



## Audubon Society of Rhode Island

### **Re: Remarks on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2024 from Jeff Hall, Executive Director of the Audubon Society of Rhode Island**

Thank you, Chair Cotter, members of the Commission for the invitation to be here today.

I'm Executive Director of the Audubon Society of Rhode Island and here to represent our 17,000 members supporters across the state who are passionate in protecting birds, their habitats, and the wild places across Rhode Island.

Due to a conflict, Scott Ruhren, our Senior Director of Conservation, couldn't attend this meeting, but we didn't want to miss out on this important discussion. That said, I'm not the PhD scientist so for any questions I am unable to answer, we will gain detailed advice from Director Ruhren and return it to the commission as soon as possible.

Audubon is the state's oldest environmental organization and one of the state's largest private landowners. We protect over 9,800 acres on over 100 properties composed mainly of forested and coastal habitats. Fourteen of our properties are open free to the public to discover and connect with nature. We say that everyone in RI lives with twenty minutes of an Audubon refuge.

Since the pandemic we have seen a significant increase in visitor-ship for people to benefit from the physical and mental health benefits of being in nature.

In 2021, Audubon launched a major avian research initiative to study Rhode Island birds, both breeding and migratory, and how birds utilize our protected land and in extension other protected properties. That research has identified the western forests of Rhode Island as some of the most important migratory habitat along the eastern flyway. As birds moving through the state, and region, both north and south, birds use this habitat to feed and restock their energy supplies as they undertake this incredible migration journey.

Audubon understands that forests in Rhode Island are under stress, from droughts, invasive plants and insects and disease. As well as the very real impacts of climate change that are exasperating these factors.

Forests need our protection for all the values that I'm sure you are aware of, as well as a natural buffer for climate mitigation. We are acutely aware that natural habitats and humans need to interact and we welcome this discussion on the recent fires that have occurred in the state.

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Audubon Nature Center and Aquarium: 1401 Hope Street, Bristol, RI 02809



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For our part, Audubon has experienced fires on our property. In late the 2000s the marsh at our McIntosh refuge in Bristol was damaged by a fire, causing significant damage to our coastal board walk. We watched, along with many you, the fires in Exeter this spring. At one point the fire was headed toward our Fisherville Wildlife refuge, one of our largest and most visited properties, also where we have staff residing on the property. We are thankful to the National Guard, RI DEM and the many volunteer fires fighters from Exeter and beyond for the work to contain that fire.

Audubon offered assistance to the Nature Conservancy and our staff and volunteers helped with crowd control immediately following the fire. In the summer we were approached by the Exeter Fire Department to grant an easement to install a dry hydrant on our Eppley Wildlife Refuge at the Queen River. We have been working on this easement, which was a first of its kind for us. After doing our due diligence on the deeds of Eppley and looking at the impact of the Queen River we have drafted and tomorrow at 10:30 I have a meeting with Chief Gavitt to sign and file the easement with the town of Exeter.

I want to thank Kate Sayles for the RI Land Trust Council and our colleagues at NRCS for assistance in this process. Frankly, I did not know what a dry hydrant was, so there was a steep learning curve here and we are glad to share what we learned and our easement as a template for others looking to install these dry hydrants.

Our priority in being here today is to protect forests, help in the networking in response to fires in the future and open continuing this important conversation. It is important to understand that each forest area and habitats there are unique. Recommendations that enforce a blanket approach to combating forest fires that don't take in the unique landscapes and wildlife are not only bad for the forests, but may not be as effective at fighting forest fires, as well.

One of the experiences we would share from this spring's event is how to better open communication in real time. Our refuge manager at Fisherville is a Girl Scout leader and a mother from the troop was the first person to alert us of the fire. Luckily there were no visitors on the refuge at the time, so we were able to close the parking lot, but we were unsure of what was happening. As I asked our manager to prepare to evacuate, and was fortunate to have my sister in law, who is friends with someone that was at the fire site, texting me updates on the direction of the fire and if it was being contained or growing. So I'm not sure how information is communicated in real-time with these type events but it would important.

Also, I asked our conservation staff to connect with towns that we have property in to exchange numbers of contacts we would need to reach out to in event of fire. Especially on the refuges which are open to the public, so that we can evacuate those sites in case of emergency.

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We also have a staff member mapping our major properties to identify access points for emergency vehicles. Not all our property boundaries abut roads, but we do want to know where, if any, they are and make sure they are passable. We will share that information with the local fire departments.

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