

April 8th 2022

House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife
Amy Sheldon, Chair
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633

Re: Forester Support for Forest Fragmentation Criteria and amendments to Act 250 supporting Forest Products Industry in S.234

Dear Chair Sheldon,

As licensed foresters who work with forest landowners and members of the forest products industry every day, we are writing to express our support for S.234, which passed the Senate on March 25th.

S.234 makes important changes to Act 250 in two significant areas effecting our rural communities and working lands economy: maintaining our working land base and strengthening our forest products manufacturing sector. While S.234 is not the comprehensive Act 250 reform package that many in the industry had hoped for, the two policies advanced here are a significant positive step which we are asking you to support.

As industry professionals working across the state to manage our woodlands, we see the need to acknowledge and account for the well-documented fact that forest fragmentation is occurring, and to take action to address it. Our forests provide a myriad of economic, ecological, and cultural benefits to Vermont. They provide the foundation for our forest products economy and growing outdoor recreation industry, contributing over \$3.4 billion to the Vermont economy annually and employing over 10,000 of our friends and neighbors. These forests support natural ecological processes, helping to maintain air and water quality, and flood resilience. They act as critical carbon sinks. They provide habitat for wide-ranging wildlife species, and the base for the hunting and fishing community. The forests are why so many of us live here and are what define the place we call home.

For years, members of our industry have called for a legislative solution to maintain working forests when the state's largest developments go through Act 250. The changes included in S.234 are a modest step to ensuring that future development in our large unfragmented forest blocks is planned in ways to better maintain the integrity and function of—and access to—our working forests, and to encourage subdivision design that supports both the industry and the economic vitality of Vermont's rural communities.

We applaud the work being done by the legislature to strengthen our working lands economy in other ways and look forward to working with the legislature to confront the unique challenges faced working lands enterprises, which must be considered in a different context than other commercial or industrial development planned for in our rural communities. The forest products industry is facing increasing challenges in operational conditions, driven principally by the impacts of climate change, as well as dramatic shifts in commodity markets precipitated by forces well beyond our control. In the face of these

challenges, many of our enterprises continue to explore new or diverse ways of expanding or adding value to their forest harvested products. The activity of diversifying production or adding value to products which are traditionally minimally processed can ensure that they remain viable and productive. These changes will be critical if we, as a state, are to succeed in the task of strengthening our forest-based enterprises, diversifying and building resilience, and ensuring that they continue to be a cornerstone of our state's economy and way of life. These businesses have a conservation effect in and of themselves, as a vibrant forest products economy is a tool for keeping our forests as forests, and the changes to Act 250 in S.234 which allow for changes to hours of operation permit conditions for wood products manufacturing operations are a small but important step towards ensuring their vitality.

We have taken a massive hit with continued shifts in markets which now challenge us to foster changes to the marketplace, turning a capital-intensive industry slowly in a new direction to optimize the strengths of new technologies and opportunity. Further reform is needed, as economic viability remains key to keeping our forests and the industries that depend on them intact. We hope the legislature will consider other proposed changes to Act 250, including those around agricultural soils mitigation for forest-based enterprises, and permit exemptions for small sawmills. These reforms, coupled with the efforts prescribed in the Forest Futures Plan, send a clear signal to those who work in the industry and all Vermonters alike of the importance to our forests and forest-based enterprises to our communities. With so many other pressures facing our forests, including the large projected transfer and sale of our woodlands from our aging population of forest owners, and the regional pressures from population swells in our rural communities we see resulting from global pressures like COVID-19, we must maintain the viability of the land that supports a vibrant forest products industry and ensure that our forests remain functional, resilient, and productive into the future. Passing S.234 into law is step towards doing just that.

Thank you for your support, and please accept an open invitation to come for a walk in the woods.

Sincerely,

Charlie Hancock
North Woods Forestry, Montgomery

Alex Baret
Long View Forest Inc., Westminster VT

Dan Healy
Long View Forest Inc., Westminster VT

Lynn Lavine
Forest*Care, East Dummerston VT

Allan Thompson
Northern Stewards, Waterbury VT

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Long Meadow Resource Management, LLC. Burlington VT

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Caitlin Cusack
Stewardship Forester, Vermont Land Trust, Richmond Office

David McMath
Stewardship Forester, Vermont Land Trust, Montpelier Office

Nancy Patch
VT FPR, Franklin/Grand Isle County Forester (*signing as a private citizen, not representing the dept.*)

Anthony D'Amato, PhD
Professor and Director of Forestry Program, University of Vermont, Burlington VT

William Keeton, PhD
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