Testimony in Support of H.473

House Committee on Environment – January 27, 2026

Chair Sheldon and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of H.473 with some suggested changes to the current bill.

For the record, my name is Renee Seacor, I am from Chittenden, Vermont and I serve as the Northeast Rewilding Director for the organization Mighty Earth. Mighty Earth is a global environmental organization working to protect wild nature and secure a stable climate through a variety of diverse campaigns. My professional background is in carnivore conservation, coexistence, and environmental advocacy, and my work has focused on advancing science-based approaches to living alongside large carnivores while addressing ecological, social, and community considerations. At Mighty Earth, I lead our wildlife restoration efforts and currently direct our **Bring Catamounts Home** campaign, which is active here in Vermont and focused on supporting thoughtful, science-based conversations about the long-term future of catamounts in the Northeast. It is in this capacity that I speak with you today to offer our support for this legislation and our willingness to address any questions and assist as you may wish.

At the outset, I want to emphasize our respect for the **Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department** and for the professionalism and expertise of the Department s staff. We recognize that Vermont Fish & Wildlife is the state authority on wildlife management, and we view H.473 as an opportunity to support and collaborate with the Department s work through a science-based analysis of examining the potential restoration of catamounts back to Vermont. We also believe that the question of catamount restoration and the study of its feasibility in particular warrants timely and serious evaluation by the Department.

The catamount is a native species and an important part of Vermont's ecological and cultural history, extirpated from the state in the late 1800s under very different conditions than exist today. Many of you may be aware that the preserved remains of the last known catamount killed in Vermont in 1881 outside Barnard are on public display at the Vermont History Museum, just down the street, alongside an exhibit that documents the species' ecological and cultural presence in our state. Although absent from our forests for more than a century, the catamount has remained a cherished cultural icon in Vermont—embedded in our place names, imagery, and

shared identity as a wild and resilient landscape, and reflected most visibly as the mascot of the University of Vermont.

Catamounts are apex carnivores and keystone species that play a crucial role in ecosystem dynamics. For millennia, they helped shape Northeastern landscapes by influencing prey abundance and behavior, supporting forest regeneration, and providing carrion that sustains a wide range of other wildlife. Research also suggests that intact predator–prey systems can contribute to reduced disease risk and enhanced biodiversity. The return of this missing native species could help restore these ecological functions and contribute to healthier, more resilient forest ecosystems.

Since the time of extirpation, Vermont's landscape and ecological context have changed significantly. Forest cover has rebounded from historic lows to roughly 75 percent of the state, and large, connected tracts of habitat now exist across Vermont and the broader region. White-tailed deer populations—the primary prey base for catamounts—are abundant and, in some areas, overabundant. Scientific understanding of large carnivore ecology and coexistence has advanced substantially, and public interest in catamount restoration is strong, with recent polling showing roughly a twelve-to-one ratio of strong support to strong opposition in Vermont. Much of this recent research and context was the subject of testimony this Committee received from large carnivore researchers and academics during the first half of this legislative biennium. Taken together, this research and current landscape conditions raise legitimate, science-based questions about whether conditions in Vermont today are adequate for the restoration of this missing native species and what benefits its restoration would provide to our ecosystems and landscapes.

Across the country, state and federal wildlife agencies have used what is called a 'feasibility study' to thoughtfully evaluate the return of native species once lost from their landscapes, helping to inform careful, place-based decisions grounded in science and public process.

We believe Vermont has an opportunity to show similar leadership. Authorizing a feasibility study does not commit the state to a particular outcome, but it does affirm Vermont's willingness to ask informed questions, to reckon thoughtfully with

past ecological losses, and to consider what kind of conservation legacy it wishes to leave for future generations.

We also view this initiative as supportive of the Department's broader conservation work. As outlined in Vermont's State Wildlife Action Plan draft update as well at the Vermont Conservation Design, the Department has prioritized maintaining and restoring intact, functioning, and connected landscapes as a core strategy for conserving biodiversity, supporting climate resilience, and sustaining healthy ecosystems. Evaluating the feasibility of catamount restoration aligns directly with those goals. Research shows that native apex carnivores can help promote ecosystem resilience, influence prey behavior and distribution, and support biodiversity across landscapes—outcomes that are fully consistent with the Department's mission and long-term conservation vision. A feasibility study allows the Department to assess whether and how this missing native species could contribute to those objectives under modern conditions.

We do not believe that leaving these questions unanswered, or deferring their evaluation indefinitely, is sufficient. What we mean by that is simply that the Department now has enough information—and enough change in underlying conditions from the time of extirpation—to warrant a structured evaluation. A feasibility study is the tool for how agencies responsibly determine whether further action is appropriate. Without that assessment, the question remains unresolved, and neither the Legislature nor the public has the benefit of clear, agency-led science-based analysis to inform future decisions.

A feasibility study as proposed in H.473 is precisely the appropriate mechanism for the Department to assess whether restoration is viable based on existing literature as well as the benefits and interest in doing so. Beginning that process now allows Vermont Fish & Wildlife to lead the conversation as it moves forward and identify where scientific and management uncertainties remain, rather than leaving those questions unresolved.

H.473, as introduced, directs the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department to conduct a feasibility study examining the potential restoration of catamounts to Vermont. The bill does **not** mandate reintroduction. I d like to repeat that point – the bill does **not** mandate reintroduction and we are not requesting such a mandate. I think this is an important point to empathize as the bill's current title "An Act Related to the

Reintroduction of Catamounts" I feel might be misleading or create confusion. Instead, the bill asks the Department to evaluate a foundational question: whether restoration is feasible—ecologically, socially, and economically—given present-day conditions.

In our view, H.473 represents a prudent and thoughtful first step. It places leadership with the Department, within Vermont s existing wildlife management framework, and allows trained wildlife professionals to assess the issue using the best available science, public input, and, importantly, regional consultation with wildlife professionals in other northeastern states.

We also suggest changes to the bill to respond to concerns raised by the Department and others. We recognize the Department's stated capacity constraints and its need to prioritize ongoing conservation responsibilities. Changes to the bill can help strengthen and clarify the scope of a feasibility assessment while preserving the bill's exploratory scope by reinforcing that this effort is focused on information-gathering and assessment. Importantly, we suggest changes to clarify that outside funding and partnerships may be used to support the feasibility study, allowing this work to move forward without reliance on public funding and without diverting staff capacity from the Department's other important conservation priorities. We also suggest that the bill call for regional consultation with neighboring states stakeholders including wildlife agencies.

I d like to briefly address two questions that have been central to discussion of this topic:

1. **Why is a feasibility study an appropriate first step?**
2. **What does a feasibility study entail under H.473?**

Why a Feasibility Study Is the Appropriate First Step

Feasibility studies are a standard tool used by wildlife agencies in assessing the potential restoration of a native species to part of its historic range. They are often initiated before any decision to restore a species. Across the country, wildlife agencies have used feasibility studies as a tool to evaluate species restoration such as black footed ferrets, grizzly bears, elk, American marten, and red wolves.

These studies allow agencies to evaluate key ecological, social, economic, and administrative factors, including:

- Habitat suitability, potential ecological impacts, and species interactions
- Potential economic costs and benefits
- Conceptual management pathways for introduced species; and
- Social considerations, including public attitudes and stakeholder concerns

They also provide an opportunity for structured public and stakeholder engagement to inform the assessment and ensure transparency, and they help identify information gaps and areas requiring further study. Importantly, feasibility studies do not assume or require a particular outcome.

To help illustrate the scope of these studies, I have attached examples to my written testimony today, including feasibility assessments conducted for species such as elk and American marten.

What a Feasibility Study Would Entail Under H.473

H.473 reflects several important components that align with best practices and respect the Department s role in this process:

- **No mandate to reintroduce:** The bill authorizes only a study, led by Vermont Fish & Wildlife.
- **Science-based analysis:** It allows the Department to review existing literature thoroughly and identify knowledge gaps that may need further study.
- **Public and stakeholder engagement:** Ensuring transparency in this process and opportunities for community input.
- **Opportunity for collaboration:** The bill allows for public–private partnerships that could support research and analysis without relying on state funds, while keeping the Department in charge of scope and direction.
- **Regional consultation:** Recognizing that coordination with neighboring states is an important element of any feasibility assessment for wide-ranging species such as catamounts.

Conclusion

In closing, we view H.473 as a respectful, measured request for initiating the long-term process of restoring catamounts back to Vermont. Supporting this bill would give Vermont Fish & Wildlife the authority to evaluate a complex conservation question using professional judgment, scientific rigor, and public input.

We are committed to engaging constructively and collaboratively in the feasibility process as it moves forward.

For these reasons, we respectfully encourage the Committee to support H.473 and allow the feasibility study to move forward.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration. I'd be happy to answer any questions.