

Peter Trafton, Providence Rhode Island
Testimony opposing H7293, "Old Growth Forest Protection Act"
House Committee on Environment and Natural Resources, 4.4.2024

Dear Chair Bennett and Honorable members of the House Committee on Environment and Natural Resources,

I have been studying bill 7293 for several weeks and feel compelled to write in opposition to this bill. I speak for myself alone.

For several years, Nathan Cornell has been telling us that Rhode Island's Department of Environmental Management has been taken over by supporters of the "logging industry".

The Old Growth Forest Act - "OGFA" is based on this premise.

The bill applies only to State & Municipal forests. It ignores our private forests. It does nothing to bring more trees to our urban EJ neighborhoods. But please note, it does authorize the state to control our municipal forests

Let's consider Rhode Island's forests. Almost 60% of our land area is forest.

{please watch the Burrillville Land Trust's beautiful brief video of Sweet's Hill}

RI Total Forest land: 367,000 acres – State:18 % Municipal: 13% Private 68%

DEM manages our state-owned forests, including purchase of private lands or adding easements that also **protect them**, just as our state forests are **protected**. If more funds were available, Rhode Island would buy more land and easements.

No Rhode Island state-owned forests are leased or sold for timber harvesting, or for solar farms. Both Connecticut and Massachusetts lease state forest lands for commercial logging. Rhode Island does NOT.

DEM, like most forest managers, does some active forest management. This may involve cutting trees. But how much? For the past 10 years, only 0.3% per year of DEM's forest area has been cut – that's a total of 3%, over a 10-year period. The amount has *not increased over time*. DEM is not turning the state's forests over to the logging industry.

Active forest management is the only "logging" done in Rhode Island state forests. We have lost significantly more forest land to wildfires, tree diseases, and changed use of private lands. NOT STATE FORESTS.

OGFA has Five Parts.

First, it requires the governor to appoint a “tree czar” with ultimate control over our state and municipal forests.

Second, OGFA forbids the felling or removal of any trees, for any reason, from areas blocked off by the czar. (It creates a new felony!)

Third, OGFA creates a new version of a state **Natural Heritage Program**, into which the tree czar can place a portion of any state or municipal forest. The program must survey and categorize all such forests. But transparency and public involvement are not assured. **It replaces the DEM for all “special forests”**.

Fourth, OGFA revises current state laws regarding forest fire prevention and management, dividing the responsibility between DEM and the tree czar. **So, forget about having a single incident commander** - the standard practice for disasters or emergencies.

Fifth, OGFA amends the Act on Climate, adding the tree czar to the EC4, and requiring the EC4 to end “ecologically destructive logging.”

The goal is to help our trees fight climate change – BUT, all the forests in Rhode Island clear only 7% of our total greenhouse gas emissions per year. Nothing we do will significantly increase this small segment of our greenhouse gas emissions.

Because of all these problems, I cannot support the Old Growth Forest Act.

I do think that we should study and plan a new comprehensive approach to protecting our forests and their biodiversity. We must include the private forests which are 2/3 of Rhode Island’s forest land. We need to advocate for the resources that forest protection will require. We should help the state improve its care of our forests.

Thank you for considering my comments.

Respectfully,



Peter Trafton