



NEW ENGLAND BACKCOUNTRY HUNTERS AND ANGLERS

January 27, 2022

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

Re: BHA Comments on H7066

Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (BHA) seeks to ensure North America's outdoor heritage of hunting and fishing in a natural setting. Our members recognize that to accomplish this mission we must protect and manage the habitats and ecosystems that fish and wildlife rely on and ensure that the public has ample access to them.

With these things in mind we agree with the intent of H7066 – to protect Rhode Island's old growth forests and uncommon forest types – but oppose the methods it proposes to accomplish this goal.

Our primary concern is that the bill seeks to replace the state's ability to enlist a variety of management techniques, including cutting, to achieve public land management goals with rigid prohibitions that have a narrow focus and restrict flexibility to respond to changing needs and conditions in the future. The bill states that old growth forests in Rhode Island are at serious risk of being cut for development, which we agree with on a state-wide basis. However, the bill's prohibition on cutting would mostly affect forested lands owned by the state or municipalities, which are far less at-risk than similar lands that are privately owned. While public land forests are sometimes cut, the decision to enlist this tool is informed by biologists and foresters who work to achieve a wide range of ecological goals rather than convert forestland to other uses.

Rather than advancing the bill our recommendation is to request that the newly created Forest Conservation Commission, which is a result of last year's passage of H5760 & S0470, address the issues identified. One of the purposes of the Commission is to make an inventory of all forested lands within the state and develop criteria to define the most important forest lands to conserve, and a key component of this process should be to identify existing old growth and rare forest types on both public and privately owned lands. The Commission also has mechanisms for the General Assembly to fund the type of research and surveying that is proposed in the bill, and we feel this would be a more effective use of funding towards addressing Rhode Island's greater forest conservation challenges. Addressing these challenges will require a broad view of Rhode Island's forests on both public and private land, and as a result we feel that restricting tools that the state and municipalities can use to achieve public land management goals before the Commission has a chance to issue recommendations would be premature.

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

Sincerely,

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