



H. 126 TESTIMONY

Vermont Ski Areas Association

Molly Mahar, President

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The Vermont Ski Areas Association is a non-profit trade association representing 20 alpine and 28 cross-country ski areas across Vermont. Ski areas are not only major economic drivers and employers in the rural communities where most are located, but skiing is also an important part of the state's tourism, heritage, and culture. Ski areas have successfully conserved and protected lands through master planning and careful management to benefit our state, its natural resources, and the environment over many decades.

Ski areas are part of Vermont's working landscape; they are stewards of the land, and their managers take this responsibility very seriously, spending millions of dollars in planning and permitting to accomplish this to support the state's recreation economy.

Outdoor recreation is an important gateway for many people, both Vermonters and visitors, to understand the importance of our environment and why it should be protected. Skiers come to the mountains for recreational opportunities but also to experience the mountain environment. We strive to manage that environment properly, so people will continue to visit and the capacity to support and promote outdoor recreation will be enhanced.

We broadly support the goals of H. 126 and believe that a more diverse and connected ecosystem is more resilient, that conserved and managed lands help mitigate climate change through carbon storage and sequestration and that maintaining habitat connectivity in Vermont is key to maintaining habitat connectivity for the region.

That said, we want to make sure you understand some unique characteristics of the environment in which ski areas work and the issues that we are focused on for the future.

Vermont's ski areas exist on privately-owned lands, state lands and federal lands and often combinations of private and state land or private and federal land. And while Act 250 governs the use, development, management, and protection of lands where ski areas operate, often state and federal land use policies govern their management as well. For example, ski areas that operate on or partially on state lands must file, seek approval for and manage to an annual stewardship plan and the same is true for areas on federal lands.

Ski areas are managed using an array of tools which include permanent conservation by fee ownership or easements by the State or the US Forest Service or, as you heard from ANR last week, through the Act 250 and ANR permitting processes which impose conditions that govern ski area operations. We support the use of the widest array of conservation programs and tools be used toward achieving the goals

contemplated in H. 126, because the regulatory process provides significant protection for the lands, wildlife and plant species that are on private, state, and federal lands where ski areas operate or adjacent to where they operate.

Last week you heard from Mr. Austin of the Vermont Department of Fish & Wildlife. He indicated that the Department, working with the ski areas through Act 250 and the ANR permitting process over many decades, has resulted in significant permanent conservation as well as permit conditions that guide how ski areas are operated in harmony with the goals of ANR and in support of the lands and wildlife resources we seek to protect. Mr. Austin indicated that there have been efficiencies created in the permitting process because of our long-standing work with the Department.

We agree that efficiencies can happen, particularly in the master planning process when looking at the big picture and planning for future development, management, and conservation. Conservation or planned conservation of larger parcels of land is more predictable and preferred in contrast with piecemeal conservation in the context of permitting individual projects.

Master planning is a lengthy and expensive process for ski areas to undertake, but they view this positively as proactive and necessary work. Businesses like certainty and the ability to plan is how ski areas achieve good outcomes. They increase their certainty by creating a framework for individual projects, as well as creating a framework to ensure that the ski area, the local community, the region, and the state all have a vision of and agree on the goals and preferred outcomes.

Looking now to the future, we have seen that ANR's scope of review and resource tools have been evolving and a lot of focus is now at the landscape level of the largest forest blocks and connecting habitat. This is a much broader view, and this bill would direct ANR to prioritize land conservation in the future to meet the goals of the bill. This creates uncertainty and unknowns for ski areas, and it would be beneficial for us to understand how the Agency will prioritize areas for conservation and make sure we participate in any stakeholder process. This is the same observation we've made when we've talked about forest fragmentation during prior legislative sessions: it is unclear how ANR and other stakeholders will prioritize lands for conservation and protection because if we look at ANR's maps of forest blocks and connecting habitat now, the land area that is identified is very large and even includes some ski areas. Just like in a ski area's master planning process, we need to have a vision to the state's conservation goals and an understanding of the plan to get there, so we can focus future planning efforts.

In closing, we support the broad goals of H. 126, but would advocate for 1) that the widest array of conservation programs and tools should be available to reach these goals, and, 2) advocate for a process, in which we would participate, where stakeholders can have input into how we will focus our collective efforts to determine how lands are prioritized for conservation, either through permanent conservation or other ways, like regulatory processes. Right now, that future vision is unknown and something we hope that H. 126 could help to create and clarify. We are advocating for a process where stakeholders can work with the state to create more certainty around where these lands are that we want to protect and how we can work together to get there.

Thank you.