A Message From MHLC’s Associate Director

Fall is here and following a summer of record high temperatures with drought and severe storm events across the country, we thought this edition of Loving Your Land should focus on the climate crisis and how we can all help.

As a landowner who has protected your land, you have already taken an important step to ensure your property doesn’t grow houses instead of trees, ensuring continued carbon sequestration on the land. The climate crisis is an overwhelming challenge. Where should I start? How much am I willing to change? These are all questions we are asking ourselves.

In this issue, you will find quick, easy solutions you can institute on your property (some of which you already may be doing!) to increase carbon sequestration. We have a great profile with Jeff Leon of the Strawberry Field Preserve in Montgomery County. Jeff’s passion for the climate and his ‘at home’ actions will inspire you. He has some great tips!

We hope this issue encourages you and finds you welcoming the change of season towards another year of loving your land!

Sincerely,

Sarah Walsh
Associate Director
Property Enhancements for Combating Climate Change

Every acre that is protected with a conservation easement that contains plants, trees, soil and water is combating the climate crisis. Through photosynthesis, plants are taking carbon from our atmosphere and storing it in their roots and shoots, making food and releasing life-giving oxygen. For those of you who have protected land, you already have one box checked for helping combat climate change.

There is more each of us can do to help, which can start at home on the land you love. Here are some simple solutions you can implement with small costs and big gains for helping our earth while also improving the health of your land.

Plant Native

In past issues, we have talked about the benefits of encouraging native plants and removing invasives from your property. Native plants support a plethora of native insects for birds and other wildlife to feed on and are a great source of nectar for pollinators. Native plants also have more extensive root systems, growing deeper and wider than non-native and invasive plants. Deeper roots mean more surface area for storing carbon – thus making natives more efficient at storing carbon to combat climate change. Replacing just a few plants each year can provide great benefits to the climate, pollinators, and the wildlife on your property. Native plants also tend to be more drought tolerant than non-native, ornamental plants.

Here’s a great resource from NYS DEC’s website for native flowers, grasses, shrubs, trees and vines: https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/factnatives.pdf.

Plant Trees and Manage Your Forests

We know that trees are the ultimate carbon storers. Research shows that old growth forests are the most efficient for carbon storing. But what if you don’t have old growth? New research is showing that multi-age tree stands, meaning trees that are not all the same age, but vary in ages, are the next best thing. By removing some trees to allow young trees to come in or planting young trees along the edge of an older forest year after year, you are creating the age dynamics for this type of forest structure.

Be sure to check your conservation easement to ensure you can remove trees before embarking on this practice. Here is a great resource to guide management strategies to improve your forests for carbon: https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/factnatives.pdf.

The take home here is – the best way to fight climate change is keeping forests as forests!

Compost

The USDA states that 30% of trash in the US is food scraps. Creating a home compost pile or using a composter is a great way to improve your soil at home and reduce waste going into the landfill, which is a methane (greenhouse gas) generator.

Composted food scraps provide lots of nutrients for your garden and create “fat soil” meaning full of nutrient and microbes that all sequester carbon. Composted soils also retain more moisture, reducing water use for gardens too!

Here’s a great resource for getting started on home composting: https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/factnatives.pdf.

We hope these little suggestions are helpful and perhaps you are already doing them! For those who would like more guidance on changes they can make, check out this recent article: https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/mar/07/six-key-lifestyle-changes-can-help-avert-the-climate-crisis-study-finds.
Thinking about solar? Be sure to check-in with your easement documents!

Reducing Your Footprint: Can I install solar on my property?

Moving to an alternative energy source is a great way to reduce your impact on the climate. Installing solar panels, heating and cooling with geothermal systems, using mini splits to heat and cool with electric, green energy or installing wind generators are all good ways to reduce your footprint.

Does my easement allow for this use? Before you make your plans for alternative energy, check-in with your easement document. Most easements refer to this as non-commercial clean renewable energy structures and improvements and are usually mentioned in section 7 of an easement. If you can't find this section, or if the easement language is unclear, reach out to Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy staff and we can help.

What siting is best for the environment? Once you have established this as an acceptable use within the conservation easement, looking for site placement is important to ensure the conservation values of your land will remain protected. You can use Scenic Hudson’s Clean Energy, Green Communities: A Guide to Siting Renewable Energy found here to help you site your project, https://scenichudson.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/renewables-siting-guide.pdf.

As always, please be sure to reach out to MHLC staff when starting projects to ensure you are not violating your conservation easement. We provide fast and thorough responses to ensure your project is not held up.

Strawberry Fields Profile:
Using Conservation to Answer the Climate Crisis, a Conversation with Landowner Jeff Leon

How did you come to purchase your property?

My father bought what is now Strawberry Fields on Easter Sunday, 1968, after seeing a small, classified ad in The New York Times that morning. It was on a whim to make the trip, and he later said the place reminded him of a farm in Spain he visited as a boy. Three years later, he passed the 118 acres to me. It sounds like there's more to the story, but let's leave it at my father had his reasons. My growing family came up here most weekends from Manhattan until 2000 when the kids were embarking on their own lives and I made it my full-time home.

How did you come about placing a conservation easement on your property?

The simple answer is that protecting Strawberry Fields from over-development was one of my personal responses to global warming. When I closed the life chapter of working for money in 2002, I spent some quality time thinking about what else I wanted to do. Given that I had been concerned about humans' negative impacts on the environment since the '60s, it quickly became apparent that personally addressing global warming had to be my next priority. It was obvious that what I had been doing for the environment—practicing the 3R's, driving more fuel-efficient cars, growing some of our own food, etc.—were not nearly enough, even if everyone did those same things, to halt, let alone reduce, the damage already done. It was also obvious that emissions had to stop, so I embarked on the road to net zero and sought ways to step up my mitigation efforts. I'd heard about land trusts before and soon was discussing protecting Strawberry Fields with the Mohawk Hudson (then Albany County) Land Conservancy. Keeping land from being developed is the ultimate way to mitigate climate chaos. Coincidentally we did the easement about the same time our home reached net zero operation.

As a private landowner, your property is unique in that you allow the public on portions of it. Can you tell us the mechanics of this public access and why you decided to share your land with people in this way?

Another part of thinking about my priorities was that more people had to be more respectful of the environment, so sharing the nature trail that has been a primary source of my deepened environmental consciousness was an objective from the beginning. As the kiosk says, Strawberry Fields is dedicated to contemplating humanity's connection with

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narrative. The mechanics are straightforward: the nature trail is leased to MHLC, and, for now, I am the steward. The public is asked to stay on the marked trails, and after five years and thousands of visitors, only a few folks have gotten off track. It gives me great pleasure just knowing that others can enjoy the same things I do.

What do you manage for on your land, is it pollinators, timber, wildlife and/or bird habitat?

All of the above! We manage for wildlife first and limited human access second. Harvesting timber is not a consideration, but having healthy woods is. Our goal is to have a wide variety of habitats, from open fields and water to successional habitats and wetlands to woods, thereby supporting as much biodiversity as possible. This land also has two homesteads and an organic, regenerative working farm. By the time we did our easement, we'd learned that we have over 300 plant species and over 100 bird species living here, plus lots of mammals, mosses, lichens, and fungi. We're in close daily contact with nature, which is both a joy to experience and a despair to experience its diminution. Probably not many will join me in mourning the disappearance of bugs, but they would when they realize that's one reason why there are fewer birds. These days I can sit on the porch at dusk and not get eaten alive, and where I used to see dozens of swallows eating those mosquitoes, I see none, one or two. Even though we're protecting nature, it is still dying away. My optimism comes from seeing how quickly nature can often return when conditions improve.

Can you tell us about the Motus station on your property and its public benefit?

In July 2020, an international consortium called MOTUS erected a radio antenna at Strawberry Fields that is part of a network of hundreds of east/west lines of receivers from the mid-Atlantic to Canada. Bird researchers tag their subjects with RFID chips (like on a credit card but fitted with backpack straps that go over the wings) that are read whenever the birds pass within 9 miles of an antenna. The data is uploaded automatically by cell phone to a database that is publicly accessible. This spring, a Tennessee warbler was tagged in southeastern Ohio in mid-April and was “seen” flying over Strawberry Fields 10 days later! This is a big improvement in bird research versus the leg banding days. The generated data will lead to conservation plans for species of concern, but we don't include detected birds in our bird list unless it has been seen by eyes or heard by ears.

How did you implement all these things with a conservation easement on your property?

We became long term partners with MHLC when we signed our conservation easement. MHLC is the permanent partner, and we're the current partner. All the things we've done since then have been with communications, whether they've required permission or not. The working farm was all built post-easement. We discussed all those plans, even though building in the Acceptable Development Area is permitted. As the easement donor, I know that Mohawk Hudson's and my goals are aligned. I value the breadth of knowledge they can bring to my stewardship. The next generation of ownership - our kids - are aware of the easement and support it.

Plan a visit to Strawberry Fields Nature Preserve! Visit our [website](https://www.mohawkhudson.org/resources) for preserve information and directions.