

April 1, 2021

Vermont House Committee on Energy and Technology

Rep. Timothy Briglin, Chair

Rep. Laura Sibilila, Vice Chair

RE: S.1, An act relating to extending the baseload renewable power portfolio requirement

Dear Representatives Briglin, Sibilila, and members of the committee,

Established in 1961, the Ruffed Grouse Society (RGS) is North America's foremost conservation organization dedicated to creating healthy forests, abundant wildlife and promoting a conservation ethic. Together with the American Woodcock Society (established in 2014), RGS & AWS work with landowners and government agencies to develop critical wildlife habitat utilizing scientific management practices. We continue to build collaboration with forest industry and other partners in ways to increase timber sales carried out in support of sustaining healthy forests and wildlife habitat across the region. In recent years, projects established by RGS & AWS applied over \$470,000 of federal Farm Bill funding to manage forests on private and town forest lands in the region. Our members and supporters have provided nearly \$50,000 of funding to enhance habitat and improve hunting opportunities on wildlife management areas and state forests. Our work with non-profit and corporate partners supported planning for the Early Successional Habitat Creation Project that approved up to 15,000 acres of young forest habitat creation on the Green Mountain National Forest.

We noted with interest the recent Senate passage of S.1 on Wednesday, March 17, that would:

1. Extend the end date through which Vermont retail electricity providers are required to purchase a share of power provided by the Ryegate Power Station (RPS) biomass electricity plant, from October 31, 2022 to October 31, 2024 (Sec. 2. PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION ORDER EXTENSION);
2. Require the RPS owner, on or before January 15, 2023, to present to the General Assembly a plan and expected implementation schedule for a project to utilize the excess thermal energy generated by the plant (Sec. 3. BASELOAD RENEWABLE POWER PORTFOLIO REQUIREMENT; COLOCATION REPORT);
3. Require the Secretary of Commerce and Community Development and the Commissioner of Forests, Parks, and Recreation, on or before March 1, 2022, to present to the Senate Committee on Finance and the House Committee on Energy and Technology a contingency plan to address the economic, workforce, forest industry, and forest health impacts that may occur if RPS closes (Sec. 4. PLANT CLOSURE CONTINGENCY PLAN).



We commend the action taken by the Senate on S.1 to ensure further continuity of operations of RPS, and urge the House Committee on Energy and Technology to also support the bill's passage.

RPS operations provide important support for Vermont's forest products industry, which in turn supports creation of critical wildlife habitat. Numerous wildlife species that require early successional (young tree and shrub) habitats are declining and identified in Vermont's Wildlife Action Plan as Species of Greatest Conservation Need, including ruffed grouse, American woodcock, golden-winged warbler, and New England cottontail. The Wildlife Action Plan identifies the decline of young forests as a threat to conserving the state's biodiversity, and indicates conservation cannot depend upon natural disturbance events alone to create these habitats. RPS consumes 250,000 tons of biomass per year, which equates to harvest that produces approximately 4,000 to 8,000 acres of young forest habitat on an annual basis. This consistent harvest provides an important baseline level of sustainably created habitat to maintain ecological function of Vermont's forest lands.

Wood chips represent a small portion of the overall value of Vermont's timber harvest, with more than 90% of the value provided by sawlogs. The \$7 million annual expenditure by RPS to acquire wood chips for this biomass does, however, essentially subsidize additional forest products, keeping the forestry operations that provide timber for other wood products financially viable.

Wood chip consumption is occurring at a rate compatible with forest sustainability in Vermont. A forester on staff at the RPS plant manages to the Vermont Harvesting Regulations and coordinates with the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife on logging activities that supply the facility with wood chips. The 2018 Vermont Wood Fuel Supply Study concluded that the net available low-grade wood in the forest available for wood energy was 5% higher than last estimated in 2010. Increased rates of forest management would actually increase the forest growth rate along with increasing young forest habitat. The Wood Fuel Supply Study found growth declined as Vermont's forests have aged, from a net annual growth rate of 2.10% in 2010 to 1.75% in 2018.

We understand from discussion in the Senate that there are concerns regarding plant efficiency and interest in finding a suitable use for excess heat generated by RPS. We strongly encourage you to carefully weigh the important wildlife habitat management and conservation benefits as well as the forest products economy in that region supported by RPS operations. The report required of the Secretary of Commerce and Community Development and the Commissioner of Forests, Parks, and Recreation should explicitly evaluate and address these benefits that would be lost if RPS ceased to operate.

On behalf of our members and supporters, we thank you for your careful consideration and action to support healthy forests, abundant wildlife and promoting a conservation ethic in



Vermont. RGS & AWS would be happy to comment further or address questions on these considerations in your future deliberations.

Signed,

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Cc: Matthew Grimo, Committee Assistant
S. 1 Bill sponsors - Senators Kitchel, Benning, and Starr
Todd Waldron, RGS & AWS Northeast Forest Conservation Director