



Testimony of

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**Before the House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency and Forestry and
Senate Committee on Agriculture regarding the Health of the Vermont Forest
Industry**

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Senator Starr, Senator Collamore and members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture. 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 on the current health of the forest industry, specifically logger health.

As background, the PLC is a trade association that was created in 1995 to represent logging and associated trucking contractors throughout the state of Maine. In May 2023, the membership voted to expand its presence to become a regional trade organization and begin representing contractors in the region, including the state of Vermont. The PLC now has three Board Members from Vermont, Sam Lincoln, Lincoln Farm Timber Harvesting, Randolph Center; Jack Bell, Longview Forest, Inc., Hartland; and Gabe Russo, Southwind Forestry, LLC, Pawlet and has also accepted 15 new contractor members from the state of Vermont since early October. The PLC is also excited to begin representing VT harvesters and haulers during the 2024 legislative session.

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.

Policy Priorities for Timber Harvesting and Hauling in Vermont

Over the past four 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 and workforce development strategies. Also, during this time, the PLC has been working with Representative Katherine Sims, Representative Jed Lipsky, staff in the Scott Administration, including the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation and the Department of Environmental Conservation to develop and implement these strategies. I will review the overall platform with you today, but Phase I of these strategies will come before both of your Committees later this session in the form of H.624, An Act Relating to Providing Financial Assistance to the Forest Economy, a bi-partisan effort championed by Rep. Sims and Rep. Lipsky.

Phase I - Economic Impact and Workforce Availability Study

- a) The state of Vermont has never comprehensively studied the economic impact of timber harvesting and hauling to the state's economy. This data and analysis is vital to determine policy priorities for the future of the industry.

In Maine, the PLC has collaborated with the University of Maine's School of Forest Resources and the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center on three occasions to survey timber harvesters and haulers and publish the "Economic Impact of Professional Logging and Trucking in Maine." The most recent study, published in March 2022, estimated that as of 2021, logging and trucking contractors in Maine employed over 3,000 people directly and were indirectly responsible for the creation of an additional 2,500 jobs. This employment and the investments that contractors make contributed \$582 million to the state's economy.

A similar study should be initiated in Vermont in collaboration with the PLC and the University of Vermont's School of Forestry and/or Center for Rural Studies. Additional modeling in the report will also forecast how many jobs in logging, trucking, mechanics, etc. will be required in this industry in the next 10 years.

- a) To continue Vermont's investment in creating a culture of safety on logging operations, reduce injuries and insurance claims, and continue to lower insurance costs, relevant and engaging training is necessary for logging contractors and their employees. Current industry professionals should be able to take advantage of free safety training each year to lower risk and reduce costs for contractors. PLC works with insurance carriers to adapt trainings each year to emerging trends and risks for injuries and will bring their engaging training regime to VT.

The PLC would like to see the Vermont Legislature invest in safety training for logging contractors, timber trucking firms, and their employees. To do so, at least four logging and two trucking safety trainings should be conducted annually. The goal is to improve workplace safety, reduce injuries, and continue to lower insurance costs by reinforcing a culture of safety in Vermont's forest economy. Also, financial assistance for logging contractors to become Master Logger Certified by the Trust to Conserve Northeast Forestlands should also be provided so that logging contractors qualify as "safety certified" as defined by the Department of Financial Regulation. In the past, this program

provided a 50% cost share for businesses to become Master Logger certified to assist with workers' compensation insurance adaptation.

Phase II - Career Promotion/Workforce Development

- b) Based upon the results of the economic impact and workforce availability studies, forest economy career opportunities need to be promoted by the PLC to parents, students and teachers in VT schools through advertising and marketing. Students and educators should also be provided with opportunities to visit harvests, meet logging and trucking contractors, and learn about career options.
- c) The PLC has created a very successful Mechanized Logging Operations and Forest Trucking program in Maine that works in conjunction with industry and the community college system. Post-secondary students go through a 20 week program that provides training on highly advanced equipment and students also receive their commercial drivers license. No comparable logger and forest trucker training program exists in Vermont. This program should be brought to VT, or VT citizens should be encouraged and sponsored to attend the Maine program.

Phase I - Harvesting Adaptation and Resilience Incentives

As a result of the severe rain events and prolonged periods of saturated soils in VT during 2023, the unprecedented warm winter of 2022/2023, and an ever-changing climate, the cost of water quality protection is rapidly increasing for forest operations. Logging contractors are expected to absorb these costs for pre-harvest preparation that will protect soils and infrastructure and reduce and/or eliminate sedimentation and phosphorous runoff, during and after harvests. They need financial assistance to ensure the most durable practices are consistently implemented at the beginning of any harvest.

A decades old program that is operating successfully close to Vermont, which could act as a model for implementation, is the New York Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC)'s forest management implementation program. WAC incentivizes logging contractors to implement best management practices to enhance water quality protection measures during forest operations in the Catskill Mountains. VT should establish and fund a similar program that provides payments to logging contractors for specific materials and practices that can be utilized for forest road construction, land preparation, culverts and sediment control in advance of harvest implementation. Examples include erosion control measures on skid trails (mulch, seed, waterbars, straw wattles); right sized culverts, geotextile fabric, and gravel or stone on access roads and landings; and bridges for temporary stream crossing structures during logging. A newly established program would ensure logging contractors can continue to affordably implement water quality protection measures and enhance ecosystem protection, even in the face of escalating climate impacts.

Phase I (non-legislative) - Forest Equipment Loan Program – State Clean Water Revolving Loan Program

Vermont should utilize Clean Water Revolving Loan Funds already provided from US EPA to provide reduced-interest rate financing for investment in low impact harvesting equipment. The purpose of this financial incentive would be to increase the use of AMPs with low ground pressure logging equipment that will help to protect and improve water quality in and around logging operations. This modernized use of these existing funds would provide funding to

specific lenders to loan to logging contractors at a reduced interest rate, as low as 2%. Contractors that apply must be Master Logger Certified to ensure accountability.

The PLC is currently working with the Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation and the Department of Environmental Conservation to establish this program with existing funding. It is estimated that a program can be created in July 2024 and will not require any general fund appropriation.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide background on our organization and an overview of our policy priorities in Vermont on behalf of our membership before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.