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FOR/Maine: A forest industry growth plan for Maine Featured

Written by [Nit-Noi Ricker](https://www.foxbangor.com/news/itemlist/user/1861-nitnoiricker)

**ORONO -** Maine's forest industry has been declining for years.

But some folks at the University of Maine believe that there are new uses for wood products on the horizon that could change things around, with the proper investments and plan in place.

“This piece of plastic-like material basically is 100 percent nanocellulose,” said Mehdi Tajvidi, UMaine assistant professor of renewable nanomaterials.

Nanocellulose is processed wood pulp, an abundant renewable resource in Maine.

The Forest Opportunity Roadmap or "FOR/Maine" is a coalition of people in the forest industry, in education or in Maine's mill-towns who are working together to rebuild the state's forest economy by diversifying products made in Maine.

“Everything from the bio-plastic that you would package yogurt in, to bio-based fuels to run in vehicles and all sorts of everyday products and chemicals that we rely on every day,” said Charlotte Mace, Biobased Maine executive director. “But instead of making them from crude oil and natural gas, we will make them out of the wood we have right here in Maine.”

Nanocellulose is already being used to make a variety of products.

“What is a renewable source that can replace fossil fuels? Wood fiber can do almost anything that fossils fuels can do,” said Yello Light Breen, Maine Development Foundation president. “We can make bio-chemicals, bio-fuels, bio-textiles. Some of it is already happening around the world. How can we make sure that a lot of that stuff starts happening right here in Maine.”

Members of the group traveled the world to find products that can be made in Maine. One is a bio-plastic called "PLA" that is biodegradable.

“If you put it into the ground, six months later it's gone,” Mace said. “And it returns nutrients into the soil. So it doesn't hang around forever. It doesn't end up in a landfill for 100 years. It biodegrades and that's important to a lot of people in Maine.”

The goal of For/Maine is to increase the forest economy in Maine from around $8 billion annually to $12 billion in the next six years.

UMaine professors and students are working on developing a variety of wood-based products including a lighter and more insulating version of Sheetrock, a fiberboard that doesn't use the formaldehyde and barrier films for food products.

“They basically are like plastics, but the difference is they are all made from bio-products,” Tajvidi said.

The barrier films may someday be used for potato chip bags and other food containers, he said.

“We have an optimistic, long-term future strategy to really grow this industry,” Breen said. “Not to play defense, not just to bemoan some of the mill closings in the past but to ... say Maine has really an unbelievable asset in the Maine woods and we can continue to grow some really amazing economic and job opportunities.”

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