

To: House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish and Wildlife; House Committee on Ways and Means; Jill Krowinski, House of Representatives

From: Sarah Laird, [REDACTED], Lincoln VT 05443

Re: The Inclusion of Wild Forest in the Current Use Program

I am writing as a landowner to provide input to the Natural Resources Committee hearings on the inclusion of wildlands in the UVA program. I live in Lincoln, and my land has been in the current use program since I bought it in 2004. I own 211.2 acres, of which 153 are managed as forest. My land was a hill farm not long ago, and in most areas the forest is less than 60 years old. My family has owned and managed land in Vermont for generations, and this has included logging, and I have a Masters in Forestry. I share this information to make clear that I am not opposed to a forest economy that includes timber.

Current use has significantly contributed to the health of forests and maintenance of intact landscapes in Vermont. However, in my experience the focus of the program has grown extremely narrow over time and today - despite language referencing biodiversity, wildlife, and ecosystem services – is focused primarily on timber production. This is out of step with the priorities of many private landowners, as well as the latest and best science. It also undermines other valuable direct and indirect benefits of forests, including tourism, recreation, potential carbon markets, and environmental services like water management, and the conservation of biodiversity and wildlife.

I, and most of those I know with land in UVA, would prefer a program with broader objectives that allow us to manage for a wider range of products and environmental services. Current use programs in neighboring states include an open space or wildlands option which is unavailable to Vermonters, and it is not clear why this is the case.

My forest is identified by the state of Vermont as having Highest Priority Interior Forest Blocks, Connectivity Blocks, Surface Water and Riparian Areas, Riparian Wildlife Connectivity, and Physical Landscape Diversity. It provides habitat and connectivity for a wide range of species, from small creatures like red efts and hermit thrush to large ones like black bear and moose. The land is a mix of upland and wetland communities. However, in areas where the forest has been opened up, invasive and exotic plants like buckthorn and bush honeysuckle are present, and require management to control. A number of tree species are under pressure from forest pests and pathogens, including black knot fungus on cherry trees, beech bark disease, Dutch elm disease, and emerald ash borer.

While my forest is important for conservation and provides ecosystem services of value to the public, it is also under pressure from climate change, pests and diseases, and

invasive species. Logging adds to this pressure. The forest is also not mature ecologically (a process which doesn't even begin until 150 years) nor economically (which for timber is 100 years of age). It has little to no valuable timber, and this will be the case for another generation at least. However, my management plans are required to follow silvicultural guides and manage for timber as the primary product, and as a result over the years much has been logged - at a loss.

The current use program puts landowners like myself in a difficult position. We believe climate change is real and urgent, and that forests have an important role to play in sequestering carbon and addressing the impacts of climate change like flooding and invasive species. But in order to be taxed equitably on land we do not wish to develop, we must log our forests. We are denied the option to manage for carbon, biodiversity, water quality, wildlife, non-timber forest products, or to accelerate old growth forest characteristics (as described by William Keeton at UVM) .

I, and many other landowners, would prefer a current use program that:

- reflects the original goals of the program, allowing for a diversity of management goals
- adapts to and addresses the environmental crises in our world today
- incorporates the latest science
- prioritizes public ecological, economic, and health values over subsidies for private timber production

The state of Vermont recognizes that biodiversity loss, flooding, invasive species, and climate change are real, interconnected, and urgent threats, and that old forests can address all of them (see the recent Climate Action Plan and the Vermont Conservation Design report from a few years ago). Recent research by Jesse Gourevitch and others at UVM also demonstrates that climate change impacts and ecological degradation hit the low-income and socially vulnerable in Vermont most significantly. In times of dramatic environmental crises that disproportionately impact the poor and marginal, it seems that state agencies should support and conserve forests, rather than work to degrade them.

The latest science is clear that old forests - trees, soils, wetlands, etc. - sequester far more carbon than young or disturbed forests. This is why governments at the recent UN climate change meeting in Glasgow came out overwhelmingly in favor of halting forest degradation and destruction (<https://unfccc.int/news/cop26-pivotal-progress-made-on-sustainable-forest-management-and-conservation>, <https://ukcop26.org/glasgow-leaders-declaration-on-forests-and-land-use>). The forests of the northeast US are unusually important carbon sinks (<https://www.wri.org/insights/forests-absorb-twice-much-carbon-they-emit-each-year>). Sound forest management and conservation could be Vermont's most significant contribution to the climate change crisis, potentially dwarfing in impact changes to Vermont's transportation, housing, and other sectors.

Unfortunately, the current use program currently requires landowners to *release* carbon from their forests, undermining the state's efforts to address climate change. The current use program also works against landowners' ability to benefit economically from what is soon to be a truly valuable product (unlike timber) in their forests - carbon. Carbon markets are rapidly maturing, spurred on by recent decisions in Glasgow (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-13/cop26-finally-set-rules-on-carbon-markets-what-does-it-mean>). Vermont's forests play a unique role – globally - as carbon sinks. As a state, we should prioritize managing forests for carbon sequestration in keeping with current science, and in light of the climate and biodiversity crises, and this should include current use.

The proposal by FPR for a “reserve forestland subcategory” in current use does not do this. Most landowners (70%) would not qualify, timber production remains the primary objective of the program, and it does not address the role forests play in carbon sequestration, and the need for urgent action. In contrast, the Wild Forests Vermont report presented to the committee two weeks ago provides an ALL Scenario that gives landowners in Vermont the tools and support they need to manage for wild forests. This approach would still allow for plenty of logging in Vermont, but without state or landowner subsidies of the private sector. It would support the forest economy through a wider range of forest products and functions with real value to many more Vermonters.

I encourage the House Committees to review and consider the ALL Scenario in the recent Wild Forests Vermont report. It is a straight forward, equitable approach to forest management, and would significantly strengthen Vermont's current use program.

Sincerely,

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