

Vermont State Legislature. House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish & Wildlife

Testimony of Dr. Anthony D'Amato, Professor and Forestry Program Director at the University of Vermont

March 19, 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the proposed legislation associated with updating and revising Act 250. I serve as the Director of the Forestry Program at the University of Vermont (UVM) and am a Professor of Silviculture and Applied Forest Ecology. Outside of UVM, I am actively engaged with the forestry profession in the region and serve as the Forest Science and Technology Coordinator for the New England Chapter of the Society of American Foresters (SAF), In-coming Chair of the Green Mountain Division of SAF, and co-director of the Northeast Silviculture Institute for Foresters. I care deeply about the biota and livelihoods that depend on the the forests of Vermont and am happy to have the opportunity today to speak to aspects of the proposed revisions to Act 250 that may affect them.

Much of what we consider the “Vermont Brand” and the quality of life associated with it are a direct reflection of the abundance and diversity of forests across our state. From serving as the year-round backdrop to our tourism industry to the natural filter for our water supplies, forests are a constant that provides our state with a green infrastructure that is internationally renowned. Unfortunately, this green infrastructure has begun showing signs of erosion with many of us in the forestry community dismayed to see Vermont lose forest acreage for the first time in over a century during the last statewide inventory. In this light, the revisions to Act 250 to conserve large forest blocks and further reduce forest fragmentation and loss are welcomed and should be commended; however, a larger forest crisis remains unaddressed that threatens the long-term viability of our working forest landscapes. This crisis—the collapse of Vermont’s forest economy—requires careful consideration and recognition if vibrant rural landscapes and forest-dependent communities are a component of the vision for Act 250 over the next 50 years.

As has been pointed out by previous testimonies, Vermont’s forest economy is struggling due in part to global competition, a limited marketplace for low-grade forest materials, and sustained erosion of the number of forest processing facilities in the state over the past several decades. While I am not here to draw causation between this market downturn and Act 250, I do believe an opportunity exists to use Act 250 as part of the solution in addressing the challenges facing our forest-dependent industries. This would include reconsidering the suggestions provided to the Act 47 Commission on Act 250 at 50 regarding permitting for forest processing facilities that recognizes the operational constraints facing these industries under changing climate conditions. In particular, the past several decades have seen a 2-4 week reduction in frozen ground conditions and an increase in the amount of rainfall received in June, a period when many forest operators traditionally return to the woods following mud season. To make up for these periods during which lower volumes of raw materials are being delivered, a forest processing facility may need to shift production hours to those outside of customary business hours, such as evening, weekends, and holidays. The development of a flexible permitting process that allowed for off-hour delivery of raw materials to these facilities would present an important adaptation pathway for Vermont’s forest industry allowing it to respond to the impacts of a changing climate, as well as shifts in market conditions.

Addressing the challenges currently facing Vermont's forest industry has additional implications that relate to the goals around climate change introduced into the Act 250 revisions, particularly those relating to reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Currently, the low manufacturing capacity for forest products in Vermont relative to surrounding states and provinces results in the trucking of a large proportion of harvested trees out of state for processing. This outsourcing of processing not only limits employment and economic opportunities within the state, but it also increases the level of GHG emissions associated with the forest products supply chain. If we are to reduce the carbon footprint of the state, increasing the opportunities for local processing of forest products needs to be considered as part of the solution.

Similarly, the historic outsourcing of Vermont's forest processing should also be considered in light of proposed revisions to Act 250 that would require projects to avoid, minimize, or mitigate GHG emissions. In particular, substitution of wood products for other building materials, such as steel, is recognized as an important GHG mitigation strategy and one that will likely be considered under these revisions. Given the current level of processing facilities in Vermont, much of the processed wood (e.g., studs, joists, plywood) used in these projects would again need to come from outside of the state, increasing the level of emissions associated with any given project. The presence of local processing facilities would provide greater opportunity for the use of building materials with a smaller carbon footprint and greater potential GHG benefits. If nothing else, this proposed revision to Act 250 should consider providing additional credits for the use of locally-sourced wood products in development projects in recognition of their greater GHG mitigation benefits relative to lumber shipped in from the Pacific Northwest or elsewhere.

In closing, the Report of the Commission on Act 250 raised the notion that "removing or altering the conditioning authority" concerning forest industry may be unfair to all other industries seeking permits in the future under Act 250. While I respect the desire to use a similar process across all industries, I would argue that given the disproportionate influence these forest processing facilities play in sustaining the working forested landscapes making up the majority of our state, separate treatment is warranted. This treatment would recognize the unique challenges facing the long-term, viable operation of these facilities under variable climate and market conditions and would help ensure that working forest landscapes are sustained and enhanced as part of the next 50 years of Act 250.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.