

Ed Larson  
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## Robbo Holleran Forester

211 Green Mountain Tpk., Chester VT 05143 (802) 875-3021 Phone, 875-2337 Fax  
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House Natural Resources Committee  
Via Ed Larson

April 14, 2017

Re: H233, Forest Fragmentation

Dear friends,

This subject has received much consideration over the recent years and months, and so I will keep my comments brief and look at the bigger picture.

First of all, there is no crisis. Vermont's large blocks of forestland are not at high risk for development. Act 250 already covers anything serious. After 100+ years of farm abandonment with ever increasing forest acres, we have peaked at about 80% forest a few decades ago. We may have lost 2% of forest acres over the past 20 years, but there is no momentum for this to be a tragic trend. We are not between Washington DC and Baltimore. I think that much of this 2% has been nibbling at the edges of already developed areas, reclaiming of marginal farmland for renewed agriculture, and the occasional "mansion in the wilderness". When flying over the state, which I do frequently in Google Earth, I do not see a crisis in this regard.

The crisis that I do see is at the kitchen table of landowners. I think we can all agree that we want landowners to maintain their land as forest. We might argue over details of management, but keeping it forest provides this wide range of public benefits. These landowners have done this, for decades. Forest management is a very long-term, low yield investment. We want to encourage this investment. What these landowners need is stability, and has the Vermont legislature offered that? Have the legislative bodies done anything to encourage forest investment or merely left the tax and regulatory challenges alone for a few years?

I manage almost 50,000 acres, mostly in southern Vermont. My clients have generally been stable ownerships, and I seldom do any conversions or UVA withdrawals. The ones I do are usually carefully planned, a house for the kids, or perhaps clearing pastureland for actual farming. In the past 6 years, I have had a number of larger landholdings decide to sell the land and move their capital out of Vermont. 30, even 20 years ago, Vermont was still seen as a reasonable long term investment. For these landowners, the tax and regulatory burden has removed the incentive, the stability, of investing in growing trees in Vermont.

The area to which the current proposal applies is vague. Landowners have no idea what is about to be changed in their rules for operation. You and I have no way to notify them, or ask their opinion. Yet, these are the same landowners who have done what is appreciated for these past 100+ years: leave their land as wildlife habitat, perhaps manage it for wood products, pay their taxes, and demand very little in terms of services like road access or fire protection. There should

be some way to reward them, instead of taking away their rights to use their land in certain ways. How much of this is already protected with state or federal ownership, conservation easements, or Use Value Appraisal liens? Probably more than half of these mapped blocks, as a guess.

The maps which had been offered included huge swaths of the state, seemingly more than half, as “priority blocks”. I understand that a large portion of the state is undeveloped, “wild” land. If the state had some cost associated with designating a priority, such as the cost of purchasing conservation easements, I think the map would look much different. If it cost the state even \$100 dollars per acre, then they would show us the real priorities for habitat connectivity. My guess is that there are some potential gaps like crossings on major highways or river valleys where habitat connectivity is threatened. But to paint half the state as “Highest Priority Habitat Connectivity Blocks” is like walking through the grocery store and saying: “I’ll take everything in this aisle, and those six aisles, and just put it on my credit card”.

This is a complex issue which has been looked at from many angles over the past year, and even decades. A Shumlin appointed study committee spent this past summer and fall dealing with this, and came to no consensus. In particular, they did NOT recommend Act 250 as the tool to deal with this, AND they said that any solution had to be a holistic approach to the tax/regulatory/forest management issues which large landholdings deal with. There is another bill to review Act 250 changes, and it is premature to make these changes to Act 250 before this comprehensive review of both Act 250, and the wider range of issues involved with large landholdings.

How do we, as a society, reward the landowners who have done these things that we appreciate? We could simplify the Current Use program to reduce their costs and regulatory burden. We could roll out the red carpet for forest products businesses, so these landowners have ready markets competing for their products. We could give support for good stewardship, and promote the wide range of stewardship possibilities. And we could promote Vermont’s forest products and recreational opportunities.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Robbo Holleran