

## Written Testimony in Support of 2026 -- H 7074

### Construction and Maintenance of State Roads

Statement by Lawrence Bacher, Barrington, RI in a personal capacity

Research in *Science* magazine (Vol 366, Issue 6461 pp. 120-124) documents that North American bird populations have declined by 3 billion birds - 30% of the base population - since 1970 when I was in high school. This astounding loss has several causes, but the most significant cause is loss of habitat. As we clear forests and meadows for house lots and agricultural fields, we eliminate habitat that these creatures — and other mammals, reptiles and insects — evolved to inhabit and use for food source.

Rhode Island DOT has the capacity to mitigate some of this habitat loss by returning right-of-way cleared for roadways to land supporting habitat. Medians, roadsides and undeveloped land could readily be seeded to support meadow or forest tranches that would support insects (bees, butterflies, moths) and birds who feed on the seeds and insects. The states surrounding us make this a part of their highway management programs:

<b>Massachusetts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Native meadow plantings along Rt. 2, I-90 and I-495 rights-of-way</li><li>• Pollinator-friendly seed mixes used in roadside restoration projects</li><li>• Participates in the Monarch Highway and other regional pollinator initiatives</li><li>• Uses native grasses and forms in stormwater basin and median restoration projects</li><li>• MassDOT's Landscape Design Standards explicitly encourage native species</li></ul>
<b>Connecticut</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Installs native vegetation in stormwater basins and rights-of-way</li><li>• Uses native seed mixes in erosion-control projects</li><li>• Participates in the New England Transportation Consortium research on native roadside vegetation</li></ul>
<b>New York</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Native wildflower and grass plantings along I-87 (Northway)</li><li>• Native meadow installations in the Hudson Valley and Finger Lakes regions</li><li>• Pollinator-focused plantings in medians and rights-of-way as part of the state's Pollinator Protection Plan</li><li>• NYSDOT statewide seed specification incorporates native plant species</li></ul>
<b>Pennsylvania</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Large-scale native meadow installations along I-80, I-99 and I-81</li><li>• Native plantings in medians as part of the Pollinator Habitat Program</li><li>• Partnerships with conservation groups to convert turf medians into native grasslands</li><li>• Formal policy encouraging native species in vegetation management</li></ul>
<b>New Hampshire</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Native species used in slope restoration and wetland mitigation along highways</li><li>• Installs native vegetation in select medians and right-of-way</li></ul>
<b>Vermont</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Native plantings along Rt. 7, I-89 and I-91</li><li>• Use of native seed mixes in erosion-control and slope-stabilization programs</li><li>• Participation in New England regional native-seed development programs</li></ul>
<b>Maine</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Native species in coastal highway restoration projects</li><li>• Pollinator-friendly roadside plantings</li><li>• Slope and median restoration using native grasses and shrubs</li></ul>

This past summer I traveled to the Niagara Region of Ontario through Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania and Connecticut. On those long hours of driving, stress was mitigated by beautiful native landscapes surrounding these roadways. Coming into Rhode Island, I had only the turf grass median strips we use to deck out I-95.

Those turf grass areas are an annual expense to the RIDOT maintenance budget. They require weekly mowing, fertilizers and herbicides. Native plant meadows and woodlands can be established inexpensively through seeding, then are self-sustaining. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA: *Roadside Revegetation: An Integrated Approach to Establishing Native Plants*) outlines savings strategies from reduced mowing, reduced erosion control costs, lower herbicide use and the long-term stability of native plant communities. In addition to enhancing the natural beauty of Rhode Island, restoring ecological relationships damaged by past development, and protecting water quality by reducing chemical usage, the measures outlined in H7074 offer long-term savings to support other transportation goals.

I urge the members of the RI Legislature to join their ten colleagues who sponsor this bill in a considered and vigorous approval.