The willingness to invest in land and water conservation is a growing local and national trend. Nationally, 85% of local and state wide environmental ballot initiatives to protect land and water resources were successful in 2005.

Conservation organizations across the Commonwealth stand ready to work in partnership with the State and maximize our collective resources. However, the ability of private nonprofits to leverage private investment depends on a strong, creative and consistent commitment by the State.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has the opportunity to build upon this public support and have a profound impact on the future of the Commonwealth, preserving our landscape for generations to come.

Whether we live in the heart of the Berkshires or the center of Boston, our communities and quality of life depend on healthy land and water.

Our organizations, representing a combined membership of more than 250,000 Massachusetts families, have united to advocate for new policies and comprehensive and consistent funding for the natural resources that are important to all of us.

With careful planning and strong, reliable investments by the Commonwealth, we can together create a sustainable and productive landscape of farms, forests, and protected natural areas while meeting the economic, housing, transportation and recreational needs of Massachusetts residents.
Strategic Actions for the Next Two Years

Protect Lands of Statewide Significance
In recent years, the state scaled back funding for protecting critical natural resources of statewide significance, including wildlife habitat, working farms and forests, and state parks. We must act now to ensure that the integrity of our natural resources is protected before they are gone forever.

Utilize Open Space Bonds: Bond bills have long been the most reliable investment funding for state land protection programs. The 2000 Open Space Bond bill received unanimous approval by the Legislature and authorized $70 million annually for land conservation.

Revise Statewide Conservation Plan: Update the statewide land conservation plan to identify priority areas for conservation. Use new and existing geographic and scientific data to plan strategic protection of outstanding agricultural, forested, forestland, recreational, scenic, and water supply resources. The plan should also reflect the critical need to enhance urban neighborhoods with accessible open space and greenways.

Ensure Adequate Agency Staffing: The Division of Conservation Services as well as the Departments of Agriculture, Recreation, and Fish and Game must be adequately staffed to work with landowners, municipalities, and land trusts to protect critical natural resources of statewide significance.

Encourage Statewide Land Protection Efforts: Expand land conservation efforts by the Departments of Agriculture, Recreation, and Fish and Game to ensure that natural resources transcending municipal boundaries are protected. Use grants that appropriately address their importance.

Establish a Conservation Tax Credit: As it has done in several other states, a modest state income tax credit would provide a much-needed incentive to increase voluntary donations of important resource lands, including working farms and forests. Donations made to the state, towns, and qualifying nonprofits would leverage the existing federal tax deduction.

Improve our Public Parks
A clean, safe and well-run State Park system, which includes parks, forests and beaches in urban, suburban and rural settings – is integral to the state’s well-being. Our State Park system is an economic engine that boosts tourism, stimulates investment in our communities, and attracts knowledgeable workers to our state. Today, the Commonwealth is desperate for leadership to save our parks. The Department of Conservation and Recreation is chronically under-funded, leading to a $1.1 billion backlog of needed facilities. We need a multi-tiered approach to maintain General Fund support for parks; to establish a dedicated source of operational funding and to allow new self-generated funds to be kept by DACR.

Maintain General Fund, Establish New “Retained Revenue” System and Utilize Bonds For Capital Backlog: Creating a sustainable funding system for our State Parks will require continuing strong support through the General Fund as well as allowing DACR to keep new revenues that it generates. In the short term, securing bond funding is essential to addressing the $1.1 billion backlog.

Complete Resource Management Plans for State Parks: The Department of Conservation and Recreation is currently developing management plans for the park system. The completion of these plans - to inform the public, municipalities and conservation organizations should be a top priority for agency staff.

Keep Our Working Lands Working
Development pressures pose an enormous threat to working farms and forests in Massachusetts, from dairy farms and sawmills in the Berkshires, to vegetable farms in the Connecticut River Valley and cranberry bogs in the southeast. This is a now or never moment, especially for the dairy farmers who control a quarter of the cropland in the Commonwealth and are in a severe economic crisis.

Decision action is needed to boost the funding for the Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program and expand development incentives to ensure that working farms remain economically viable. Similarly, encouraging conservation of working forests and the expansion of sustainable forest-based businesses will utilize a previously untapped economic resource while responsibly managing our forests.

Invest in Working Farms: The state’s APR program is nationally recognized as a farmstead protection leader, but it has limited funding and is highly competitive. A New Open Space Bond bill should provide increased funding for the conservation of working farms and forests.

Give the history of recent funding cuts and the constant pressure on farmers to sell their land for development, the state should seek an additional, “emergency” appropriation to purchase APRs on all qualifying well-listed farms as soon as possible; before significant additional farm land loss occurs.

Invest In Working Forests: Establish a new, separately-funded “working forest” program - modeled after the permanent conservation and complement the federal Forest Legacy Program.

In addition, the Commonwealth should maintain the Forest Stewardship Council’s (FSC) Green Certification of State Forests. Becoming the first state in the nation to receive this third-party certification for management of all state-owned lands is a milestone for Massachusetts. Recertification is critical to maintaining management of our own lands, permanently protecting ecological reserves and practicing sustainable forestry. FSC certification, which is considered the gold standard of sustainable forestry, can also be applied to private lands under the Chapter 61 program.

Help Communities Protect Local Lands
Healthy and vibrant communities are the foundation. The state works with local communities to protect drinking water supplies, create parks and natural areas and maintain local character and identity. The state’s efforts to leverage local investments in state parkways – including Community Protection Act, Self-Help and Urban Self-Help – are integral to keep our cities and towns vibrant and must be sustained.

Preserve Community Protection Act Matching Funds: Due to the presence of ‘dollar for dollar’ matching funds from the state, CPA has enabled 118 cities and towns to balance affordable housing with open space preservation; with the state’s matching funds set to decline by 2008, cities and towns may opt out of CPA unless the CPA Trust Fund receives an increase in the dedicated fee that sustains it.

Sustain Self-Help and Urban Self-Help Programs: Established in 1961 and 1977, respectively, these state programs are an invaluable source of support for Commonwealth municipalities looking to acquire or restore land for conservation and recreation, or to build and repair recreational facilities.

Dispose of Surplus State Lands Appropriately: Historically, the Commonwealth has not regularly considered conservation as a primary objective when disposing of surplus state lands. Where appropriate, municipalities and conservation organizations should be given the right of first refusal on these dispositions.

Stable Communities
Land conservation helps manage demands on municipal services in cities and towns, and adds value to land that is developed. Smart growth combined with smart conservation reduces the costs of community services by directing development to areas related to existing infrastructure: by incorporating natural resource protection into their planning; municipalities can encourage housing and employment opportunities while enhancing the health and beauty of their community.

Recreation
Outdoor recreation helps maintain our physical and spiritual health: improved maintenance of state parks and other public lands in both urban and rural areas, will make quality recreation opportunities accessible to all residents and attract more skilled professionals to our state.

Economy
Quality of life for employees is an important factor for businesses deciding to relocate. The diverse natural beauty in Massachusetts contributes to its attractiveness. Travel and tourism is the Commonwealth’s third largest industry, supporting 15,500 jobs and generating $3.24 billion annually. An expanded program of conservation will help to ensure that Massachusetts will continue to be a desirable place to live and visit.