

December 14, 2023

Representative Megan Cotter
Chair, House Study Commission on Forest Management
Rhode Island State House
Providence RI 02908

Re: The Nature Conservancy Testimony on Forest Management

Dear Chair Cotter & Members of the Commission,

Thank you so much for the opportunity to provide written and oral testimony to the Forest Management Commission. We are grateful for the work you are doing on behalf of our state's forests and ecosystems – and for the people of RI who benefit from them.

The Nature Conservancy is a global organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. We have chapters in all fifty U.S. states and in nearly 80 countries around the globe. Here in Rhode Island, we steward more than 14,000 acres of protected land, and we have partnered with others to protect an additional 35,000+ acres of land. Partners in this work have included the Department of Environmental Management, the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, private donors, as well as local land trusts and others.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is committed to being a partner in this work to protect our forests and resident from fire. We look forward to future partnerships with the Chairwoman, the state, and other land trusts on next steps in this process. In this testimony, we offer some information about our approach to land stewardship and our commitment to continue in this process with you.

At The Nature Conservancy, we realize that we cannot succeed in our core mission to protect the land and water on which all life depends without engaging seriously with climate change. The average temperature for Rhode Island on April 13 is 58 degrees. The high temperatures on the two days prior to the Exeter fire were well into the 70s, and on the day of the Queen's River fire, the high was 88 – a record. The following day was 87, another record. Humidity was low and the winds were up, triggering several red flag warnings, not only in southern New England, but across much of the eastern United States. It was unusually dry on the ground, with little snow falling over the winter and with just 1.25" of rain falling in the month prior to the fire. We saw only trace amounts of rain between April 2 and April 15, normally one of the wettest times of the year.

The forest of white pine and pitch pine at the Queen's River Preserve provides many services to people: absorbing air and water pollution, shading the river, hiking opportunities, etc. It is a resilient ecosystem, growing quickly on poor, sandy soils. Mature trees have a thick bark that enables them to withstand a low-intensity fire. But with irregular spring conditions drying out the landscape, the forest was vulnerable to any human-instigated spark on the ground. The result was a high-intensity crown fire, spreading rapidly and causing so much damage. While we can't attribute any one event directly to climate change, Rhode Island is experiencing warmer winters, hotter summers and prolonged droughts, punctuated by intense rainfall. Plus, we're seeing the arrival of new forest pests and diseases. Cumulatively, the effects of climate change are putting stress on our forests and increasing fire risk in Rhode Island and in many parts of the world.

TNC stewards approximately 14,000 acres in Rhode Island. The vast majority of that land is allowed to achieve its natural ecological outcomes without intervention. A small percentage is more actively managed to achieve ecological habitat and wildlife benefits. For example, this could involve some limited tree removal to allow for and encourage additional ecosystems to develop, such as grass and shrub lands. For example, in Queens River in 2013-2014, we softened the edges of an existing hayfield, removing some of the overstory to encourage the growth of shrub habitat and younger forest – blueberry, bayberry, gray birch, black cherry, and others. This helped provide habitat for birds

that have been in steep decline throughout the region – including the blue-winged warbler, eastern towhee, and the prairie warbler. This management was funded by NRCS and followed their science-based protocols, in consultation with DEM Fish & Wildlife. After the softening, the habitat rebounded and birds have responded well. TNC does not clear cut forests, nor do we have any incentive to do so.

We also want to be clear that there is *no science* to support that this type of management increases vulnerability to fire. This is just an additional type of habitat for birds and other species that is not better or worse than other habitats—just different to support different species.

TNC would be very supportive of efforts to create a statewide fire management strategy. While we have a large role in land preservation in the state, the forests of the state are owned and managed by an array of state, non-profit, and private interests. Coordination and collaboration is key – particularly to highlight the most important immediate next steps. We would gladly participate in any statewide planning process, adding both on-the ground knowledge and potential desktop mapping, etc. skills. Further, We support fire road maintenance. We want to make it as easy as possible for fire fighters to get onto our preserves in an emergency. We also support the proposal calling for mapping and inventorying the condition for all fire roads, including those on conservation land. We do want to urge caution for recommendations that could be “unfunded mandates” – we will be good partners, but do not have unlimited resources and would require support for additional work.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to provide this testimony. We are available any time to follow up or answer any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Sue AnderBois'.

Sue AnderBois
Director of Climate & Government Relations
The Nature Conservancy in Rhode Island

The Nature Conservancy is a global organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Working in more than 70 countries, we are tackling climate change, conserving lands, waters and oceans, and helping make cities more sustainable. Here in Rhode Island, we have 4,000 members, and we steward more than 10,000 acres of protected land while maintaining 78 miles of public walking trails.