



## Lincoln AgriSource, LLC

Samuel W. Lincoln

4884 East Bethel Rd. • Randolph Center, VT 05061 • (802) 793-1206



For the record, my name is Sam Lincoln. I own and operate a Master Logger certified mechanized timber harvesting business in Randolph Center. I am part of a multi-generational family that owns farm and forestland. We've been dairy and cash crop farmers, loggers, maple producers and my wife's family also operated a sawmill. At their peak, my agricultural enterprises were doing business with up to 80 dairy, beef, and equine farms per year. I have worked on timber harvesting projects for over 50 individual landowners in central Vermont in the past 25 years, many of them repeat clients during that time (including three legislators), and generated millions of dollars in revenue. I conservatively estimate that I've spent over 16,000 hours working in the forests of central Vermont.

I served six years on the Randolph Development Review Board and followed that with a year and a half on Randolph's Planning Commission. I served as a private sector representative on the Forest Fragmentation study committee for Act 171 in 2016. In 2017, I was appointed by Governor Scott to serve as Deputy Commissioner of the Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation working on forest economy policy, during which time I reviewed Vermont Conservation Design and provided feedback to the authors.

Though there are many subjects I'd enjoy the opportunity to speak with you about, today I'd like to discuss the stewardship of rural land and defining conservation in relation to the goals of H.126.

I support land conservation in different forms and the goals of Vermont Conservation Design. I recognize that H.126 is a plan to achieve that, not a mandate. I have concerns with how the plan is to be developed.

### **Landowners –**

Looking at the Vermont Conservation Design maps, and where the priority areas are, it's important to recognize that millions of acres on the landscape under private ownership are undeveloped in a wide range of shapes and sizes. There are many forms of conservation, easements, and ownership, but millions of those acres remain, what I would refer to as conserved land due to the stewardship ethic and culture of rural Vermonters. The reason so much of Vermont is undeveloped and ripe for conservations is that these are parcels of land that have been transferred from generation to generation by people who saw the highest value in it as working land, providing essential goods for human existence, and for habitat. As science, awareness, outreach, and education evolved, these landowners also recognized the value of this land for biodiversity and as ecologically important areas.

Adding value to commodities raised on the land has a centuries old track record for maintaining Vermont's landscape in an undeveloped state, with remarkable progress in practices, and without a need for permanent restrictions on the use of the land.

### **Forestland owners that I work with have several consistent characteristics –**

- Enrollment in the Use Value Appraisal program.
- Many goals for the management of their land, other than generating revenue from timber sales, but the revenue is consistently important to them.

- They make decisions about their land use based on practical information and best practices they've learned from –
  - Interactions with a licensed consulting forester, or their county forester.
  - They may have been to a Vermont Woodlands walk in the woods, or a VT Coverts retreat.
  - They've read or learned about ecosystem protection from a source they trust.
  - They've enrolled in a program that incentivizes wildlife habitat enhancement.
- They want and need flexibility, within best practices, and their bundle of property rights, to make decisions that work for them.
- The witness list for this bill has included many talented professionals, but barely any testimony from private landowners, and without their participation and buy-in, this concept could not successfully advance.
  - I encourage the committee to hear from landowners across Vermont about the challenges they face and how they would implement these goals. There are tens of thousands of them.

The concepts in H.126 do not appear to have been drafted with private landowners in mind, which is a significant oversight. The word "landowner" appears two times in the draft - once in the findings and once in the development of the plan. Asking for landowners to provide input through a comment period or during three public meetings so someone else can develop a plan on how to conserve their land - when they've been doing it for generations - is, quite frankly, disrespectful. H.126 does not meet Vermont landowners where they are.

#### **Economics -**

- Planning for the cost of conservation at this scale is not addressed in the bill.
- Tax assessment for permanent conservation of land at this scale is not addressed.
- There is no mention of the root causes of forest fragmentation or conversion to land to non-forest uses, which I believe to be based in the economics of land ownership costs, and the forest economy, far more so than a lack of restrictive land use regulations. Landowners that want to keep their land intact and undeveloped need solutions that work in their kitchen table discussions. If efforts to combat fragmentation first appear before a landowner at the town hall permit office, we've already lost the battle.
- Some farm and forest landowners use a strategy of subdividing dwellings, or land for dwellings and other development, from their existing holdings to fund additional purchases of land. Those types of subdivisions are beneficial in adding to the aggregated total acreage of undeveloped land and should be considered in discussions about conservation.

### **Sustainable forest management –**

- As you heard Bob Zaino say, the most efficient way to achieve young forests, and create the habitat is through forest management, which works in conjunction with how landowners have already been sustainably managing forest for generations.
- Implementing sustainable forest management is not a switch that can be flipped on and off. It requires massive capital investment, diverse markets, and a skilled workforce. The forest economy supply chain that currently enables this type of management, is undergoing significant disruptions – economic, cultural, and natural - and this implementation tool is at risk. It would serve the committee’s goals well to have a broader discussion about the forest economy supply chain and understand why and how this land remains undeveloped and stewarded by rural Vermonters.
- As the restrictions on the different categories of easements are considered, please remember that the output of sustainable forest management activities are forest products that are manufactured into essential human needs – traditional building materials, food packaging, medical supplies, energy for homes and institutions – an endless list - and we learned at the beginning of the pandemic just how essential those products are. Not producing them here only externalizes the impact of their production, transportation, and the consumption of that resource to another part of the globe. Not harvesting trees in Vermont does not result in a net decrease in the number of trees harvested on the planet.
- The forest economy supply chain generates \$27 million in annual stumpage payments to Vermont landowners as part of forest management activities. The production and value of forest products has its own conservation effect and is greatly beneficial to the rural economy. If the forest management activities required to meet VCD goals are not economically viable (meaning the market and workforce doesn’t exist to generate positive revenue for the products harvested) they could become an economic *liability* for landowners. Other than investing in infrastructure improvements that enhance access to their land, I have not worked with a forest landowner in 25 years that would have been willing or able to *pay* out of pocket for the implementation of sustainable forest management practices on their land.
- Forest management activities in Vermont with the highest standards of sustainability and ecosystem protection during planning and implementation – public lands timber sales and timber harvests that include chip harvesting for wood fuel – are under threat in other policy discussions.
- Regarding the definition of “sustainable forest management,” my request is that term be defined by the Commissioner of the Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation.

### **Additional concepts to conserve land in Vermont –**

- Ensure that landowners have wide lanes of practical and economically viable options, with guardrails of best practices, to make choices about their land use.
- I encourage the committee to support and expand the work of public/private conservation programs such as Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, Vermont Land Trust, and others, to reach our common goals.

- Add a category of Conservation Subdivision
  - Create guidelines for smaller lot sizes to achieve increased density.
  - Require clustering of the development in a manner that facilitates access and management of the remaining land – with parallel conservation of larger blocks of land on the same parcel.
  - Allows landowners access to cash and equity from their land while providing predictable permit process.
  - Require a minimum acreage of eligibility to maintain large enough blocks of contiguous and operable acreage to support economically viable management activities.
  - This could be modified to achieve broader goals, including those of VCD.
  - Please see the Town of Randolph's [Land Use Regulations](#) that has descriptions and requirements for conservation subdivisions (beginning on page 84 of the document). I contributed to this provision during my time on the Planning Commission and there are some key elements necessary to make this work that should not be overlooked. I would be happy to assist in furthering a discussion with the committee on implementing this category.
- Please take a few minutes to look at the work done by the Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC) – protection of the New York City drinking water supply for nine million residents. I believe rural Vermont landowners will be much more responsive to this type of collaborative effort to reach conservation and ecosystem goals than what is proposed in H.126.
  - <https://www.nycwatershed.org/about-us/>
  - “The Council’s success is directly related to:
    - Voluntary landowner participation within the watershed.
    - The organization is locally controlled through the nonprofit structure, WAC.
    - Water-quality recommendations in the Whole Farm and Forest Management.
    - Plans are funded by the New York City Department of Environmental Protection, U.S.D.A, U.S. Forest Service and other funding sources.”