 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, just to name a few. Conserved land can contain any number of cover types, such as forest, pasture, grassland, cropland, shrubland, 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 habitats throughout a large geographic area helps provide for a larger diversity of wildlife species. Large blocks of forested land make forest management

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easier and more profitable. Contiguous agricultural lands maintain a necessary acreage of tillable land to support dairy and other farming operations.

Tug Hill's Contribution to New York State's Protection Goals

In addition to habitat preservation and working land continuity, conservation in the Tug Hill region also supports New York's climate adaptation goals. Forested landscapes in this region sequester carbon, reduce surface runoff, and help mitigate the increasing frequency of extreme weather events. These functions are highlighted in [New York's Climate Impact Assessment](#) (2024) as essential to safeguard drinking water sources, limiting flood risk, and maintaining ecosystem services ([NYSERDA 2024](#)). Protecting large tracts of forested land on Tug Hill helps to ensure these natural climate solutions remain intact and scalable.

In 2022, New York State enacted Section 113, titled "Thirty by Thirty Conservation Goal," under Article 49 of the Environmental Conservation Law, committing to the conservation of 30% of its lands and waters by 2030. This ["30x30" initiative](#) reflects the state's recognition that strategic land and water conservation is essential to strengthening climate resilience, preserving biodiversity, and promoting public health. Currently, the state estimates that 22% of the state's lands and waters are conserved, as reported in the 2024 30x30 baseline estimate ([NYSDEC 2024](#)). The Tug Hill region with its extensive forests, headwater streams, and productive working lands represents a critical landscape in achieving this ambitious statewide objective.

The state also makes clear its conservation goals in the statewide [Open Space Conservation Plan](#), first adopted in 1990, most recently updated in 2016, and currently undergoing an update scheduled for completion in late 2025 or early 2026. When the new open space plan is released, this paper will be edited to detail the state's goals relevant to Tug Hill, which will be found in the Region 6 and 7 sections of the report. In general, the state's open space conservation program was designed to ensure citizen input to the land acquisition decisions made by NYSDEC and OPRHP.

Protecting Private Land on Tug Hill

Private conservation organizations state their reasons for conserving lands in their 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.

To protect land, a landowner may choose either to sell or donate all or part of their property to NYS 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 may also 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 an independent appraisal, and so can be sold or donated to a government agency or not-for-profit conservation organization.

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Public Land Ownership Breakdown

State-Owned Conservation Lands

New York State owns approximately 170,586 acres in the Tug Hill region, which is largely comprised of state forests, 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 was considered forest preserve in the late 1800s.

Looking ahead, New York State is expected to continue its land conservation initiatives through programs such as the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), forest conservation easements for land trusts, and community forest conservation grants. These programs are aligned with the state's 30x30 strategy and offer targeted opportunities for municipalities, land trusts, and regional partners to access funding.

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 forested 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 5,507 acres of land, 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 2,231 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 through a sustainable forest management plan.

Lewis County owns approximately 1,134 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 5,567 acres within the Tug Hill region.

Municipal Conservation Lands

Towns and villages have the legal authority to protect land for specific purposes, such as recreation or conservation. When a municipality formally designates land as parkland, either through deed dedication, express municipal intent or long-standing public use that land becomes subject to the Public Trust Doctrine ([Legal Information Institute, 2025](#)). Under this doctrine, municipal parkland is considered inalienable, meaning it cannot be sold, leased, or converted to another without prior authorization from the New York State Legislative branch. As a result, municipal parkland is generally considered to be

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permanently dedicated to its intended use, offering long-term protection for public benefit ([New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, 2017](#)).

Private Conservation Organizations on Tug Hill

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(c)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's 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 August 2025, [THTLT](#) has worked with landowners to protect approximately 14,564 acres within the Tug Hill region, and 9,647 acres outside the Tug Hill region through conservation easements for a total of 22,872 acres of conservation easements. THTLT owns almost 825 acres in the region, and approximately 514 acres outside the region, for a total of around 1,339 acres owned in fee. It is important to note that both the map data and the aforementioned fee and eased land totals will change over time as new conservation easements and fee lands are added.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC)

[The Nature Conservancy](#) (TNC) is a global conservation organization dedicated to protecting ecologically significant lands and waters for both nature and communities. In the Tug Hill, TNC's New York Division, based in Rochester with a field office in Pulaski, led the protection of roughly 44,500 acres in the [East Branch of Fish Creek](#) watershed. This included the acquisition by TNC of the 14,000 acres of headwaters now under permanent conservation easements held by the NYSDEC. TNC also manages an approximately total of 17,920 acres across Tug Hill, where climate adapted forestry practices are being demonstrated. These methods aim to enhance species diversity and carbon storage under projected warming scenarios.

Adirondack Land Trust (ALT)

[ALT](#) holds permanent conservation easements on land owned by the Black River Environmental Improvement Association ([BREIA](#)) near Boonville, ensuring their ecological and recreational protection in perpetuity. To date, the ALT has protected a total 28,332 acres of land to include 125 miles of shoreline and 7,500 acres of farmland mostly in the Adirondack region. They currently hold conservation easements on 1,154 acres of BREIA land. Established in 1984, BREIA was founded to conserve and enhance scenic and historical values in the Adirondack-Tug Hill region, growing into one

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of the largest classic cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and mountain biking trail systems, with more than 31 miles of groomed trails. ALT's easements guarantee public access and align with both recreational and conservational goals. The protection of the 184-acre Black River Headwaters parcel under easement since 2007 underscores ALT's long-term commitment to preserving critical watershed areas.

The East Branch of Fish Creek Conservation Easement: A Unique Tug Hill Example of Land Protection

Beyond land protection, the East Branch Conservation Easement is governed by a formal recreation management plan, which ensures public access through designated parking areas and a multi-use trail network that accommodates hiking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, among other outdoor recreational activities. Recognized in the New York State Open Space Conservation Plan as a priority watershed, the East Branch supports intact headwater streams that are vital to maintaining regional biodiversity and aquatic habitat quality. The watershed delivers essential ecosystem services, including drinking water protection for downstream communities to include the cities of Rome and Onieda and support for economically significant activities such as forestry, hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation. The East Branch tract represents one of the largest conservation easements in New York State in terms of both acreage and ecological function.

Summary

The amount of land protected in the Tug Hill region has increased by more than 25,000 acres from 249,221 acres in 2015 to 275,165 acres in 2025, reflecting a growing recognition of the region's ecological value. This difference could also reflect a change in the data as it becomes more accurate and accessible over time. As of 2025, approximately 19% of the Tug Hill region is conserved, which is trending towards the statewide current baseline of 22%. With private landowners holding a significant share of the remaining landscape, future progress will depend on voluntary conservation partnerships, sustainable land use practices, and continued access to state and federal funding. Protecting the Tug Hill's forests, watersheds, and agricultural lands not only preserves its rural identity but also provides a measurable contribution to climate resilience, biodiversity, and ecosystem integrity statewide.

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