

Environment and Natural Resources Committee
Testimony in Opposition to H5098 – Forest Parity Act
By Jane Kenney Austin, 26 Narragansett Bay Ave., Warwick, RI 02889
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Dear Members of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee,

I strongly oppose the passage of H5098 and ask you to vote against this legislation. The basic premise of the bill is flawed. It states that “Forests are more likely to be maintained if they provide economic value.” However, the reason that forests need to be conserved and protected is because the prices for forest based products doesn't come close to reflecting the broad economic, social and environmental benefits provided by trees and forests, whether as part of the urban tree canopy or the state's remaining forested tracts.

This bill subsidizes the production of wood products, increasing the incentive and pressure to consume and diminish these natural resources. The underlying premise that the expansion of the forestry industry is key to the health of Rhode Island forests is simply not true. RI forests are becoming increasingly valuable to the environmental health of the state, the quality of life of RI citizens, and as a bulwark against climate change. This one sided bill aimed at expanding and increasing the profitability of the state's logging interests does not begin to address the broader question of how and where to preserve these key natural resources and how to manage their use.

This act is designed to treat forestry and logging on par with agricultural activities and to extend protections and benefits now tied to farmland and open space conservation to forestry and logging activities in the name of "parity". However, since most of the activities and equipment covered under this bill are related to manufacturing activities - not agricultural activities - it is reasonable to ask why this industry should benefit from public subsidies in comparison to comparable manufacturing and service industries in the state.

The bill is likely to have many unintended consequences and is very poorly conceived. Agricultural operations and open space protections are tied to discrete and specific tracts of land. By and large, forestry and logging industry interests in the state do not own the property on which their activities take place. They rely on access to private and State owned land. Therefore, the simple extension of longstanding and thoughtfully developed protections farmland and open space areas to the forest products industry is a very poor fit and unwise. Add to this the "safeguards" included in the bill against actions by state and local authorities in the case of nuisance or land use related conflicts and the danger posed by this bill only grows. I strongly oppose this bill and ask that you vote against passage.

Thank you for your consideration.