



MASSACHUSETTS
LAND TRUST
COALITION

State Public Policy Update

September 12, 2025

Under the guidance of our Policy Committee, MLTC focusses its administrative and legislative advocacy on increasing state investment in land conservation and the work of land trusts, and maximizing the integrity and natural resource value of protected lands and unprotected lands of significant conservation value.

2025-2026 Legislative Priorities

The 2025-2026 legislative session started on January 2, 2025. MLTC's top priorities for the session are:

- **The Nature for All Bill** ([H.901/S.597](#), Rep Blais, Rep. Montañó & Sen. Feeney)
This bill would dedicate a portion of the existing state sales tax for conservation, restoration and improvement of lands and waters to benefit nature and people. The Joint Committee on the Environment held a hearing on the bill on July 1, 2025. MLTC submitted [written testimony](#) and also signed on to [The Nature for Massachusetts Coalition's joint written testimony](#) as well. Both House and Senate versions of the bill have attracted a very large number of co-sponsors. On August 11th, the Senate bill (redrafted as [S.2571](#)) was reported out favorably and sent to the Joint Committee on Rules as a next step. Action on the House bill is pending. Meanwhile, a subset of the large Coalition that has been advocating for this bill has decided to mount a parallel effort to place the matter before voters in November 2026 via initiative petition. The two efforts are moving forward under a single [Nature for Massachusetts](#) umbrella. See members of the legislative coalition [here](#). See members (as of now) of the ballot coalition [here](#). On September 3rd, Attorney General Andrea Campbell approved advocates' preferred version of the [ballot petition](#). Supporters must now submit nearly 75,000 certified signatures by December 3, 2025. If these signatures are verified, the proposal will be sent to the State Legislature in January 2026 for its consideration. If the Legislature does not enact the proposal by then, proponents must gather 12,429 additional signatures from registered voters by July 1, 2026, to place the proposed law on the November 2026 ballot. Those interested in joining the Coalition supporting this effort can fill out [this form](#).

An Act increasing the conservation land tax credit ([S.2083/H.3147](#), Sen Tarr and Rep. Jones)

This bill would expand the annual cap on the state's conservation land tax credit program, resolving a long-standing waitlist for landowners willing to permanently conserve their environmentally significant properties. For more information, see this [fact sheet](#) and [WBUR coverage](#) from Martha Bebinger on the importance of expanding the tax credit. A hearing before the Joint Committee on Revenue was held on July 1st. Mark Wamsley testified on behalf of Kestrel Land Trust and MLTC's Policy Committee, alongside Zach Sheldon from The Nature Conservancy and landowner Edith Wislocki, who spoke about her experience donating a Conservation Restriction to Rehoboth Land Trust. See MLTC's written testimony [here](#). As of September 8th, action on both versions of the bill is pending.

FY2026 State Operating Budget

On July 4th, Governor Healey approved a \$60.9 billion operating budget for the fiscal year that began July 1st. The final budget reflects \$130 million in vetoes from the version the Legislature sent her on June

30th. Reflecting growing concern about looming federal budget cuts, the final budget is more than \$1 billion lower than the version the Governor herself filed in January. As a further indication of concerns over fiscal uncertainty, the Governor said she would extend a recently imposed hiring freeze and delay some earmark spending with the option to cancel it entirely if conditions worsen. Environmental programs were among those adversely impacted by the conservative mood. The Department of Ecological Restoration, EEA Admin and the Department of Public Utilities Admin each saw cuts ranging from 8.6 - 9.9% compared to last year's funding levels, while the Office of Environmental Justice and Equity was cut by over \$2.5 million – nearly 29% of its budget. On the positive side, the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) State Parks and Department of Fish and Game (DFG) Admin each saw increases of just over 2% compared to last year. As fiscal conditions evolve, the Administration is expected to file supplemental budget bills to respond to potential additional cuts in federal funding.

State Capital Budget

On June 30th, the Healey-Driscoll Administration released its 5-year capital spending plan. The Plan includes over \$3.2 billion in capital spending during FY26, with new growth focused on housing and economic development. Unlike the operating budget, capital spending is substantially supported by borrowing, as authorized under various bond bills. Federal and other sources supplement what the state is able to spend in a given year. Compared to FY25, the State projects a \$44 million (i.e. 10.6%) decrease in capital spending, including an 18% decrease in the capital line for the EEA, and a nearly 22% drop for the Department of Fish and Game, which is impacted by a \$12.5 million drop in federal funding. Meanwhile, DCR is projected to see an \$11 million increase (i.e. 8.4%) compared to FY25. See detail on planned spending for Energy and Environmental programs [here](#). Read more about the overall plan [here](#).

Environmental Bond Bill

On June 24, Governor Healey filed her long-awaited environmental bond bill as [S.2542](#), ***An Act to build resilience for Massachusetts communities*** (also known as the [Mass Ready Act](#).) Every five years or so, the legislature passes an environmental bond bill to authorize future capital spending for a wide range of state programs essential to land conservation and other environmental programs. A variety of policy changes are attached to bond bills as 'outside sections' and become law when the bill passes. On July 15th, the Joint Committee on the Environment held a hearing on the bill, with MLTC Executive Director Robb Johnson and a large number of MLTC's partner organizations testifying. Written testimony was submitted by [MLTC](#) and also by a large [Coalition](#) of which MLTC is a part. As the bill works its way through the legislature, MLTC will continue to work closely with coalition partners on potential amendments to strengthen it.

Other Bills MLTC Supports

An Act investing in natural and working lands ([H.1005/S.549](#) Rep. Meschino & Sen. Comerford) to promote acquisition and management of natural and working lands to reduce impacts from climate change. A hearing date before the Joint Committee on Environment and Natural Resources is anticipated in coming weeks. Read more about the bill [here](#).

An Act relative to uniform partition of heirs property ([H.1964/S.1239](#), Sen. Lovely) to increase protection for legal heirs of property owners who die without a will in place. This bill was heard on April 22, 2025 before the Joint Committee on the Judiciary. See a letter of testimony submitted by MLTC [here](#). As of September 8, 2025, Committee action on both versions of the bill is pending.

An Act accelerating wetlands restoration projects ([S.557](#), Sen. Crighton) to facilitate expanded wetlands restoration. This bill is the centerpiece of a Mass Audubon to Accelerate Wetland Restoration across Massachusetts. Learn more about the bill [here](#). The Joint Committee on Environment and Natural

Resources held a hearing on the bill on June 3, 2025. See a joint letter of testimony that MLTC supported [here](#). While Committee action on the bill is pending, aspects of this bill were included as an outside section in the Environmental Bond Bill ([S.2542](#), aka “The Mass Ready Act”) filed by the Governor and now under review by the Environmental and Natural Resources Committee.

An Act to reimburse the George L. Darey Inland Fisheries and Game Fund ([S.579](#) Sen. Durant, [H.1066](#), Rep. Vieira) to consistently reimburse MassWildlife for revenue lost from providing free hunting and fishing licenses. A hearing date before the Joint Committee on Environment and Natural Resources was held on July 1, 2025. As of September 8, 2025, Committee action on both versions of the bill is pending.

An Act relative to Urban Farmland, ([S.61/H.121](#), Sen. Gómez, Rep. Duffy) to support conversion of vacant lots and underutilized land in environmental justice communities into urban farms, community gardens, and other agricultural enterprises. A hearing before the Joint Committee on Agriculture will be held on September 16, 2025 at 10:00 am. For more information on signing up to testify (by 5 pm on September 14th) or how to submit written testimony, see [this page](#).

Proposal for a legislative amendment to the constitution relative to agricultural and horticultural lands ([S.11/H.71](#), Sen. Comerford, Rep. Blais) to authorize lower tax rates for agricultural land regardless of the size of the agricultural parcel. A hearing on this bill was held before the Joint Committee on Revenue on March 25, 2025. See our written testimony in support [here](#). The Senate bill was reported out favorably on May 1 2025, but on the same day, the House bill received an “ought not to pass” decision. Supporters are currently exploring next steps.

An Act to report payments in lieu of taxes for state-owned land ([S.1939/H.3032](#), Sen. Comerford, Rep. Blais) to improve equity in the distribution of state payments in lieu of taxes (PILOT) to municipalities that host state land and facilities. The bill would revise payment formulas to provide additional reimbursement for the value of ecosystem services provided by state-owned land, such as drinking water protection, habitat for endangered or threatened species, outdoor recreation, carbon sequestration, and landscape connectivity. As of September 8, 2025, a hearing date before the Joint Committee on Revenue has not yet been announced. Meanwhile, on August 13th, the Governor issued an [Executive Order](#) establishing a Commission on PILOT for State-Owned Land. The Commonwealth owns over 500 million acres of land across the state, and makes PILOT payments to municipalities to help offset some of the revenue lost from having those properties on the tax rolls. Municipalities with the most state-owned land are primarily in Western Massachusetts, but under the current funding formula they receive lower payments than communities in eastern Massachusetts due to lower property values. The Commission will be charged with evaluating potential changes, with particular attention to geographic equity.

Other State Policy Updates

MEPA Streamlining Proposed for Development and Restoration

On September 9, 2025, Governor Maura Healey announced a proposal for expedited environmental permitting for certain projects that are currently required to submit a full Environmental Impact Report (EIR) under the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA), either because of their size or location in an environmental justice community. To qualify for relief, projects would have to be at least 67% housing and meet additional criteria regarding floodplains, energy efficiency, and access to existing water infrastructure. Land that is in Priority Habitat, prime farmland, or the top quintile of high carbon storage forests would not be eligible. Redevelopment is incentivized, though up to 10 acres of land clearing is allowed provided there is some tree planting and retention. This proposal would override a 2021 change in the MEPA statute requiring an EIR for all projects in EJ communities undergoing MEPA

review. The proposed changes would also exempt Ecological Restoration Limited projects from a mandatory EIR. These changes are distinct from other permit streamlining proposals that were included in the Mass Ready Act (Environmental Bond Bill) filed by the Governor on June 24 and currently under review by the Legislature. Public hearings on these latest proposed regulations will be held October 14 and 15, with comments due by October 31. If approved, the change could take effect by the end of this year. Learn more [here](#).

State Biodiversity Goals

On August 21, 2025, Governor Maura Healey released [“Biodiversity Conservation Goals for the Commonwealth”](#), a 25-year plan to protect and restore nature across the state. She also announced Massachusetts’ intention to join the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), making Massachusetts the first state to do so. The Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game developed the plan with input from state agencies, municipalities, Tribes and community partners. The plan sets biodiversity targets for 2030, 2040 and 2050, including for coastal and marine habitats. Learn [more](#).

Sign on to Support Accelerating Wetland Restoration Across MA

Mass Audubon is coordinating a campaign to increase the pace of wetland restoration by reducing the time and expense involved in permitting these beneficial projects. To demonstrate the depth and breadth of support across the state, you can join the list of organizations and communities supporting the transformation of restoration permitting to accelerate progress. You can review the statement and sign on [here](#). For more information contact Heidi Ricci at hricci@massaudubon.org

Open Space Act (“PLPA”) Implementation

MLTC continues to monitor implementation of An Act Preserving Open Space in the Commonwealth (the “Open Space Act”, formerly known as PLPA), which took effect in February 2023. Under the law, implementing regulations were supposed to be promulgated by August 2024, but they have yet to be issued. EEA has offered three rounds of public comment on the [draft regulations](#) MLTC coordinated a group comment letter in January 2025, which can be viewed [here](#). See our second comment letter from March 2025 [here](#). Despite recent inquiries, EEA has not been able to say when the regulations – now more than a year overdue – will be issued. The state’s [Open Space Act webpage](#) provides a variety of important resources on the Open Space Act, including a Tracker with information submitted about proposed Article 97 actions, and list of Article 97 change-of-use petitions that passed in the 2023-2024 legislative session.

Energy Facility Siting

MLTC will work with partners to advocate for robust measures to avoid, minimize and mitigate impacts on ecological and human communities from the siting of new energy-facilities. Recent developments include the following:

- [SMART 3.0](#)– The Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources (DOER) issued updated draft emergency regs in June 2025 for this incentive program, and these will be finalized soon. SMART 3.0 includes a new approach to scoring parcels hosting incentive-eligible solar ground-mount projects using environmental/land use/electric grid criteria and sets up a system for mitigation fees. Details on final scoring and values will be described in a forthcoming guidance document, and a public comment period on the guidance is expected.
- **Energy siting and permitting regulations under 2024 Grid Equity Act.** This law has a number of provisions intended to mitigate the impacts of energy facilities on communities and the environment, including creation of a financial assistance program for those who face barriers commenting on projects under review; new community benefit requirements; a requirement to analyze cumulative impacts, and site suitability criteria. Learn more [here](#). Draft regulations are

anticipated to be released for public comment soon, along with additional stakeholder sessions to inform the public. Under the 2024 law, regulations are due March 31, 2026.

- **Solar model by-law development.** DOER recently led stakeholder sessions seeking initial inputs and feedback on a new draft model bylaw for solar and energy storage. The draft bylaw guidance will be consistent with the regulations discussed above.

Appeals Court Affirms Drought Restrictions

On July 31, the Massachusetts Appeals Court affirmed a lower court's decision that the state can legally require registered water users to restrict nonessential outdoor water use during droughts. Mass Rivers and eleven of its member organizations submitted an amicus brief supporting MassDEP regulations that had been challenged by a group of water suppliers. The decision affirms the importance of tools to protect the sustainability of rivers and water supplies as climate change brings projected increases in seasonal drought. [Read more.](#)

Uncertainty re: Federal Funding and Executive Orders

Given on-going uncertainty, MLTC has posted some [resources on our website](#) for federal grantees and others seeking information. As things continue to evolve, we'll do our best to share relevant updates on that page.