



**Testimony by David Mears, Executive Director of Audubon Vermont
On Behalf of the Vermont Forest Partnership**

Supporting Vermont's Forests in the FY21 Budget

February 19, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee today. My name is David Mears and I am the Executive Director of Audubon Vermont. Audubon works to protect birds and the places birds need to thrive through education, conservation, and stewardship. I am here as a representative of the Vermont Forest Partnership: a coalition of five organizations including Audubon Vermont, The Nature Conservancy, The Trust for Public Land, Vermont Land Trust, and Vermont Natural Resources Council. The Vermont Forest Partnership is committed to ensuring a future in which Vermont's forests continue to play the vital service they provide to the health and well-being of our state.

Due to our forests, the description of Vermont as the Green Mountain State is more than a nickname. Approximately 75% of Vermont is forested, making us one of the most forested states in the United States. Our forests are vital to who we are as Vermonters. Protection of our forests serves our culture and our rural working lands and recreation-based economy, while benefiting birds and wildlife, clean water, clean air, reducing flood damage, and storing carbon.

Rural economy: Our forests are critical to Vermont's economy. As discussed in the 2018 report issued by the Trust for Public Land in collaboration with other Vermont Forest Partnership members, titled "[Vermont's return on investment in land conservation](#)," the combination of economic benefits from the forest products and recreational activities associated with Vermont's forests accounts for 20,600 jobs and \$3.4 billion in economic output. An investment in protecting and conserving our forests is an investment in our communities.

Environmental Benefits: Vermont's forests are home to a myriad of plants and provide critical habitat to birds and wildlife. Protecting our forests is a critical way to sequester and store carbon, contributing to Vermont's obligation to address our own carbon emissions. Investing in Vermont's forests also increases the resilience of our communities against the increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather by slowing the release of rainwater and snowmelt, reducing downstream flooding. Similarly, our forests are vital to protecting the quality of our streams and rivers, ponds and lakes.

Unfortunately, our forests are facing significant threats. Of particular concern is that our forests are being compromised and fragmented by scattered, unplanned development. As a consequence of this and other threats, we are losing the benefits provided by our forests. The Vermont Forest

Partnership seeks to prevent forest fragmentation through sound policy, the conservation of important forestland, and public awareness about the risks of fragmentation.

We urge you to support programs in the FY21 budget that reverse current trends, increasing protections for our forests and supporting our rural communities. These include:

Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB). We request that you fund the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, a successful Vermont innovation serving as a critical resource for conserving Vermont's forests, at the level set by statute: \$22.6 million.

Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Board (WLEB). We support expanded funding for the Working Lands Enterprise Program beyond the Governor's FY21 proposal, to achieve a \$3 million annual investment, with the goal of sustaining this level of investment for 5 years. Approximately 80% of Vermont's forests are privately owned – we need a vibrant wood products to ensure that private forest landowners have a financial incentive to keep their land forested.

Vermont Outdoor Recreational Economic Collaborative. Forests are necessary for our outdoor recreation economy, which also encourages healthy communities and individuals, enhances the Vermont lifestyle and brand, and increases connection to nature and attraction of high-quality employers and a sustainable workforce in all economic sectors. Please fund the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative at a level of at least \$200,000, and support the Governor's proposal for \$250,000 for a marketing initiative.

Agency of Natural Resources. Without sufficient funding and staffing, ANR will not be able to ensure that our forests remain healthy and productive. For too long, the State of Vermont has not provided sufficient support to ensure that the Agency has the funds necessary to do meet its many obligations, so vital to Vermont's economy and environment. Please increase the fees used to generate revenue from those entities which receive direct benefits from the agency's decisions, and appropriate sufficient funds for the agency to keep up with the costs and demands it faces as it serves the public interest in a clean and healthy environment.

Modernizing Act 250. Similarly, please provide the funding necessary to ensure that the Agency of Natural Resources and Natural Resources Board can effectively administer the and implement the historic modernization of Act 250.

Thank you for your time.