



NEW ENGLAND CHAPTER BACKCOUNTRY HUNTERS & ANGLERS

April 4, 2024

To Chairman Bennett and members of the House Committee on Environment and Natural Resources

Re: BHA Opposition to RI - 2024 – H7293 –Old Growth Forest Protection Act

Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (BHA) seeks to ensure North America's outdoor heritage of hunting and fishing in a natural setting. Our members believe that the habitats and ecosystems that fish and wildlife rely upon should be managed following the best available science, and we work to enact policies that keep habitat management authority in the hands of the biologists and foresters who are most familiar with the resources being managed.

Over the last several years BHA has provided testimony on bills that sought to protect old growth forests in Rhode Island, and while we don't necessarily oppose the concept, **the New England Chapter of BHA urges the Committee to oppose H7293**. Unlike earlier iterations of the 'Old Growth Forest Act' (2022 – H7066, 2023 – H5344), H7293 seems to have lost its relatively narrow focus on defining and protecting old growth forests, and now seeks to completely upend RI's public land management paradigm.

To be clear, we support the use of management tools like timber harvests and prescribed burns on public lands when they are used to achieve specific management goals, like the promotion of certain habitats, the mitigation of ecological diseases or infestations, or for public safety. This is especially true when goals are aligned with public input processes like State Wildlife and Forest Action Plans, and/or are aligned with the priorities of the funding programs utilized to acquire and manage public lands, such as the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act and Land and Water Conservation Fund.

While BHA has expressed our conceptual support for the protection of old growth forests in the past, this support does not extend to situations where it would be at odds with, would restrict, or would totally overrule existing priorities. This is the case with H7293, which seeks to overpower both the goals that public land managers work towards and the tools available to achieve them by imposing restrictive legislation. This year's iteration of the 'Old Growth Forest Act' goes even further than previous efforts by proposing a new agency, which shares the name of a program once housed within RI's Department of Environmental Management, that would have the extraordinary statutory authority to impose its own management goals, and preferences related to how those goals are achieved, onto an unknown but likely considerable proportion of RI's publicly owned forests, and potentially onto privately owned land too.

To summarize BHA's position, we are fundamentally opposed to overriding decades of purposeful public land acquisition, stewardship, and conservation work with restrictive legislation that prioritizes a new, narrow set of management goals above all current priorities, which is what H7293 seeks to do. Further, we are concerned that none of the Commissions that the General Assembly has created in recent years to provide recommendations on precisely the types of forestry issues H7293 is seeking to address have ever weighed in favorably on this or any prior version of the 'Old Growth Forest Act'. With all these things in mind, **the New England Chapter BHA respectfully urges the Committee, and ultimately the entire RI General Assembly, to oppose H7293.**

Thank you for your consideration,

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