

Members of this Committee, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to testify in front of you on behalf of the Vermont Forest Products Association. I consider it both an honor and a real opportunity to present my views on this legislation and more specifically how I believe this ties to what has already happened in Bennington County over my 50+ year career as a forester. Public landownership, the 30x30 and the 50x50 legislation and other similar proposed legislation that would create more wild-lands, already have had or will have a direct impact on the forest products industry. Bennington County is I believe a bellwether for the rest of the state on the impact of public lands to the working forest landscape in Vermont. I feel that it is of the utmost importance that Current Use land be added to the definition of conserved and protected land statewide.

To quickly summarize, I'm a native Vermonter originally from Worcester, Vermont and have lived in Shaftsbury since 1977. I'm a 1974 graduate of the University of Vermont School of Natural Resources. As of this May, I will have made my living for 52 continuous years working as a forester and wildlife manager in Vermont. This includes 10 years as a Deputy Game Warden for the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. I couldn't have asked for a more intensely rewarding outdoor career. Most recently I published a book about my career, **"50 Years a Dirt Forester...Always Outside and Never Behind a Desk"**. I've enjoyed traveling and speaking to my fellow Vermonters about my book and advocating for forestry and wildlife issues.

This past summer I was speaking about my book at the Vermont Veterans Home in Bennington. An old friend and business acquaintance Don Lewis, who was a former owner of a Bennington County sawmill and is a resident of the home, visited with me afterwards about my book and what I'd just talked about. He said my presentation and talk about change over my career had gotten him thinking. He suggested I take a closer look at the reasons for the disappearance of sawmills with a focus on just Bennington County. He suggested that there might be another big story there. I don't think he realized how important this story is, and how it continues to impact us today. I thought about this for several days trying

to discover what were the big changes that occurred in the forest products industry within the time period of my career.

I knew these following things to be facts. Within the 50 years since I moved to Bennington County, ten major sawmills have gone out of business. Along with those ten sawmills, 3 major furniture manufacturers have also gone out of business. This does not include other mills scattered along the New York and Massachusetts state lines. The economic loss was huge. The combined loss of jobs was over 500 people in Vermont, and this does not include the loggers and truckers that worked for these mills. What caused the loss of mills and manufacturers? Do you know how many mills are left today in Bennington County ...0.

So, do you like statistics? Not me, but I'm about to throw a whole bunch at you. Bennington County sawmills suffered more than any other county in Vermont from the very thing that contributed to the beauty around us today. Consumers in the area now pay for it every time they go to their lumberyard where the material comes from the other side of the globe or from Canada. I would offer that the United States Forest Service land purchases probably contributed more to the demise of sawmills within Bennington County than any other factor. This is a statement that is not without controversy. Hear me out and let's keep digging into it.

The USFS began buying Bennington County land in 1932 with the purchase of 1842 acres at Hapgood Pond in Peru. From that humble beginning the USFS holdings have exploded. It is probably easiest to list the statistics...it is overwhelming.

1. Total acreage in Vermont is about **6,000,000** acres +/-
2. Total USFS holdings in Vermont are around **414,099** acres \* which makes up nearly **7%** of the total acreage in Vermont.
3. Total Bennington County acreage is around **385,088**+/- acres.
4. Total USFS holdings in Bennington County are about **161,359**+ acres\* or about **42 %** of the total acreage in Bennington County. Bennington County holds nearly **39%** of all the USFS land in Vermont.
- 5 Bennington County USFS Wilderness Areas make up over **48,614** acres\*. About **12.5 %** of Bennington County acreage is dedicated to Wilderness

Area. That amounts to **30%** of the USFS acreage in the county. **100,745 acres\*** are in Wilderness Area statewide. Bennington County alone contains almost half of the statewide total wilderness acreage. This acreage is not to be harvested and has remained untouched. **(Acreage indicated with \* were obtained directly from the USFS).**

Early in my career the USFS harvested large steady volumes of timber on their lands within the county. Previous to USFS ownership, these private lands had produced large volumes of timber for many years. Both sawmills, furniture manufacturers and loggers depended on that log flow. By the early 1980's, changes in how timber sales were appealed became law. Our industry was changed overnight by decisions made at the ballot box. The change was predictable. The easiest way to cripple an industry is to cut off the supply of raw material and that is what happened. Every potential sale was appealed over and over. Volumes being harvested crashed. USFS staffing was cut back substantially. Mills that depended on that volume had to begin to look at private landownership for their wood supply, but that land base had also been eroded and fragmented. The Hale Company in Arlington, the Readsboro Chair Factory, and Cushman Furniture in North Bennington depended on those same mills for their lumber. They had to find different places to purchase their material. All further away. Costs for raw materials rapidly escalated. Was this the only reason for the loss of these mills? No. I called their demise a death by a thousand pin pricks. Every mill had its own story, but the one constant was the increase in raw material cost or loss of availability of the raw material. I'll spend a lot of time in this second book looking at those reasons for the mills' demise and the consequences of their disappearance. The title of my second book will be **“The Disappearance of Sawmills in Bennington County or How Much Public Land is Enough”?**

Bennington County has already shot right by the acreages in the 30x30 legislation and is or is nearly approaching the 50x50 acreages. There have been economic consequences of public land creation in Bennington County that no one anticipated. Additionally, my research has shown me that there have been consequences even to the wildlife that live on those

public lands by timber sale cutbacks. One thing I heard often was that wildlife thrives on disturbance. This is the exact opposite of what some folks would like us to believe. As my retiring 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher wife says, **“you are free to choose, but you are not free from the consequences of those choices”**. The choices you make as legislators today will have an impact on our little state for many years. I’m currently writing in my second book **that every small act has consequences. Everything we do outdoors is interrelated.** Changes in wildlife and the forest products industry certainly seem to be tied to things we do today and things we didn’t realize or account for 50 years ago when they happened. We can’t go back nor would I want to, but **I’ll write in this second book that hopefully the people that are making the decisions today have had the hindsight to look to the past and the foresight to look to the future.** I’ll make the point that a conserved or protected land inventory needs to be as accurate as possible so that we can predict and anticipate these consequences. Current Use lands need to be included. That acreage has been a major part of the continuation of improving forest management practices and the protection of land in Vermont since the creation of the program in 1978 by your legislative predecessors. Please continue their important work. Please make the changes requested in H.70.

Finally, we must continue working hard to ensure that Vermont folks have the land to grow, harvest and make a living. The forestry and farming communities of Vermont, with their working lands, are what make our state beautiful. Please recognize that land that can’t be used is a death sentence to rural landowners. Every piece of land that forestry and farming are being restricted from using, is another one of those thousand pin pricks to our future.

Thank you again for giving an average Vermonter the opportunity to be able to express his opinion. It is part of what makes our state great.

Sincerely,  
William Sargent

[sargentw@myfairpoint.net](mailto:sargentw@myfairpoint.net)

518-281-7982 cell/text