



VERMONT MAPLE SUGAR MAKERS' ASSOCIATION

189 VERMONT ROUTE 15, JERICHO, VT 05465

PHONE: 802-858-9444

WWW.VERMONTMAPLE.ORG

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Discussion of H.631, An act relating to forestland used for maple production

Dear Chair Deen:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on H.631, an act relating to forestland used for maple production. The bill focuses its attention on the largest producers of maple syrup in Vermont but touches upon concerns that may affect producers of all scales. We offer the following perspectives on the maple industry here in Vermont.

Background

The Vermont Maple Sugar Makers' Association (VMSMA) is a membership organization, founded in 1893, and focused on supporting the Vermont maple industry through a variety of initiatives. Our membership numbers just over 1000 and covers producers who have 100 taps and producers with over 100,000 taps as well as businesses within the industry such as bulk processors, retailers, and equipment manufacturers. VMSMA serves our membership by providing access to information through newsletters and seminars; promotion and marketing through our website, social media, and consumer-oriented events; and serving as an advocate for the maple industry. We work closely with many partners in the industry including other trade organizations like the International Maple Syrup Institute, researchers and educators with the University of Vermont Proctor Maple Research Center and UVM Extension, and in government, particularly with the Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets, the Department of Forest, Parks and Recreation, and the Department of Tourism and Marketing.

Maple production in Vermont has grown dramatically in the past ten years, from an average crop of 600,000 gallons of syrup over 2005-2007 to an average crop of 1,793,000 gallons of syrup over 2015-2017 according to USDA-NASS. This growth has been driven by an increase of total taps set, with twice as many taps counted in that ten-year period. At the same time, new equipment has been adopted by many sugar makers, increasing their production efficiency. These gains in efficiency come from both a wider adoption of, as well as improvements in, equipment but also an evolution of practices within the sugarbush and sugarhouse. As an example of the latter, more sugar makers are tapping trees earlier in the winter and are making syrup during mid-winter thaws. Where many sugar makers made syrup during February 19-21, 2018, this would have been uncommon only ten years ago.

A study of 2013 production and financial records by the Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont found the industry contributed over 4500 jobs and \$330 million to the Vermont economy. We calculate that on average, each 200-tap segment of maple tubing requires roughly 8 person-hours per year to tap trees, check lines during the season, pull spouts, and provide routine maintenance. There has been a 1.2 million increase in the number of taps, according to USDA-NASS, since the 2013 economic contribution study. Using our estimate, that would require 6000 days of employment each year – or 23 full-time jobs – just for work associated with tapping and maple tubing maintenance. That



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does not account for greater sugarbush management, boiling of sap, packaging syrup, or other ancillary activities related to sugaring.

Maple production has become a major component of Vermont's economy, creating jobs at a time of year when many industries, such as construction, are seasonally slow. It is also creating jobs throughout the state, some in areas where there may not be many employment opportunities. These are jobs that mostly do not require advanced education and are not heavily skill-dependent.

Discussion

Sugaring at any scale involves the collection of raw sap which must be processed to make maple syrup. At the tree level, assuming equal practices and following generally accepted guidelines, tapping trees and collecting sap is equal regardless of the number of taps a producer has. Each tap hole creates a small injury on the tree, which under good tapping and production practices, allows the tree to heal. Studies to date have shown little negative impact on the practice of tapping, suggesting conservative and sustainable practices are not contributing detrimentally to the health of Vermont's forests. Research into the effect of the removal of sap on the health of trees is limited and a long-term study was begun in 2013 by the UVM Proctor Center to determine if there is a difference in overall tree health with sap collection with no vacuum and with vacuum. Early results have shown no significant changes in tree growth health from those tapping practices.

The VMSMA supports and recommends the adoption of sustainable tapping practices for all sugar makers to promote the long-term health of the sugarbush. With those practices in place, we believe that large-scale maple operations do not contribute negatively to the forest but rather spread that impact over a larger area to tap more trees. In short, larger production numbers do not require more extractive practices within the forest but rather spread the production over a greater area and more trees. Large-scale maple operations are not engaging in a more intensive use of a natural resource but rather engaging in a more extensive use of the natural resource.

Within §1. (b)(3)(B) the bill seeks to determine if large-scale operations "reduces diversity of tree species or reduces or eliminates wildlife habitat." Maple producers of all scale will favor sugar maples in their woods to increase their yield per acre. However, operations meeting the bill's definition of large-scale are very likely to have the forest land enrolled in the Use Value Appraisal (UVA) program where forest management plans must be approved, and the landowners must follow accepted management practices to address potential issues like water quality and erosion. Additionally, many large-scale operations are also certified organic maple producers, a process which applies further guidelines for sustainable tapping, forest management, and species diversity as a condition of maintaining certification. New programs, such as the Audubon Vermont Bird-Friendly Maple Program give producers a marketing incentive to pursue management strategies in the sugarbush that increase species diversity and creating ecological conditions for wildlife.



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Wildlife habitat may have a greater significance within large-scale operations as these businesses are likely utilizing larger contiguous tracts of land. These uninterrupted sections of land can provide important wildlife corridors and habitat. Many maple producers allow their land to be used for recreation, including hiking, skiing, mountain biking, snowmobiling, hunting, and fishing. A sugarbush will never be a primeval forest but on the balance, it is our belief that the positive outcomes from sugaring outweigh potential, or realized, negatives.

The bill requires the report to include "recommended regulatory or legislative actions to address the negative effects of large-scale maple production operations on the health and vitality of the State's forestlands." It is unclear what the definition of a negative effect would be and, to date, evidence from current practices and a review of appropriate research would suggest that large-scale operations are not creating adverse conditions due to the size of their operation.

We support the collection of data within the bill under §1. (b)(1) and §1. (b)(2) as that information may provide another valuable data point in understanding the growth of the industry here in Vermont. Maple production is no longer a cottage industry but has become a vibrant component of the state's economy. We believe the spirit of bill H.631 is sound; that collecting data and having a broader understanding of the changes within the Vermont maple industry is useful. However, we believe the focus on large-scale operations negative contributions is misdirecting the focus of the bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Bill H.631. We look forward to further engagement on this issue and are willing to help the committee as needed.

Matt Gordon
Executive Director