

April 1, 2024

The Honorable Joseph J. Solomon, Jr.
Chairman, House Corporations Committee
Rhode Island State House
Providence, Rhode Island 02908

RE: H-7086 – An Act Relating to Public Utilities & Carriers – Vegetation Management for Electric System Reliability

Dear Chairman Solomon:

On behalf of Rhode Island Energy, I write in strong **support** of H-7086 and respectfully urge its passage. Our company is grateful for the leadership shown by Speaker Pro Tempore Kennedy and the bill's co-sponsors in introducing this important piece of legislation.

This bill will strengthen electric reliability for homes and businesses, reduce system costs, foster resource efficiencies, and enhance public and worker safety – a substantial suite of benefits driven by a statewide, holistic approach to utility vegetation management. H-7086 achieves these positive outcomes through a transparent, efficient, and regulated process that is *inclusive* of input from local tree wardens and the public and *without* creating new rates or substantial utility cost burdens.

Rhode Island Energy provides essential energy services to over 770,000 customers across the Ocean State through the delivery of electricity and natural gas. Our team of 1,300 union and non-union employees is dedicated to helping Rhode Island customers and communities thrive, while supporting the transition to a cleaner energy future – in a safe, reliable, and affordable manner.

Tree-related damage is the number one source of power outages in Rhode Island and throughout the region. Climate change is amplifying this threat across our network of 6,200 miles of distribution lines, as more frequent, intense storms roar through the northeast, and new pests and fungi weaken and decay local vegetation. Today, the outages we see across the system are not limited to strong weather events but can occur even on “blue sky” days. These heightened risks come at a time when Rhode Islanders and the state’s economy are becoming increasingly dependent on the grid – *not only to power homes and businesses, but also to heat buildings on the coldest winter days and help meet clean transportation demands.*

H-7086 establishes a practical, statewide approach to utility vegetation management – with thorough regulatory oversight and stakeholder input – while driving clear energy, economic, and other societal benefits. The bill requires Rhode Island Energy to file vegetation management standards and practices with state regulators at least once every four years,¹ including:

- specifications, under various design scenarios, for vegetation clearing on and around utility infrastructure;
- a notification process for municipalities, state agencies, and private property owners that may be impacted by vegetation management activities, including a detailed workplan for cities and towns;
- establishment of an educational “right tree, right place” program to inform the public on safe planting practices near utility infrastructure and reduce future grid impacts;

¹ Page 7, lines 4-5.

- detailed compliance with state arborist licensing requirements; and
- a process by which the electric distribution company will seek approval from property owners for necessary tree removals (e.g., dead or diseased trees) that jeopardize the electric system.²

This bill does not establish new rates or other funding streams, but instead leverages existing regulatory processes in Rhode Island statute that govern costs associated with maintaining safe and reliable energy infrastructure.³

Importantly, prior to any regulatory filing, **H-7086 directs the electric distribution utility to present an overview of its draft vegetation management standards and practices to locally appointed tree wardens for their input.**⁴ This valuable touchpoint supports an informed, iterative process at the design stage and will enhance the utility's proposal and regulatory process itself. Importantly, that process – overseen by the state's utility ratepayer advocate – includes a separate and distinct opportunity for public comment.⁵

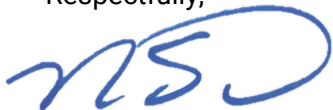
To further enhance transparency, the legislation requires the utility (and state regulators) to post its vegetation management standards and practices online.⁶ Rhode Island Energy would also be required to notify each municipality and local tree warden when its utility vegetation standards and practices filing has been submitted for regulatory review.⁷

This legislation, coupled with other actions being taken by Rhode Island Energy – such as implementation of Advanced Metering Functionality (AMF) and the filing of its Grid Modernization Plan – will facilitate a safe, reliable, and more advanced, 21st century electric distribution system to meet evolving customer demands, grow our economy, and meet Act on Climate mandates.

In closing, Rhode Island Energy respectfully asks this Committee to advance H-7086 as an important tool that will improve electric grid reliability, mitigate power outages, enhance public and worker safety, and reduce long-term system costs for ratepayers.

Thank you for your leadership and consideration of these comments.

Respectfully,



Nicholas S. Ucci
Director of Government Affairs

CC: The Honorable Members of the House Corporations Committee
Speaker Pro Tempore Brian Patrick Kennedy, Bill Sponsor

² Page 5, lines 7-33.

³ Page 6, lines 30-34 through page 7, lines 1-3.

⁴ Page 5, line 34 through page 6, 1-4.

⁵ Page 6, lines 14-15.

⁶ Page 5, lines 26-28.

⁷ Page 6, lines 5-8.