

NORTHEAST



WILDERNESS
TRUST

Conserving Forever-Wild Landscapes for Nature and People

www.newildernesstrust.org • info@newildernesstrust.org •
802.224.1000 17 State Street, Suite 302 • Montpelier, VT 05602



Jon Leibowitz
Executive Director, Northeast Wilderness Trust

**Testimony to House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife
Re: Testimony on Use Value Appraisal Program 1/5/22**

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 as the Executive Director of Northeast Wilderness Trust and as a Steering Committee Member of Wild Forests Vermont.

Wild Forests Vermont got its start in 2019 at a conference discussing the importance of wild forests and how to increase their representation across the Vermont landscape. Among the recommendations that emerged from the conference was the creation of a Steering Committee to explore further how to include permanently conserved wild forests in Vermont's Current Use Program – more formally known as Use Value Appraisal (UVA). Most recently, the Steering Committee commissioned the report that you just heard about from John Roe. The Wild Forests Vermont Steering Committee is made up of private citizens, forest landowners, foresters, and conservation professionals.

We are all here today because there is broad consensus on the importance of Vermont's forests. Forests are the beating heart of Vermont.

Forests provide us with the raw material that frames our homes, that our furniture is made of, and they provide essential, locally sourced, warmth for many. Forests provide jobs and they largely define our cultural identity. Those are all good things and no reasonable person would argue against them.

Forests are also home to countless wild species, our wild kin, with whom we share the Vermont landscape. We need to do a better job sharing the landscape, because we are after all, just one of many species who call Vermont home.

Forests store and sequester carbon. We need to do a better job keeping carbon in the landscape and out of the atmosphere.

Forests provide clean water and, on that front, too, the health of Lake Champlain, as one example, beckons that we do a better job.

Forests also provide flood resilience and the inevitable next Hurricane Irene will ask of us that we do a better job there, too.

For all of these critical issues: biodiversity richness, carbon storage and sequestration, clean water and flood resilience—there is a relatively simple tool at our disposal that can move the needle simultaneously, and that tool is increasing the amount of wild and old forests in Vermont. The science is clear on all of these issues as this Committee heard last session: wild, old, and complex forests excel in promoting biodiversity richness, storing and sequestering carbon, filtering water, and providing flood resilience. In addition to John Roe's report, I've included documents with my submitted testimony that speak to the incredible ability of old and complex forests to store and sequester carbon and harbor more biodiversity than managed forests.

In May of 2021, when I testified before this Committee, I made clear that my remarks in support of changes to Current Use were not an attack on the program. Far from it, I acknowledged the immense positive role that Current Use has played in keeping Vermont such a forested state. I come before you as a strong proponent of UVA.

Likewise, as a strong advocate for the Wildlands and Woodlands vision for New England (a regional vision that calls for 70 percent of New England to be conserved as forests and at least 10 percent as wilderness) I don't approach this conversation as an either/or choice. Wildlands are not in opposition to woodlands or vice versa. They are complementary and we need both. However, while approximately 28 percent of Vermont is conserved only about 3 percent is conserved as wild. That balance needs to change and in light of the entwined ecological and climate crises we face, that needs to change urgently.

So how do we do that and why has UVA become the center of this conversation?

Seventy-nine percent of Vermont's 4.5 million acres of forest is privately owned. According to the Dept. of Forests, Parks and Recreation, about 70 percent of all qualifying privately-owned forestland is enrolled in UVA. It is thus logical that if there is consensus that we need more old forests on the landscape, as called for in Vermont Conservation Design as well as regional visions such as Wildlands and Woodlands, and international frameworks such as half-earth and 30X30, then UVA is the place to enact such change.

John Roe presented on the three scenarios to incorporate a Wild Reserve Category in his report. Those being the ESTA scenario put forth by Commissioner Snyder, a Vermont Conservation Design scenario, and what he called the 'All' scenario.

Wild Forests Vermont strongly supports the 'All' scenario. Here's why:

The 'All' scenario places the importance of wild forests as equal to the importance of harvested forests, and in terms of tax equity, it is also the fairest option to landowners. All landowners who are currently eligible for forest current use tax reductions ought to be allowed to choose to manage their forest under the proposed wild reserve land use category if that is their choice, regardless of geographic location or other criteria. This is a matter of equity and private property rights, in addition to being a positive choice for the land and atmosphere if willing landowners want to go that route.

Why does the state give preferential tax treatment to landowners who cut trees on their property versus those who want to provide carbon storage, wildlife habitat, water quality enhancement, or recreational space? And a more important question is, how many landowners currently enrolled in UVA are being forced to cut their forests because they can't afford their property taxes otherwise? This is a matter of equity, for forest landowners, and for the forests themselves.

I submitted a commentary recently to VTDigger, the theme of which was that addressing the urgent ecological crises of our time requires a reimagining of our relationship with other-than-human beings. We must embrace our place as one of many species and redevelop a familial relationship with Mother Earth. It may seem odd to place such a lofty theme alongside a conversation about amending tax policy. Far from it.

Treating all landowners equitably and providing a choice for how Vermonters manage their private property rather than requiring timber management on those who wish to, or need to, receive tax relief for keeping forests intact and in the family will go a long way towards redefining our collective relationship with nature. The time for that shift is at precisely this moment in history. That is why Wild Forests Vermont supports the 'All' option.

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, especially to the Commissioner and his team, the volunteer members of Wild Forests Vermont, as well as this Committee.

Thank you.