



For a thriving New England

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Via Electronic Mail

March 21, 2024

The Honorable David A. Bennett
Chair, House Committee on Environment and Natural Resources
Room 135, State House
Providence, RI 02903

RE: CLF **Supports** House Bill No. 7617 – The Building Decarbonization Act of 2024

Dear Chair Bennett:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill No. 7617, the Building Decarbonization Act of 2024. H-7617 would reduce greenhouse gas (“GHG”) emissions from the heating of homes and businesses by (i) requiring energy usage reporting and the creation of building performance standards for large existing buildings, and (ii) phasing out reliance on fossil fuels in new buildings. Conservation Law Foundation (“CLF”) enthusiastically supports this bill and wishes to thank its sponsors for their attention to this important issue.

CLF is a member-supported non-profit environmental advocacy organization working throughout New England to counter climate change, restore the health of our oceans, embolden new energy infrastructure, and safeguard health, quality of life, and economic prosperity for future generations. We are working to cut emissions from the heating sector and push for affordable and equitable heating policies in Rhode Island and across New England.

In Rhode Island, the heating of homes and businesses, including associated leaks from the gas distribution system, accounts for approximately 30% of statewide GHG emissions.¹ This figure does not include industrial heating (another 10% of state emissions), and likely underestimates emissions associated with the gas distribution system.² Decarbonizing the heating of Rhode Island’s homes and businesses is thus a large and important part of achieving the mandates of the

¹ R.I. Dep’t of Env’tl. Mgmt., *2020 Rhode Island Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory* 6 (2023), available at <https://dem.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur861/files/2023-10/2020%20RI%20GHG%20Emissions%20Inventory%20Summary.pdf>.

² See Stockholm Env’tl. Inst. & Brown Univ. Climate and Dev. Lab, *Deeper Decarbonization in the Ocean State: The 2019 Rhode Island Greenhouse Gas Reduction Study* 20–23 (2019), available at <https://www.sei.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/deeper-decarbonization-in-the-ocean-state.pdf>.

Act on Climate, which requires GHG emissions reductions of 45% below 1990 levels by 2030, 80% by 2040, and net-zero emissions by 2050.³

In addition to the significant climate impacts of fossil fuel heating and appliances, reliance on these technologies has an adverse impact on indoor air quality, including release of NO₂—a respiratory irritant that results in asthma, coughing, trouble breathing, and other respiratory symptoms.⁴

While Rhode Island has enacted significant new policies designed to decarbonize Rhode Island’s electricity and transportation sectors—including requiring 100% renewable electricity by 2033⁵ and adopting stricter vehicle emissions standards⁶—the heating sector has received comparably little attention since the passage of the Act on Climate in 2021.

H-7617 will reduce emissions from the heating of homes and businesses by:

- Requiring large buildings to report their energy usage and GHG emissions, which will help building owners learn how to reduce energy usage and save money, and will enable the creation of a building performance standard.
- Requiring the Office of Energy Resources (“OER”) to evaluate benchmarking data, consult with stakeholders, and create a building performance standard for large buildings to reduce emissions in line with the Act on Climate. A new Environmental Justice Advisory Board will advise OER on equitable policy design and implementation.
- Requiring the phase-in of all-electric new construction as follows:
 - electric-ready construction of new buildings by 2024
 - all-electric construction of public buildings (including schools) by 2024
 - all-electric construction of new buildings by 2026
- Giving cities and towns the option to require all-electric new construction effective immediately.

The bill also contains provisions to ensure housing and electricity affordability, and exemptions for commercial or industrial uses which cannot feasibly operate using commercially available all-electric appliances.

³ R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-6.2-2.

⁴ Eric D. Lebel et al., *Methane and NO_x Emissions from Natural Gas Stoves, Cooktops, and Ovens in Residential Homes*, 56 *Envtl. Sci. & Tech.* 2529 (2022), at C, I, available at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.est.1c04707>.

⁵ See R.I. Gen. Laws § 39-26-4.

⁶ See 250 R.I. Code R. 120-05-37.

The policies advanced by H-7617 are consistent with the Executive Climate Change Coordinating Council's ("EC4") 2022 update to the state climate plan, which recommends pursuit of energy efficiency and heating electrification, and notes that "[b]uilding codes can help the State set the trajectory for net-zero green building standards, prepare our new buildings to be EV- and solar-ready, and prepare our buildings to be completely electrified."⁷

H-7617 won't solve the problem of GHG emissions from building heating all at once, but it is a meaningful step we can and should take this year. Addressing the climate crisis, and doing so in a way that minimizes costs and other impacts to Rhode Islanders, is a complicated policy challenge. The more we delay action the harder it becomes. Conversely, proactively addressing the challenge will put Rhode Island in position to achieve the mandates of the Act on Climate and help to prevent the worst impacts of the climate crisis.

The time has come to take meaningful action to decarbonize Rhode Island's heating sector. CLF therefore respectfully urges passage of H-7617.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this testimony.

Sincerely,



James Crowley
Staff Attorney, CLF Rhode Island

cc: Members of the House Committee on Environment and Natural Resources
Representative David Morales
Representative Leonela Felix
Darrèll Brown, Vice President, Rhode Island, Conservation Law Foundation

⁷ R.I. Exec. Climate Change Coordinating Council, *Rhode Island 2022 Climate Update 79-85* (2022), available at <https://climatechange.ri.gov/media/1261/download?language=en>.