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March 7, 2014

The Honorable Robert Hartwell
Chair Senate Natural Resources and Energy Committee
Vermont State House
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

Dear Senator Hartwell,

On behalf of Audubon Vermont, I am writing to support the Senate Natural Resources Committee's efforts to curb the rate of forest fragmentation in Vermont. Audubon Vermont is the state program of the National Audubon Society representing 3,000 households in the state. Audubon's mission is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity.

We care about this issue because Vermont and our neighboring states are globally important breeding habitat for millions of neo-tropical migratory birds: birds that winter in the tropics and migrate to Vermont to breed each spring. In fact, Vermont boasts some of the highest diversity of breeding bird species of anywhere in the continental United States. By and large these birds are attracted to Vermont because of our largely intact forest habitat. However, many of these migrant birds are experiencing long-term population declines. Our common birds are less common than they were 40 years ago. For example, our state bird the Hermit Thrush has declined by 63%. Maintaining and improving forest breeding habitat condition is critical if we are to reverse these disturbing population declines.

A number of conservation plans have identified forest fragmentation as the largest threat to birds and forest biodiversity. The 2013 US State of the Birds Report states: *The single largest threat to private forests is increased parcelization, or the breaking up of blocks of forest land into smaller blocks, often for sale and development. Forests are being lost and fragmented due to depressed timber values and higher economic gains from residential development or agricultural expansion. Pressures to sell off land can result in new management objectives that do not include maintaining forest habitat.* Vermont's Wildlife Action Plan identifies forest fragmentation as the largest threat to birds and other wildlife species of greatest concern in Vermont. And Vermont's 2010-2015 Forest Resources Plan states, *"Perhaps the single biggest threat to biological diversity is conversion of forests to other uses. Conversion may stem from parcelization, changing landowner objectives and development. Results of conversion include fragmentation of wildlife habitats, impact to the natural processes, increases in exotic invasive species and the loss of the integrity of natural communities."*

The threats created by forest fragmentation extend beyond the direct impact to birds, other wildlife and their habitats. The loss of habitat and access to forest blocks may also impact an

important but often overlooked sector of our economy. According to a 2011 US Census Bureau survey, Vermont topped all the other states nationwide in “wildlife watching” with 53% of our residents viewing, feeding or photographing wildlife during 2011. Resident and non-resident birders and wildlife watchers spent \$289 million on wildlife-watching activities and adding approximately \$1.7 million to Vermont’s Rooms and Meals tax revenues. These activities contributed to the \$704.4 million spent in Vermont enjoying fish and wildlife recreation.

Addressing forest fragmentation needs to be a priority for the state of Vermont. Audubon Vermont agrees with the statement in the Vermont Forest Resources Plan that the “Conversion of forests to other uses is the greatest threat to sustainability”, and we support the plan’s overarching goal of “no net loss of forest cover.”

There is no one solution to addressing this threat to Vermont’s largest ecosystem. The reports and plans referenced above call for a combination of planning, incentives, property tax reductions, and effective regulation. The 2013 State of the Birds Report states that, “*Strong timber markets help reduce this pressure. Conservation easements—between private landowners and federal, state, or nonprofit conservation groups—also provide incentives to private forest owners, in exchange for agreements to continue to manage working forests and maintain contiguous forest blocks in perpetuity to benefit birds and other wildlife.*” Our Vermont State Wildlife Action Plan calls for addressing habitat issues “through education, legislation, and policy improvements” to “address issues such as sprawl, poorly planned development, and global warming that drive habitat conversion, degradation and fragmentation.” The challenge is finding the right combination of strategies that will effectively reduce fragmentation while not stifling our working forest economy which plays a critical part in keeping our forests as forests.

In addition to supporting a strong Use Value Appraisal Program, full funding for the Housing and Conservation Trust Fund, and a robust county forester program, Audubon Vermont supports the intent of S.100 to curb fragmentation by enhancing Act 250 review of development that leads to the fragmentation large forest blocks. A workable approach may be to restore the “road rule” that would review projects with new “non-forestry” roads over 1,000 feet. If you have questions or would like us to testify please contact me.

Thank you for your time and effort on this important issue.

Sincerely,



Jim Shallow

Conservation and Policy Director

Cc: Senator Diane Snelling, Vice Chair
Senator Peter W. Galbraith
Senator Mark A. MacDonald
Senator John Rodgers, Clerk