

Dear Committee members, I strongly support the Old Growth Forest Protection Act, H 7293.

Rhode Island is the only state in New England where no state-owned forests are protected from logging, and there currently are no state laws that protect forests in Rhode Island.

[Wildlands-in-New-England-Rhode-Island-Summary.pdf](https://wildlandsandwoodlands.org/Wildlands-in-New-England-Rhode-Island-Summary.pdf)
(wildlandsandwoodlands.org)

This was acknowledged in a New England Report, “Wildlands in New England,” which Harvard Forest contributed to, that found Rhode Island was the only New England state to have no Wildlands on state land, and only 20 acres of Wildlands on private land, less than any other northeastern state. Wildlands are areas shaped by natural processes with minimal human disturbance which means no logging.

<https://www.rilegislature.gov/commissions/FMC/commdocs/10-12-2023---Division%20of%20Agriculture%20and%20Forest%20Environment%20Presentation.pdf>

According to DEM in a presentation before the House Fire Commission on October 12th, 2023, “Currently, Rhode Island laws do not provide protection for forestland apart from existing wetland protection laws.”

The Old Growth Forest Protection Act would create the first laws to protect Forests and Biodiversity in Rhode Island’s history.

This bill is needed now more than ever as DEM has been clearcutting forests on state-owned land causing deforestation.

In 2020, 195 acres was logged in a clearcut by DEM in the Arcadia Management Area which from aerial photos now looks like a bomb was dropped on the forest. Much of that clearcut area was in a Natural Heritage Area which are habitats identified by the old Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program as containing rare and endangered species. Unfortunately, all the Natural Heritage Areas are open to logging which results in DEM killing the rare and endangered species that live there.



2022 Aerial Photo of 2020 195-acre DEM Clearcut in the Arcadia Management Area
[State Land Stewardship: Forest Thinning and Timber Harvests | Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management \(ri.gov\)](#)
[Aerial Photography | Rhode Island Division of Statewide Planning](#)

[Generational Concerns About Present, Future of Rhode Island's Natural World - ecoRI News](#)

Currently, no one in the state government is advocating for or protecting rare and endangered species since DEM defunded the Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program in 2007. 17 years ago!

Even before the Natural Heritage Program was discontinued, DEM never properly funded the program to the point that there was only one employee left in it when the Program ended in 2007.

[1990s Law Designed to Build Natural Area Preserves Instead Created a Mystery - ecoRI News](#)

[Rhode Island Environmental Laws Find Themselves in Land of the Lost - ecoRI News](#)

DEM was required by the Natural Areas Protection Act of 1993 RIGL 42-122 to create Natural Area Preserves to protect Rhode Island's most environmentally sensitive areas in their natural state, meaning they wouldn't be logged. This would have included the Natural Heritage Areas.

In the past 31 years since that law was created, DEM has designated zero Natural Area Preserves. When the Old Growth Tree Society requested in 2022 that the Natural Area Preserves

be finally created, DEM took no action on it and later released a statement that they don't believe any areas in Rhode Island would qualify as Natural Area Preserves, despite knowing the existence of the unprotected Natural Heritage Areas.

[Natural Heritage Areas \(2023\) | Natural Heritage Areas \(2023\) | RIGIS](#)

[It is Time to Pass the Old Growth Forest Protection Act to Save Biodiversity - ecoRI News](#)

The Old Growth Forest Protection Act would bring back the Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program to once again monitor and protect Biodiversity.

Due to what happened to the last Natural Heritage Program, the reinstated Natural Heritage Program would be a separate state agency, not under DEM, to get its funding directly from the General Assembly and other sources such as perhaps a Green Bond.

The Natural Areas Protection Act of 1993 is amended in this bill to give the responsibility of designating and managing the Natural Area Preserves to the Natural Heritage Program which would manage through passive management where no logging would be allowed.

Then, the Natural Area Preserves would finally be created, and they would be legally protected from logging, due to this bill. The Natural Heritage Areas on public land would immediately be designated as Natural Area Preserves upon passage, protecting them, as stated in the bill.

It also doesn't make sense for DEM, which has been clearcutting in Natural Heritage Areas where rare and endangered species live to be responsible for protecting the Natural Heritage Areas and other rare forest ecosystems. Our state's remaining and irreplaceable wild forests need to be protected in their natural state which is something DEM doesn't believe in.

This bill would also prohibit logging in publicly owned Old Growth Forests which contain more biodiversity, have very few if any invasives, protects water quality, are more resistant to wildfires, and store more carbon than any other forests making them important Carbon sinks.

It should be noted that these logging prohibitions are only applicable to public land, not private land.

This legislation would require the newly created Natural Heritage Program to conduct environmental review by scientists, before state logging operations, to make sure no rare or endangered habitats and species are harmed and would have final approval over state logging operations since DEM hasn't been honest about their forestry practices and might override the Natural Heritage Program's recommendations despite their logging threatening a critical habitat.

On February 15, 2024, DEM sent an email to the Environmental Council of Rhode Island stating, "DEM does not clearcut."

[Young Forest Demonstration Sites – Rhode Island Woods \(uri.edu\)](#)

This contradicts DEM documents on the University of Rhode Island's (URI)'s website which lists Young Forest Demonstration Sites as clearcuts. For example, for the Nicholas Farm Management Area, it says, "A 35-acre clearcut created in 2015 by RIDEM."

This bill would also update the state's Forest Fire Laws for the first time in close to 40 years and incorporate Forests as a priority in the 2021 Act on Climate, since currently, Forests are mentioned nowhere in that law, despite their significant role in sequestering and storing carbon.

[State Land Stewardship: Forest Thinning and Timber Harvests | Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management \(ri.gov\)](#)

Right now, DEM is planning on clearcutting in one of the last remaining upland forests in the Great Swamp Management Area, all in a Natural Heritage Area where rare and endangered species live. Without this bill as state law, that forest will be destroyed.

Currently, Rhode Island is behind the nation in the protection of Forests and Biodiversity, which is both embarrassing and dangerous due to the current Climate and Biodiversity Crises. With the Old Growth Forest Protection Act, we can be a national leader and set an example on Forest and Biodiversity protection. Please pass the Old Growth Forest Protection Act H 7293 to Save Rhode Island's Forests and Biodiversity.

Nathan Cornell

President of the Old Growth Tree Society

Warwick, RI 02886