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February 3, 2016

To: House Natural Resources and Energy Committee
From: Jim Shallow, Managing Director
Re: House Bill 584

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on H. 584. I am here today representing Audubon Vermont. Audubon Vermont is the state program of the National Audubon Society representing 4,000 members in the state. Audubon Vermont is engaging people of all ages in education, conservation, stewardship, and action to protect birds, other wildlife, and their habitats. Collaborating with seven Audubon chapters, and hundreds of volunteers, Audubon Vermont delivers conservation programs across the state. For 52 years, the 255-acre Green Mountain Audubon Center has hosted wildlife and nature programs for people of all ages and backgrounds.

H.584 addresses some important needs to keep our forest economy viable in a global economy which we all agree is an important part in keeping Vermont's forests intact. I want to speak to the global significance of our forest and how changing demographics threaten to accelerate the fragmentation trends we are beginning to see.

The Atlantic Northern Forest of Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine and New York is home to the greatest diversity of breeding bird species in the continental United States.¹ Species like the Black-throated Blue Warbler, Canada Warbler, Wood Thrush, Bicknell's Thrush, and dozens more have in some cases 90% of their global population breeding in this region. Vermont's large forest blocks are a globally important resource. Millions of birds representing dozens of species of birds migrate thousands of miles to breed in our forests. It is no surprise that our state bird the Hermit Thrush is a forest bird. But the populations of many of these seemingly-common species are declining at alarming rates. As a group, eastern forest birds have declined by 32%, due in part to the loss of forest habitat.² Our state bird has declined by 63% over the past 40 years.³ Like the proverbial "canary in the coal mine," these declines are indicative of negative impacts across a range of biodiversity. Vermonters appreciate birds as evidenced by the fact that the 53% of Vermonters watch birds and other wildlife which leads the nation and adds \$288 million to our economy.⁴

Recognizing the role Vermont's forest have in maintaining neo-tropical migratory bird populations, Audubon Vermont launched our Forest Bird Initiative in 2006 to address the threats to forest breeding birds in our state and the neighboring Northern Forest states.⁵ Keeping forest birds common in our region requires maintaining and stewarding a network of large blocks of contiguous forests that are biologically and structurally diverse, as well as healthy and resilient. Our Forest Bird Initiative works

¹ Vermont Biodiversity Report and Partners in Flight Landbird Conservation Plan

² State of the Birds Report 2014

³ Common Birds in Decline, NAS 2007

⁴ 2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation.

⁵ See: <http://vt.audubon.org/forest-bird-initiative-1>

directly with landowners, foresters, and other partners to support forest management and policy that benefits the suite of priority birds in Vermont and along the Atlantic Flyway. Roughly 80% of our forests are privately owned; not surprisingly, 83% of the distribution of 36 obligate eastern forest breeding species is on private lands.⁶ We provide technical assistance for landowners, workshops and trainings, demonstration timber harvests designed with birds in mind, and promoting public policies and programs that protect Vermont's forests and wildlife. We have worked with over 300 landowners who collectively own 250,000 acres and trained 200 foresters who manage over million acres in Vermont and New Hampshire. Our work with these individuals, families and local businesses has shown us that Vermonters care about birds and providing them with high quality habitat. However, we need to support their commitment with programs and policies that will help them maintain and hold-on to their forests.

Our forest bird programs and activities are aimed at reducing forest fragmentation and improving habitat quality. Globally and here in Vermont forest fragmentation is recognized as a significant threat to forest birds. As forest blocks are broken-up breeding habitat becomes less productive due to increased pressure from predators, cowbird nest parasitism, and invasive species. Audubon Vermont supports providing resources and incentives to landowners that will help them keep our forests as well managed forests. It is critical that Vermont continue to maintain a strong Use Value Appraisal program that allows landowners to manage forests for a range of economic and ecological benefits and support funding for forest land easements or full fee acquisition.

Most people when they think about what might be contributing to forest fragmentation think about residential and commercial development or energy infrastructure. These do have a direct impact on our forests, and are important to address but one quiet and often overlooked contributing factor is demographics. We hear a lot about young people leaving the state. But the graying of Vermont has the potential to dramatically change the forest landscape. Approximately two-thirds of the private forests in Vermont are owned by individuals over the age of 55. In the coming decade we will begin to see a significant shift in ownership among generations. Often times when this transfer happens forest land is broken up, sold and its value for habitat, forestry and recreation is reduced. However with proper estate planning and incentives it is possible to keep the forest intact.

Members of the Forest Roundtable have identified one possible way to support proactive estate planning. The idea is create incentives for donations of easements on certain un-fragmented forest ownerships through a pilot program to remove that land value from estate taxes. The exemption would be targeted at undeveloped forest land that is at least partially within a Highest Priority Ecologically Functional Landscape Forest Block (VT F&W map) and be at least 100 acres in size. To qualify the estate would need to meet the following criteria:

- Landowner must be 65 or older on the date of donation, or the donation can be made by the person's estate.
- At a minimum, easement must prohibit all subdivision and prohibit all residential structures and use except for one recreational cabin with intermittent use.

⁶ State of the Birds Report 2013

Audubon Vermont

Re: H.584

If above conditions are met, the land value would be removed from the valuation of the estate for Vermont estate taxes purpose. Program would sunset after 5 years unless renewed by the legislature.

We also recommend convening a legislative task force to develop recommendations for a statewide program to improve the capacity of providing successional planning technical assistance to forestland owners in Vermont.

Thank you for your attention to maintaining Vermont's forested landscape. Audubon Vermont and our members look forward to working with you as you take on the important work of keeping Vermont's forests as forests.