



**Prepared Testimony Draft for House Committee on Natural Resources & Energy in Response to H.584**

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify on Bill H.584. I am Eve Frankel, Director of External Affairs for The Nature Conservancy in Vermont. The Nature Conservancy in Vermont is a leader in safeguarding the natural resources of the Green Mountain State where we have been connecting land, water, wildlife and people for over 50 years. We have conserved 300,000 acres of land and over 1,200 miles of shoreline in such iconic places as Green River Reservoir, Camel's Hump and Jamaica State Park. We own and manage 55 natural areas, 54 of which are open for hunting and fishing and comprise 20,000 acres, and we co-own another 24,000 acres of working forestland. We have nearly 7,000 diverse and active members, all who engage with and benefit from the forest in different ways.

Our members are avid sportsmen and women who hunt and fish our lands and waterways and are therefore, committed supporters of our wildlife habitat and water quality work. We also have members who are birders and naturalists who hike our trails and are inspired by our land protection and climate mitigation work. Our members are foresters, 2<sup>nd</sup> home owners, outdoor enthusiasts, farmers, and everything in between and they look to us to speak for the trees and the multiple benefits they provide for our members, for our communities and for the state of Vermont.

I want to begin by stating that jobs do grow on trees. In fact, Vermont forests create over 20,000 jobs every year. Intact forest blocks protect wildlife, our forest economy, and our natural heritage, generating \$1.4 billion in annual revenue for our state. Healthy forests also provide a range of nature based solutions for our water, air quality and climate mitigation efforts that contribute \$16 million dollars in pollution control services each year. Every acre of forestland provides an estimated \$318.50 of services which reduces the impacts of extreme weather events through flood water storage and by improving water quality by filtering nutrient run off before it hits our lakes and streams.

These are also the very things that are threatened by unchecked development and rural sprawl known as forest fragmentation. Forest fragmentation leads to an ecosystem breakdown with serious economic consequences. Smaller and smaller forested blocks that are disconnected from each other threaten our wildlife, reduce recreational and hunting access, increase the threat of invasive species, impact our water, decrease forest productivity and have severe economic consequences for our forest industry.

For example, a fragmented forest is more susceptible to invasive plants and insects--posing real threats to our working forests. Currently we have private consulting foresters who have to advise clients not to conduct a timber harvest until they have controlled the invasive plants in the understory. If the invasive plants are not controlled, a timber harvest releases the invasives to flourish and to suppress future forest regeneration. This scenario plays out on smaller, fragmented forest parcels, but not on large

forest blocks which are more resistant to invasive plants. This is costly for forestland owners and creates a delay in their anticipated revenues and a net decrease in their forest-based income.

Wildlife also becomes compromised due to forest fragmentation. Just like people, animals need to move for shelter, food, water and mating. Populations will not thrive on isolated islands of habitat – they need to intermingle with other populations to avoid inbreeding and narrowing of genetic pools. Connected wildlife corridors allowing for this movement are essential for animals such as deer, bear, and moose, to thrive. Poorly planned sprawl development in the form of scattered roads, driveways and other man made obstacles break up these corridors and increase the incidents of animal vehicle collisions posing safety hazards for drivers. Public access also becomes limited impacting traditional pastimes such as hunting and fishing.

Forests moderate our local climate and help us mitigate long term climate warming. Trees and forest soils store carbon, and retain moisture and nutrients for soil fertility. During this time of rising extreme weather events, the important role of forests in slowing rainwaters cannot be overlooked. Forests absorb the water coming off our hillsides that would otherwise flood our downtowns and result in significant costs to our communities.

Finally, we cannot talk about forests without talking about water. The Nature Conservancy is raising awareness about this connection with our “forest to faucet” campaign. These two incredibly valuable natural resources are inextricably tied together. By compromising our forests, we compromise our water quality and we cannot afford the cultural, social and financial burden of allowing further degradation of our water resources. There has been a lot of talk about being “all in” to be able to effectively fix our water quality issues. Many stakeholders heard that call during Governor Shumlin’s address in 2015. In fact, Keurig Green Mountain invested half a million dollars in our water program to address water quality and what was one of the approaches they invested in? Forest restoration. In looking at the science and the long term solutions to true clean water progress, we know that forests—both upland forests and our floodplain forests—have an important role to play in reducing nutrient run off—one of the main sources of the toxic algae blooms plaguing Lake Champlain. I am sure that you are aware that natural infrastructure in the form of our existing forests is a much less expensive investment than the grey infrastructure of costly wastewater treatment plant and stormwater retention facilities.

After years of neglect and kicking the can down the road, our water crisis in Lake Champlain has reached epic and astronomically expensive proportions. If more was done when the siren was sounded 40 years ago, we could have avoided some of the significant impacts that are being felt now. It is never easy, or popular, or dare I say even sexy, to make preventative decisions, the benefits of which will not be fully realized for years and even then, the success not even fully appreciated because the dire consequences would have been avoided by the actions we are asking you to consider this year.

Therefore, let the water quality crises that we currently face be a sobering lesson about the impacts of not doing enough now. The Nature Conservancy, along with our Forest Partnership, is urging you to enhance this bill with sound forest policies. These include: 1) incentivizing landowners to conserve forestland, 2) improve land use planning tools and regulations to better protect forests, and 3) increase

funding for forest conservation efforts while supporting a sustainable forest economy. These policies are common sense solutions to address what Vermonter's truly value.

Lake Champlain is an example of a system breakdown. The growing forest fragmentation issue is an early warning sign of a system breakdown. We cannot afford to have a policy system breakdown that fails to protect healthy intact forest blocks for the cultural, environmental and economic prosperity of our state.

Thank you for your time.