



## **Testimony of**

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**Before the House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency and Forestry in  
Support of H. 128, An Act Relating to Removing Regulatory Barriers for Working  
Lands**

**Tuesday, February 20, 2024**

Representative Durfee, Representative Surprenant, Representative Graham and members of the House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency and Forestry, my name is Dana Doran, and I am the Executive Director of the Professional Logging Contractors of the Northeast (PLC). It is a pleasure appearing before you today and thank you very much for inviting me to testify in support of H. 128, An Act Relating to Removing Regulatory Barriers for Working Lands. I would like to thank the sponsors of this legislation, including Representatives Lipsky, Pearl and Surprenant who have all co-sponsored this legislation.

Timber harvesting and hauling are distinct and impactful components of Vermont's rural economy. Occupations from this industry are inextricably linked to the health and long-term management of Vermont's forests, which cover 75% of the state. The state's reliance on healthy forests requires focus and engagement on policies and programs that support a strong and vibrant forest economy.

Vermonters use and benefit from forest products in many aspects of their everyday lives. They frequent public and private forests for outdoor recreation and much of the access to this land is enabled and enhanced by forest operations. Continued management of Vermont's forests, and the revenue generated by the hardworking harvesting and hauling contractors, will allow these traditions to continue and will keep Vermont's forests forested for generations. Local wood = local good and Vermont's goals for housing, climate resiliency and workforce investment can be met by supporting timber harvesting and hauling both now and for the future.

Over the past eight months, the PLC and a steering committee of 12 logging companies has been working to develop policy initiatives that would help Vermont contractors deal with highly variable weather conditions and also set the stage for future investments. The legislation before you today, which would make necessary changes to Act 250, would eliminate regulatory hurdles that have impeded progress for our industry at one of the most critical times in Vermont's history as contractors are reeling from devastating market and weather disruptions. We implore this Committee to remove bureaucratic hurdles to ensure that small markets for forest products

can be created easily. Value added manufacturing of forest products should be done in Vermont and not exported to a surrounding state.

The PLC and our membership are in full support of any legislation that will facilitate development of new projects that could positively impact the management of Vermont's forests, provide new markets for our members, and contribute positively to our climate. The need for this legislation is also substantiated as a direct recommendation of the Forest Future Strategic Roadmap process.

Since 2013, this region has experienced the closure of seven pulp and paper mills and several biomass energy facilities. These closures have sent shock waves through the industry. At the same time, Covid 19 wreaked havoc with wood markets and boosted inflation by nearly 50% in this industry, which has put a majority of timber harvesting businesses in the red. And lastly, over the last 18 months, we have experienced two warm winters, a 100 year flood and constant precipitation that have kept logging contractors from working. As a result, there has likely been a 30-50% reduction in harvesting capacity and the layoff of hundreds of people in harvesting and hauling in just the last three years.

I testify before you today to demonstrate that the need for this bill has never been greater. The forest economy is being impacted by the global economy, climate change, and other factors that can't be controlled locally. The need for homegrown markets and local dollars circulating in Vermont's rural economy is at a critical stage. This bill will ensure that small new markets can be created without adding years of red tape and thousands of dollars to project costs. These projects will have positive impacts on rural communities and to Vermont's forests.

The PLC has significant experience with the regulatory environment in Maine. I think that this experience would be helpful for this Committee to understand as to how Vermont compares to states that is competing with.

From our perspective, as challenging as Maine can be with respect to the development of new projects, it is development friendly as compared to Vermont. Zoning in Maine is a local, municipal issue and does not rise to the state level unless there are triggers with respect to shoreland zoning, wetlands, or air quality.

As an example, if one of our members wanted to build a firewood operation, small sawmill or even a firewood kiln, which is really what this legislation would allow, all permitting would be done locally through the municipality and no state permits would be triggered. While many of us in Maine complain about how challenging it can be with respect to industrial development, there is a strong desire to maintain planned use of land within municipalities.

The scale of what is being proposed for permitting exemptions within this legislation is minute and should move forward expeditiously so that new markets can be created or expanded, similar to how things are done in Maine so that Vermont is not an outlier. We are not advocating for an exemption to build a new pulp mill that would use two million tons of fiber annually with 150 trucks per day delivering wood. We feel strongly that with the changes recommended in this legislation, the environment can still be protected locally, but without the onerous application processing and permit conditions that exist currently in Vermont.

As you consider this bill, please do so through lens that public policy should serve the greatest number for the greatest good. We can achieve this goal and provide not only economic benefits,

but environmental, and social benefits as well through the proposed changes in this legislation. We can also use this philosophy to build an economy that transcends time and economic challenges and provides a roadmap for prosperity in rural Vermont.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on behalf of our membership before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.