

Lou Mansolillo

From: Pat Foley <patdafolee@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, April 3, 2024 4:01 PM
To: House Environment and Natural Resources Committee
Subject: Old Growth Forest Protection Act 2024 H 7293

I am writing to share my strong support for the Old Growth Forest Protection Act 2024 H 7293, which would create the first state laws to protect forests and biodiversity in Rhode Island, and I urge that you support it as well. The included protections for these critical resources on public land, also restores the Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program, a key oversight and support capability, and creates a Natural Areas Preserve system. A state as small, dense and developed as Rhode Island can ill-afford to give short shrift to its remaining natural areas, since once they are lost there's little hope for their restoration.

As in much of coastal New England, centuries of human settlement, the building of transportation and manufacturing infrastructure and significant resource extraction result in any type of contiguous "old growth forest" being exceptionally rare in Rhode Island with only 1% of the state's forests being over 100 years old. However, I can attest from my own experience studying and supporting our indigenous flora, that where we do have older woodlands, there is a much higher degree of native biodiversity, limited incursion of introduced invasive species, greater resistance to wildfires, improved water and soil quality, and better carbon sequestration than found in areas with less mature tree and shrub growth. These stable older woodlands are foundational for Rhode Island's environment and residents to literally "weather" the effects of climate change that is becoming more evident to us every day.

Too much of our political and bureaucratic efforts regarding our state forests seems focused on resource extraction though the rewards of such a short-sighted approach seem illusory at best. If our state government can't or won't protect our diminishing natural resources, how can we expect our private landowners to sacrifice their own desire to profit from their forests even if the short-term gain is detrimental to our social and environmental health.

From 1978-2007, the Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program was responsible for identifying, monitoring, and protecting native biodiversity and rare and endangered species. However, since the program was defunded in 2007, no state agency has been doing the important work of advocating for and protecting native biodiversity. Also, none of the state's Natural Heritage Areas are protected as all state forests are currently open to logging.

The Natural Heritage Program would be required by this legislation to conduct environmental review and approve all public state logging operations to ensure no Old Growth Forests, Rare forest ecosystems, or Natural Heritage Areas are disturbed, as well as preventing clearcutting of public forests.

The Natural Areas Preserve system would provide a mechanism to protect rare forests, or any forests desired by the public, to be preserved in their natural state where no logging would be permitted.

Please pass H 7293, so we can finally have legal protections for our forests and have a Natural Heritage Program again. I appreciate your consideration.

Regards,

Pat Foley
RI resident, taxpayer and voter