



NEW ENGLAND BACKCOUNTRY HUNTERS AND ANGLERS

March 9, 2023

To Chairman Bennett and members of the House Committee on Environment and Natural Resources

Re: BHA Comments on H5344

Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (BHA) seeks to ensure North America's outdoor heritage of hunting and fishing in a natural setting. Our members believe that the habitats and ecosystems that fish and wildlife rely upon should be managed following the best available science, and we work to enact policies that keep habitat management authority in the hands of the biologists and foresters who are most familiar with the resources being managed.

We support the intent of H5344 – to protect Rhode Island's rare and ecologically valuable forestlands - but are concerned with how the bill proposes to achieve these goals and urge the committee to **hold H5344 for further study**.

Our most significant concern relates to the bill's proposal to replace state and municipal land managers' authority to enlist a variety of management techniques, including logging, to achieve their public land management goals with rigid legislation in the absence of a clear, direct need. The bill states that old growth forests in Rhode Island are at serious risk of being cut for development, which we don't contest on a state-wide basis. However, the scope of the bill is restricted primarily to management decisions that affect lands managed by the state or municipalities, which are far less at-risk of being cut for development than similar lands that are privately owned. While public land forests are occasionally logged and managed using other techniques, the decision to enlist these tools is informed by biologists, foresters, and other experts who work to achieve specific ecological goals, rather than to clear forestland for development.

Rather than advancing H5344 we urge the Committee to rely on the expertise of both the Department of Environmental Management (DEM) and the Forest Conservation Commission (FCC), which was created in 2021 by the enactment of § 2-27, to advise the General Assembly on issues raised by the bill's sponsors. We recognize that it is the General Assembly's responsibility, pursuant to Article 1 Section 17 of RI's Constitution, to steward Rhode Island's natural resources. Under current General Law much of this responsibility is put into action through DEM, who manages state-owned forests through regulatory processes informed by the best available science and public input. Further, we believe that the FCC is well-positioned to examine broader forestry issues, including deforestation for development, on all lands within the state and to provide recommendations on how the General Assembly might address these issues by balancing economic disparities rather than restricting the management tools that state agencies and municipalities can enlist to meet their management goals. The Commission is also tasked with creating an inventory of all forested lands within the state, and developing criteria to define the most important forest lands to conserve, and their work and recommendations should be considered as part of any reconfiguration of the legislature's forest management directive.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments and recommendations, and for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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