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**Testimony to House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife
Re: Draft Changes to Vermont's Use Value Appraisal Program**

Madame Chair and Members of the Committee:

Thank you Madame Chair for inviting me back to testify on the proposed changes being considered to the Use Value Appraisal program. I speak before you on behalf of Northeast Wilderness Trust, where I serve as the Executive Director.

I want to start by reiterating something I mentioned the last time I spoke before this committee which is that it is imperative to recognize the immense value that Current Use has had for the State of Vermont. It is not a perfect tool, but Vermont's largely forested state should be rightfully credited to the effectiveness and wide embrace of Current Use. Owning forestland in Vermont is expensive and Current Use helps many landowners keep land in unfragmented large parcels. Likewise, as I also mentioned in previous testimony, while Vermont is approximately 80 percent forested today, only about 3 percent is permanently protected as wild, and less than 1 percent is old growth. So, let's celebrate the fact that Vermont is once again a heavily forested state as compared to a century ago but let's also keep in mind that very little of it is wild or old.

You have had a number of people come before this committee and speak to the values of old *and* wild forests, so I won't repeat those today. It is now thankfully becoming common knowledge that old forests offer unparalleled benefits for carbon storage, biodiversity, clean water, climate resilience, and human health.

I applaud Commissioner Snyder, Mr. Thompson, and the FPR staff on the great work to date in exploring the idea before this Committee. I am feeling hopeful for a Vermont of tomorrow filled with more old and wild forests. What has been put forth as part of this process is a step in the right direction and I support it as an appropriate launching point for working together with Commissioner Snyder and his colleagues over the summer and fall to explore details, analyze different criteria, and identify the best mechanisms to increase the amount of self-willed (passively managed) and old forests across Vermont.

It is heartening to contemplate the inclusion of a Reserve category in Current Use for private landowners, which in a sense, already exists for non-profit conservation organizations. I believe the inclusion of a Reserve category can be done in a way that brings equity to Vermonters who want to manage their land passively for wildlife, carbon storage, and natural beauty while also honoring the important role that the managed landscape and timber industry has had and should continue to have in Vermont. Adding a



Reserve category to Current Use is of great public benefit to bring Vermont's bedrock conservation law up to date in the face of rapidly declining biodiversity and a rapidly warming world.

As previously mentioned, I am supportive of the process that has gotten us to this point and the changes proposed in the bill draft dated April 28th, 2021. In regards to that proposal, a number of questions come to mind when reading through the proposed language and sifting through the details and ramifications of the example criteria that Mr. Thompson and Commissioner Snyder presented before this committee. In the interest of collaboration and hopeful ongoing conversation over the coming months, I want to simply pose some questions for this committee and interested stakeholders to consider. I do not have the answers to any of these, though I trust there will be an open and collaborative process to identify those answers.

1. What is the correct threshold percentage for eligibility of passive/forever-wild management?
2. What mechanisms can be put into place to ensure durability of Reserve Forests?
3. What steep slope percentage is the right number to capture the greatest diversity of forest types around Vermont?
4. Should the location of a parcel in mapped Interior Forest Blocks or Matrix Forest Block be part of the criteria to encourage connectivity and help avoid fragmentation?
5. Could 'Vermont Conservation Design' Prioritized Lands be taken into account?
6. What is the appropriate buffer around vernal pools, wetlands, and streams to consider?
7. If a forest is flat and not wet but already old, does it qualify because it's already an old forest?
8. What will the process look like for someone wanting to transition from managing for old forest characteristics to passively managing the land? Or in other words, a landowner who doesn't have an old forest now but wants to one day enroll his or her land as passively managed. What does that process look like?
9. Finally, speaking from a land trust's perspective, I wonder what the practical implications and additional financial burdens will be for landowners interested in the Reserve category above and beyond what is required for managed land? How well are natural communities mapped on private land or will landowners need to hire ecologists in addition to foresters? What will the process look like for landowners interested in forever-wild conservation easements and where will the burden lie to determine eligibility of the Reserve category?

These are some of the primary questions that I hope will be addressed in the coming months. I am eager to work with this Committee, the Commissioner and his team, and representatives from the forest products industry to analyze and better understand the various options and criteria to best utilize Current Use as a tool to increase the total acres of passively managed and old forests while also supporting the actively managed landscape and timber industry. It's not either/or. We need both. Wildlands and Woodlands. It is imperative that we get this right, sooner rather than later.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify with these brief remarks. I am greatly appreciative of the work that has gone into this conversation thus far and thank you.