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2-11-2025 Sam Lincoln timber trespass report comments

For the record, my name is Sam Lincoln. I own and operate a Master Logger certified mechanized timber harvesting business in Randolph Center. In addition to my career as a multigenerational farmer and logger in central Vermont, I also served four years as the Deputy Commissioner of the Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation in the Scott administration. I currently serve on the board of directors of the Professional Logging Contractors of the Northeast.

Thank you to Chairman Durfee and the Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry for the opportunity to testify on the Timber Trespass report.

My experience with the issue of timber trespass spans my roles in both the private and public sector. As a logging contractor, I am aware of various situations in which a landowner has been the victim of an unscrupulous person who betrayed their trust or property. This has occasionally resulted in my profession being held in low regard by members of the public. As an official in the executive branch, I was essentially powerless to effectively respond to citizens that brought forth concerns about timber trespass that had allegedly occurred on their property with any resources that might bring them swift investigations, restitution, or justice.

As a member of the PLC, I contributed to the development of H.614 as it was drafted prior to the last session and supported the bill and the goals of the legislation which would in theory provide prosecutors with more options to effectively serve and protect the public. I participated as a stakeholder in the summer study group with the intent of developing effective next steps in reducing the instances in which timber trespass might occur and aiding in more predictable and effective prosecution of perpetrators.

I was glad to learn through this process that there have been some arrests of criminals that violate timber theft laws, which has been generally not been commonly known within the forest economy.

Regarding the report and recommendations, and my strong interest in taking action to deter and/or investigate timber trespass violations, I have the following comments and questions:

- The report notes that additional resources are needed to more effectively investigate and prosecute allegations of timber trespass, but estimates for necessary budgets, staffing, materials, etc. to address these constraints, were not provided to the PLC as stakeholders nor were they submitted in the report.
 - If legislators and stakeholders don't know how many people, with which skillset, or what budget amount, is necessary to address reported constraints, how can we recommend or support next steps?
 - Is there a budget or concept for a public awareness campaign to better inform landowners?
- The PLC provided recommendations for creating a better chain of evidence that would help investigators determine if there has been a violation of the law, including trip tickets and harvest notification, but the report does not indicate if law enforcement agencies support or oppose those recommendations as effective tools.
 - Based on their past experiences investigating timber theft complaints, do the agencies find those to be an effective tool to establish evidence and a chain of custody in the theft, and subsequent sale, of another's personal property?

- The AGO recommends a two-year period of improved tracking for reports of timber trespass.
 - Which agency or entity will take the lead on compiling data?
 - Has a central database or template for reporting these complaints been established and will it be made available to the stakeholders?
 - Does a county forester or state police officer (examples of the boots on the ground civil servants interfacing with the public) know who to pass information along to if they receive a timber theft complaint to ensure it is recorded? Do they know what information to collect and submit that is currently missing?
 - Will members of the public, and the forest economy, be able to submit reports of timber trespass to this collection?

I concur with what Mr. Doran has presented on behalf of the PLC, and appreciate the work that the AGO and other stakeholders put into the report. Further work needs to be done in the near term, beginning with establishing clear roles, responsibilities, and next steps so that the work of all parties on this issue does not fade away without action being taken.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.