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*Protecting land and encouraging land stewardship in North Central Massachusetts*

Re: Organizational Commitment to the First Light Learning Journey

Dear First Light Organizers,

Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust operates in the north central part of Massachusetts, which is located in the Territory of the Nipmuc people. We acknowledge that the land we conserve was sustainably stewarded by the ancestors of the still present Nipmuc community for twelve thousand years before European colonization. We also acknowledge that these lands were wrongly taken from the Nipmuc people and it is important to identify pathways by which our land trusts can return land access to the Nipmuc people. There is a responsibility for land trusts and other conservation organizations to learn and understand the legacy of Indigenous land dispossession and the harm this caused to Indigenous people and their culture, and how land trust can move to repair these harms.

Four years ago, Mount Grace made a commitment to fully engage in this work we are calling, land justice. We created and hired a full-time position to help integrate land justice into every aspect of our organization. We realized that this important work could not be an add-on to current employees' already full workload. If we were to engage in this work in a meaningful way, it required a full-time commitment. Now in year four, we have expanded this commitment to two positions, a Land Justice Director and a Land Justice and Conservation Project Manager, which is currently filled with an enrolled member of the Listuguj Mi'gmaq First Nation.

Over the last four years we have worked to develop relationships built on respect and trust with the Nipmuc community, including Nipmuc Tribal governance, Nipmuc-led NGOs, Nipmuc-led farms, and Individual Tribal members. We have developed cultural respect agreements & easements, co-stewardship plans (Nipmuc-consulted Forest Management Plans), supported Nipmuc-led projects and events, assisted with Nipmuc-led advocacy at the regional and State level, helped Nipmuc groups with grant applications, and are currently working to develop co-management plans (Nipmuc-led Forest Management Plans). We are also working with Nipmuc NGOs and the State-acknowledged Chaubunagungamaug Nipmuck Band Tribal Council to locate land and complete land return (colonial deed transfer) projects. We have also co-created, with the Nipmuc-led NGO, No Loose Braids, a year long training for six neighboring lands trust to help them learn to work with Indigenous communities in a respectful and reciprocal manner to increase the number of land trusts in Nipmuc Territory engaging in land justice work.

We have also developed a relationship with the Native Land Conservancy, founded by members of the federally recognized Mashpee- Wampanoag Nation. They have been our mentors in this work and we currently have an active land project with them, which contains significant ceremonial stone structures, and includes access rights for the Nipmuc community.

Mount Grace also just completed a 3-year strategic plan for our organization in which land justice was an overarching strategic priority for our organization. We have integrated land justice into our organizational vision and have developed specific strategic goals across our organization including conservation, stewardship, and development to guide our work over the next three years. We have also institutionalized funding into our operational budget to fund Indigenous land stewardship and other expertise from Nipmuc contractors.

We sent our Climate and Land Justice Director, Jenn Albertine, to the First Light Short Course, in 2022, making us an alumni organization. We will send 2 board members and 6 staff members to this year-long First Light Cohort 3. Jenn will support this cohort's efforts to bring the learning back "home" to the entire organization. We also look forward to working with other Massachusetts organizations participating in Cohort 3 to integrate the work throughout Massachusetts.

Respectfully,

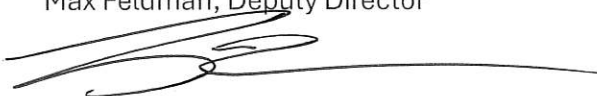
The Mount Grace Leadership Team



Emma G. Ellsworth, Executive Director



Max Feldman, Deputy Director



Liz Wilson, Finance and Administration



David Kotker, Major Gifts and Grants



Jennifer Albertine, Climate and Land Justice Director