

1/29/2026

Chairman Durfee and the members of the House Committee on Agriculture, Forestry, and Food Resilience,
Thank you for the opportunity to testify and provide comments on the Wood Products Manufacturers Report (WPMR).

As an introduction, I operate a Master Logger certified logging company in Randolph Center and have been involved in the logging business since 1998. We were recognized as the 2024 Logging Contractor of the Year by the Professional Logging Contractors of the Northeast (PLC). My family owns farm and forestland in Orange County and in addition to harvesting timber, we operate an excavation and firewood business. I served as the Deputy Commissioner for the Department of Forests, Park, and Recreation during Governor Scott's first two terms, and currently sit on the board of directors for the Professional Logging Contractors of the Northeast.

My experience with the intersection of Vermont's environmental and land use regulatory programs with manufacturers that add value to forest products goes back nearly ten years. As a member of the Scott administration, I worked with colleagues in the executive branch in an intentional effort to examine issues that could be holding back the growth, sustainability, and modernization of these critical facilities in Vermont. Owners and managers of businesses that operate under Act 250 permitting – both currently operating and those that had shuttered - were interviewed. Key issues were identified and evaluated, and specific recommendations were generated for policy proposals during the 2017/2018 biennium.

It became clear during that process that businesses were in fact deterred by the Act 250 process and permit conditions, from expanding, modernizing, and competing in the regional and global economy. It was difficult to identify a silver bullet that would "fix" the issues. The administration, along with many wood product manufacturers, dutifully engaged in the Act 47 "Act 250 at 50" study process, providing compelling evidence and testimony of various issues that were harming the businesses that ultimately provide significant value to Vermonters and their forests.

I'll now fast forward to the stakeholder engagement process in 2025, in which I served as a representative of the Professional Logging Contractors of the Northeast. From recent testimony you have been familiarized with the background of the study, and PLC's recommendations, so I will move directly to some of those recommendations and provide context from my experiences to help guide the committee's deliberations:

Recommendations in the report, organized by PLC priority:

1. Review and pursue update of Act 250 Rule 19 (Recommendation #4)

- I. Updating Rule 19 to reflect current ANR permits can streamline the Act 250 process by reducing duplicative review and better aligning regulatory standards. Allowing applicants to submit ancillary permits after Act 250 approval would provide more flexibility in project sequencing and reduce upfront delays. Clarifying when ANR permits may be dispositive would offer greater predictability for WPM, helping them plan and invest with more confidence.
- II. During the meetings, there was compelling and fact-based input from stakeholders who are permit consultants, engineers, and Agency of Natural Resources staff, on how the permit process could be improved without compromising environmental protection. It's very technical policy and addressing it with the goal of making positive changes for the rural economy, would be worth the effort.

2. Restore clarity and exemptions for log and pulp concentration yards (Recommendation #10)

- I. Revisiting how Act 250 treats log concentration yards is essential. These facilities are part of the logistics chain between the forest and mill and have proven more important as warmer winters limit the number of hours trucking can occur per day.

3. Use of the Stonybrook precedent to limit permit jurisdiction (Recommendation 1. f.)

- I. PLC supports consistent application of the “Stonybrook” approach, which limits Act 250 jurisdiction to the actual development footprint, as an important step to creating predictability in the permitting process.

4. Support for ombudsperson or permit coordination role (Recommendation #8)

- I. Having a knowledgeable point of contact to help navigate state and local permits—especially for small, multi-role operations like logging businesses that also process firewood or operate sawmills—would reduce barriers and increase compliance.

5. Proposed changes to Rule 34 (Recommendation #5 & #6)

- I. The proposed updates to Rule 34 to allow administrative amendments for minor project changes are a positive and necessary step. Forest-based businesses must be able to grow, modernize equipment, and reduce environmental impacts—such as upgrading stormwater systems or switching from diesel to electric—without triggering a full permit amendment. These kinds of practical improvements should be supported, not discouraged, by the permitting system.

6. Extend Act 250 exemptions for logging and forestry, similar to farming (Recommendation #9)

- I. The proposal to extend Act 250 exemptions to forestry operations below 2,500 feet—just as is done for farming on parcels with Act 250 permits—is a much-needed recognition of logging and forest management as a legitimate working lands use. Like farming, forestry is already subject to Acceptable Management Practices and subjecting it to Act 250 adds complexity without clear environmental benefit, consistent with reference to Item J. in the report.

7. Item J. Exemption of logging and forestry on parcels under elevation 2,500 feet with existing Act 250 permits.

- I. We believe this should have a higher priority than was given in the report - the potential impact of Act 250 permit conditions on routine forestry practices, such as the installation of temporary skidder bridges in forested riparian buffers on parcels that have Act 250 permits. These activities are already successfully regulated by Vermont’s Acceptable Management Practices (AMPs) and should not be prohibited or require a permit amendment. Preventing their use through an unpredictable process interferes with best management of adjacent forests and creates confusion about what logging activities are truly exempt. We encourage future policy change that will clarify that such activities do not trigger Act 250 jurisdiction on permitted parcels. Imposing such restrictions undermines sustainable forestry and discourages active forest management on permitted properties, with no clear environmental benefit. It is particularly concerning given the greatly expanded Act 250 Tier 3 jurisdiction into rural projects and greatly increased opportunities for this type of regulatory interaction to occur.

Big picture

While the draft report acknowledges certain procedural improvements, it does not address the fundamental challenge facing Vermont’s forest economy: the lack of meaningful incentives for investment in value-added wood processing. The limited scope and incremental nature of the recommended actions do not rise to the level necessary to stimulate long-term, resilient growth in this sector.

The recommendations focus heavily on clarifying and streamlining the existing Act 250 processes without substantively reducing the regulatory burden or increasing predictability for investors. For instance, the proposed fact sheet, administrative amendment tweaks, and interagency coordination are helpful, but peripheral at best. These do not reduce the financial, logistical, or legal risk involved in siting or expanding manufacturing infrastructure, nor do they provide the certainty needed to unlock private capital or pursue public-private investment strategies.

While the report mentions that the future development of an “Enterprise” category of land use could potentially improve the siting of WPM in regional plans, no mention is made that the LURB is currently drafting rules for potential new Tier 3 Act 250 jurisdictional triggers in mostly rural areas for “critical natural resource areas,” and the overlay maps for forest blocks and habitat connectors from Vermont Conservation Design (which are essentially going to become zones where development will be difficult, if not prohibited, in rural Vermont) are being integrated into regional and town plans now. Both of these active land use policy changes will potentially make siting WPM facilities far more challenging in the future.

If Vermont is serious about revitalizing its forest economy and building a modern, climate-aligned wood products industry, it must move beyond administrative refinements and embrace structural, incentive-based reforms.

Conclusion

While Act 250 has helped protect Vermont’s natural character since 1970, it is important to recognize that generations of stewardship by forest owners and workers—along with the forest economy supply chain—have also kept Vermont forested and productive by providing an economic return. It has been the consistently reported opinion of WPM that the unpredictability of Act 250 permitting timelines and outcomes is a significant deterrent to investment in processing forest products in Vermont. This can only be expected to have a corresponding effect on the continued use of forests as managed forests and family forest owners’ decisions over time, given the historical revenue and management options provided to forest owners from the supply chain, with no comparable replacement available.

Vermont’s forest economy—historically local and rural—is now operating in a global context, subject to climate change, shifting demographics, and geopolitical pressures. To stay competitive, forest-based businesses must scale-up, diversify, and modernize, while maintaining compliance with locally legislated costs and expectations. Businesses that do not grow and adapt do not survive.

The legislature should consider that there is no direct linkage currently between Act 250 reforms and the broader Vermont Forest Future Strategic Roadmap, which has 30 strategic goals. They were developed through a multi-year, widely attended, and diverse stakeholder process, which the legislature asked for and members of this sector committed a significant amount of time to.

While recent Act 250 policy changes or recommendations offer minor procedural relief, they do not go far enough to catalyze the scale of reinvestment Vermont’s forest economy needs as envisioned through the Roadmap process. As the region sees ongoing consolidation of wood products manufacturing, Vermont is increasingly dependent on out-of-state markets, where investment and growth in wood products manufacturing *is* occurring. This runs counter to the state’s goals for reducing emissions, supporting rural livelihoods, and keeping forests intact.

If policymakers value working forests and forest-based businesses as much as agriculture, and the siting of renewable energy infrastructure, land use policy should reflect that—differentiating wood products manufacturers from traditional commercial development. These businesses serve public policy goals related to conservation, climate, and rural vitality.

We appreciate the work of the LURB and all stakeholders for the time and effort spent considering these issues and developing the report. Thank you for consideration of our comments and we look forward to working with you in the future.