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House Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife Committee

Testimony of Michael DeBonis, Executive Director, Green Mountain Club on H.233

April 25, 2017

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.233. I am testifying on behalf of the Green Mountain Club. In addition to my role as executive director of the GMC, I am a licensed Vermont forester.

Since 1910, the Green Mountain Club (GMC) has worked to protect and maintain the Long Trail system in Vermont. The Green Mountain Club supports efforts to protect intact forest landscapes and essential wildlife habitat. And we are proud that the decades-long effort to permanently protect the Long Trail Corridor has resulted in the conservation of over 30,000 acres of trail lands in Vermont.

The fabric of public and private lands that support Vermont's recreation trails are part of the broader effort to maintain and conserve multi-use working lands in the state. The bill's focus on maintaining intact forest blocks is in line with the club's mission of making the mountains of Vermont play a larger role in the life of the people. The land is key. While a footpath is only two feet wide, the land on which the trail exists provides the hiking experience that makes the Long Trail and Vermont special. And, as trail builders and maintainers, we support the practice of locating and designing recreation trails to minimize impacts to forest ecosystems.

While the Green Mountain Club supports intent of H.233 to address forest fragmentation, we want to bring to the Committee's attention language in the bill that could impact the relocation and/or extension of existing trail networks.

We understand that limiting the development of recreation trails, especially unpaved recreation trails like the Long Trail is likely not the focus of this bill. As we work to address primary drivers of forest fragmentation, we think it is important to maintain the ability to relocate portions of existing trails and developing trails.

Some of the definitions in the bill, could serve as a barrier to maintaining the continuity of existing or developing trail networks. Specifically, the definition of fragmentation as currently written exempts existing or repaired recreation trails. This is good, but we recommend a broader definition of Fragmentation that includes exemptions for relocated, and developing recreational trails.

While most existing trail relocations or additions won't trigger Act 250, some could. In the case of larger Long Trail relocations, the challenge is identifying and conserving parcels of land in a configuration that will support ideal trail alignment. While every effort should be made to minimize and mitigate the impacts of forest fragmentation, the ability to identify alternate land parcels to support the trail or identify alternate trail alignments within the parcels can be extremely limited.

We understand that at this point in the process making changes to the bill is limited. The club is supportive of the bill overall, but asks that the committee consider changes to the definitions of "forest blocks," "fragmentation," and "habitat Connectivity area" to maintain the ability to relocate or extend existing trails.

I am happy to share the recommended changes to the three definitions for the committee's consideration.

(38) Definition of Forest Block

Page 2, line 6. Strike the word existing.

(39) Definition of Fragmentation

Change the language on Page 2, starting on line 14 to read: However, fragmentation does not include the division or conversion of a forest block or habitat connectivity area by an existing, relocated, extended, or repaired recreational trail

(41) Definition of Habitat connectivity area

Change the language on page 3, starting on line 4 to read: A habitat connectivity area may include recreational trails and improvements. Alternatively, the definition could be expanded to include relocated or extended recreational trails

The Green Mountain Club is dedicated to maintaining the rich forest and recreation infrastructure that makes Vermont special. We appreciate the opportunity to share perspectives on House Bill 233 and thank committee for all of their hard work on the bill.