The Healey-Driscoll administration has released a work plan for the “Forests as Climate Solutions” initiative unveiled a year ago.

While Healey’s team is winning praise from environmentalists, some feel it doesn’t go far enough to safeguard state lands from logging.

The initiative will set new forest management practices and promote both forest conservation and an enhancement of existing forest reserves.

The Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs had previously viewed logging as necessary for invasive species management, habitat creation and water quality control. Some argue those practices have done irreversible damage.

“They are headed in the right direction, but they’re not doing enough,” Michael Kellett, executive director of RESTORE: The North Woods, said of the initiative.

Kellett and other conservationists are worried about the future of woodlands, particularly in Western Massachusetts.

Based on a land designation system from the state Department of Conservation and Recreation, lands categorized as reserves and parklands are protected from forest management and logging practices. Woodlands, which cover much of Western Massachusetts, are not.

Karl Dziura, a Conway environmental advocate, became interested in forest protection after the Conway State Forest was selected for management in 2018. Due to a logging moratorium, the project was postponed, but Dziura has continued his conservation work.

Dziura says the state has been approaching private land trusts, hopeful they will volunteer their land as forest reserves. If this happens, he believes logging will continue on public woodlands. He wants to see state forest lands protected.
“[The Healey-Driscoll administration] has accepted the widely understood premise that we need more land in reserves,” Dziura said. “But I can’t understand why that can’t happen on state land first.”

Dziura expressed frustration with the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, which he feels has “stonewalled” the public and ignored pleas to follow scientific findings regarding forests.

Dziura said he would like the Department of Conservation and Recreation to practice greater transparency regarding its forestry practices.

“We have repeatedly begged them to have a public conversation on these issues,” Dziura said. “We would like to ask questions, we would like to share sources. There isn’t even a number saying how much carbon is expended annually by logging in Massachusetts, which we would like access to.”

Both Kellett and Dziura said while the new Forests as Climate Solutions initiative is forward-thinking, it falls short. The initiative places about 10% of state lands in reserves, compared to international goals to protect about 30% of the planet by 2030.

In Kellett’s opinion, more legislation for reserve expansion needs to be introduced. He echoed Dziura’s concerns for refocusing reservation efforts on public lands.

“Not maximizing reserves on state lands, they’re not going to make up the deficit on private lands,” Kellett said. “Because most of the state woodlands are in Western Massachusetts. It’s more important than ever that we have more legislation.”

The most effective way to maintain carbon storage, he and others say, is to keep trees intact, which is the overarching premise of the initiative.

The Healey-Driscoll administration is also taking environmental action elsewhere. The governor recently announced $1 million in grants for soil quality, which will play an additional role in carbon sequestration and storage.

**The plan**

Features of the Forests as Climate Solutions Plan include the following:

- Conserve 40% of the lands and waters in the Commonwealth by 2050.

- 10% of all forested land in Massachusetts, both state and privately owned, is set to be put in reserves (about 300,000 acres).

- The Commonwealth will “perform active management considering the recommendations of ... climate adaptation experts.”
• “Prohibit deliberate removal of older forest to create younger forests primarily for the purpose of enhancing annual carbon sequestration.”

• Forest management to maintain watersheds will continue “passively” as “active management has contributed to maintaining a healthy forest filter that protects the water supply.”

• “Pursue enhanced data gathering, mapping, analysis, and provision of land use and related data to inform land conservation and land use policies and programs.”