



NEW ENGLAND CHAPTER BACKCOUNTRY HUNTERS & ANGLERS

February 27, 2025

To Chairman Bennett and members of the House Committee on Environment and Natural Resources,

Re: BHA Opposition to RI - 2025 – H5294 –Old Growth Forest Protection Act

Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (BHA) seeks to ensure North America's outdoor heritage of hunting and fishing in a natural setting. Our members believe that the habitats and ecosystems that fish and wildlife depend upon should be managed following the best available science, and we work to enact policies that keep habitat management authority in the hands of the biologists and foresters who are most familiar with the resources being managed.

Over the last several years BHA has provided testimony on bills purported to protect old growth forests in Rhode Island, and while we don't necessarily oppose that concept, **the New England Chapter of BHA urges the Committee to oppose H5294**. Unfortunately, H5294 and prior iterations of this effort (2022 – H7066, 2023 – H5344, 2024 -H7293) have focused as much on upending RI's public land acquisition and management paradigm as they have on their simple, stated goal.

To be clear, BHA supports the use of management tools like timber harvests and prescribed burns on public lands when they are used to achieve specific management goals, like the promotion of wildlife habitat, the mitigation of ecological diseases or infestations, or for public safety. This is especially true when goals are aligned with public input processes like State Wildlife and Forest Action Plans, and/or are aligned with the priorities of the funding programs utilized to acquire and manage public lands, such as the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act and Land and Water Conservation Fund.

While BHA has expressed our conceptual support for the appropriate protection of old growth forests in the past, this support does not extend to situations where it would be at odds with, would restrict, or would totally overrule DEM's existing public land management priorities. Through longstanding statutory directives RI's General Assembly has relied on RI's Department of Environmental Management (DEM) to manage the natural resources of the state, including forests on public lands, with due regard for the preservation of their values. Notwithstanding a chronic lack of resources, our assessment is that DEM has carried out these duties effectively. H5294 seeks to overrule both the goals that DEM currently works towards and the tools available to the agency to achieve those goals, replacing them with a new, narrow set of priorities and rigid statutory restrictions. Additionally, H5294 proposes the creation of a thick, unnecessary layer of bureaucratic oversight to public land management decision-making, and costly hurdles to the acquisition of new public lands in Rhode Island.

To summarize BHA's position, we are fundamentally opposed to overriding decades of purposeful public land acquisition, stewardship, and conservation work, which is what H5294 seeks to do. With this in mind, **the New England Chapter BHA respectfully urges the Committee, and ultimately the entire RI General Assembly, to oppose H5294.**

Thank you for your consideration,

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