

March 20, 2024

Representative Bennett
Chair, House Committee on Environment and Natural Resources
Rhode Island State House
Providence, RI 02908

Re: The Nature Conservancy Supports House Bill 7022 “Act on Coasts”

Dear Chairman Bennett,

The Nature Conservancy is grateful for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 7022 (“Act on Coasts”) and is grateful to Representatives Spears, Cortvriend, Kislak, Kazarian, Casimiro, Carson, Cotter, Speakman, Ajello, Dawson for their leadership in sponsoring it.

The Nature Conservancy is a global organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Here in Rhode Island, we steward more than 14,000 acres land and protect an additional 35,000 acres with partners. We do much of our work to protect and restore our natural environment in partnership with the Department of Environmental Management, the Rhode Island Infrastructure Bank, our federal agencies, and local partner organizations.

Since 2019, we have partnered with the Rhode Island Infrastructure Bank to administer the Municipal Resilience Program (MRP). This program empowers municipalities to identify their specific challenges and opportunities in becoming more resilient to the impacts of climate change. To date, 35 of the state’s 39 municipalities have participated in the program, where they engage in a planning effort and a municipally-centered workshop focused on their vulnerabilities and potential actions related to climate resilience.

Unsurprising, our coastal communities were the first to sign up for the program in its earliest years – as they are already seeing the impacts of climate change in more frequent rain, flooding, sea level rise, and other effects that impact residents, visitors, and businesses. Earlier this year, the Bank awarded \$12 million to resilience projects stemming from the MRP workshops after receiving over \$50 million in applications. There are big resilience needs in our state.

The effects of climate change are already here and will only increase in severity – and are especially being felt on our coasts. For example, over the past 50 years, we’ve seen the surface water temperature of Narragansett Bay increase by nearly 3 degrees F. Intense rainfall events have increased by over 70% in the last 70 years – sea level has risen at the Newport Tide Gauge by more than 10 inches since 1930. According to NOAA, this could be more than a foot by 2030.

The Act on Coasts legislation would require the State to take our resilience to climate change seriously. It is consistent with the actions our neighboring states have already taken – especially Massachusetts.

It requires a few things, including (but not limited to):

- The newly-hired Chief Resiliency Officer (housed at DEM) will develop a statewide resilience plan in partnership with other state agencies and local jurisdictions by 2025 – in line with when the state is required to develop an overall Act on Climate Plan. The State’s last resilience Plan was released in 2018, and while it was a great effort, it is out of date.
- It also requires that the state’s resiliency office and officer not only develops, but maintains and implements the plan referenced above – in coordination with federal, state, and local government and non-government entities. It further requires regular review of the Plan to ensure that the plan is consistent with current and emerging science and experiences on the ground.
- The state will provide technical assistance to local governments to secure additional resources necessary to implement local resilience solutions. In our work with the MRP, we see how every city and town is dealing with these new issues related to climate resilience with minimal resources. Additional technical assistance and guidance and resources would go a long way in ensuring our communities have what they need to address these big challenges.
- A specific plan for resilience in coastal areas of the state: tidal and non-tidal waters, waterfronts, and 8 inland areas along the coast. Rhode Island’s location and unique shape exacerbate the need to address these coastal-specific challenges, which affect flooding, sea level rise, salt water intrusion, coastal erosion and more.
- The creation of an advisory board on resilience for ocean and riverine coasts, with membership including cities and towns, experts in flood management and mitigation, professionals with expertise in insurance, land use planners, environmentalist, real state professionals, and other relevant stakeholders. This body will regularly present to the EC4 and advise the EC4 on recommendations and strategies. Currently the EC4 lacks a strong voice representing the resilience components of climate change – and this would help fill that gap in knowledge.

The Nature Conservancy respectfully requests that you support and pass this legislation. It will be essential for our state to address the growing responsibilities we have to adapt to a changing climate. We are fully supportive of this legislation and stand ready to answer any questions or assist in implementation any way we can.

Sincerely,



Sue AnderBois
Director of Climate and Government Relations
The Nature Conservancy in Rhode Island