

Testimony of Allan Thompson
Vermont Legislature
House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry
March 3, 2023

My name is Allan Thompson. I live in Waterbury, Vermont I appreciate the invitation to present comments related to H. 126. I am a

- Licensed consulting forester and certified wildlife biologist
- President of the Vermont Woodlands Association
- Chair of the Waterbury Land Initiative, a local land trust in Waterbury,
- Advisor to the Forest Future Strategic Roadmap
- Current Use enrollee and a tree farmer.

I am strong advocate for forest management and land conservation in Vermont and I recognize H. 126 as having laudable and lofty goals. I am hoping, however, to take advantage of the opportunity our forests give us and highlight the realities of our woodlands, our landowners and their management to request more from this bill.

As proposed, H. 126 has two major sections.

1. The bill asks for an inventory of Conserved lands using three defined conservation areas; ecological reserves, biodiversity conservation areas and natural resource management areas.
2. The bill asks for a Conservation Plan to meet stated goals of 30x30 and 50x50 and prioritizes ecological reserve areas to protect highest priority natural communities and maintain and restore old forests.

I am, as are most in the forest sector, aware of the global and local environmental issues that press us into action and policy changes that seek protections of our unique ecosystems. Vermont Conservation Design is an ecological guide focused on connected, functional ecosystems that I and many of my colleagues use often.

I am here to offer comments that I believe will serve the general principles of H. 126, that we can invest in our forests with greater impacts, assist in building a stronger foundation for moving land conservation forward, and ultimately accelerate biodiversity and climate strategies.

Invest where needed; working lands:

Forest Inventory Analysis data reports that Vermont forests continue the trend of having on average, older, bigger trees that store more carbon. All goals of H 126.

IF nothing changed and that our forests continue to mature and harvest and development patterns remain unchanged, stored forest carbon in will increase by an estimated 28% by 2050, this too is from FIA data modeled in a recent Highstead report (October 2022). By doing nothing. Without new investment or policy, forests will store more carbon, be older and reduce

net emissions. At the same time, if nothing changed and without new investment or policy, however, forest management, working lands, and working land infrastructure will continue on their same path- withering.

Similarly, this same Highstead report, authors of which include Harvard foresters, New England Forestry Foundation, Northeast Wilderness Trust and others, posits, our forests can and should do better and suggests that the single best solution to Vermont's climate goals is continuing to utilize and evolve our forest management. That using improved forest management in Vermont is modeled to store more than 4x the carbon than having 10% of Vermont land in ecological reserve areas. If the goal of H. 126 is to increase carbon storage and sequestration, H. 126 should at least equally prioritize strategies that have the most impact at the least cost; working forests.

Vermont Conservation Design's goals for a connected, diverse and functional landscape also are greatly valued by forest professionals and landowners. Often, however goals of old growth forests are advocated for to the exclusion of forest management that results in achieving VCD biodiversity targets such as young forest. H. 126 has a unique opportunity to use VCD goals in totality rather than prioritize or emphasize one over the other.

Much of Vermont's forest land is available for timber harvest. Relatively, very little of it is considered ecological reserve areas. You will hear forest industry professionals support, conceptually, the idea of reserve forests. And similarly, ardent anti-logging groups conceptually support forest management. Pose policy or harvest activities in a microcosm without working towards solutions of all parties, contradiction and conflict persists. Ecological Reserve areas are perceived as a take from forest industry professionals in the same way a timber harvest feels like a take from old forest advocates.

However, the fact that forests are *available* to be harvested does not mean they will be. FIA data shows this. Forest managers and landowners have evolved in our ability to serve a breadth of goals integrating old forest conditions, biological diversity, wildlife habitat, recreation in the management of forests and pursuit of societies wood needs. But this balance only really works at appropriate spatial and temporal scales. You can't both cut and preserve a tree. We all need to be more intentional about where and when we want to do the cutting and preserving.

Working lands has an immense and overshadowing contributing value to climate and biodiversity goals. They could do even more, in perpetuity given robust level of commitment in H. 126. H. 126 can build on the opportunity of being supportive of and proactivity engaging with all parties *from the outset* and recognize the myriad of values conserving land brings to our community without emphasizing or prioritizing preconceived and narrowly focused conservation categories especially at this proposal of an inventory and planning stage.

Demands for wood products is not a myth and forecasted to increase on every scale. Conserved land and public land can and should be used to provide these benefits. When I'm asked *where do*

I want my wood, your wood, our wood to come from, I'll say Vermont. Every time. But we can't do that if our culture or our policy doesn't support it.

So, we have a wood demand to meet. We have climate and diversity goals to meet. Both require the ever-evolving forest management that private landowners and managers are and have been committed to. We need policy makers and our community committed to it too.

Thank you, again for allowing me to share comments.

Citations:

FIA data:

<https://fpr.vermont.gov/forest-inventory-and-analysis-fia>

Highstead Report:

New England's Climate Imperative: Our Forests as a Natural Climate. Highstead October 2022.

