

March 31, 2026
House Environment and Natural Resources Committee
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Chair Bennett, First Vice Chair Phillips, Second Vice Chair Carson, and Members of the House Environment and Natural Resources,

My name is David Brunetti, I'm from Burrillville, RI, and I support House Bill 7914 – the Natural Forest Protection Act - but feel that it should be amended such that the properties in the list of natural area preserves contained within this legislation (i.e., those in section 42-122-9) should first be subject to a public hearing upon notice prior to such designation.

Rhode Island is currently the only state in New England with no protected Wildlands on public land which are forests protected in their natural state from logging. This bill would create the first state law to protect public forests and biodiversity in Rhode Island.

The world is facing a biodiversity crisis where populations of native species are declining at an alarming rate, and many species are facing extinction. Native species in Rhode Island are at risk of becoming regionally extinct due to habitat destruction. Species such as the Cerulean warbler, one of North America's most threatened migratory songbirds, have suffered significant declines driven in large part by the loss and fragmentation of habitat on its breeding grounds due to large-scale clearing of forests which has not only eliminated habitat but has also led to even-aged forests which are unsuitable for breeding for this species. Other species in Rhode Island which rely on these forests include many other songbirds such as warblers and thrushes – many of which are on the RI list of Species of Greatest Conservation Need - which utilize the dense foliage for nesting and foraging.

Additionally, there are many wild plants species which rely on mature forests habitat, such as trilliums, lady's slippers, wood anemone, and many other spring ephemerals.

H 7914 would help to address this issue by protecting Old Growth Forests and rare habitats on public state land through the creation of the Natural Area Preserves listed in the bill.

As someone who enjoys birdwatching hikes and spring ephemeral wildflower hikes in such areas, I am concerned about the impact that current practices have and will have on these species.

Old Growth Forests and old mature forests are exceptionally rare in Rhode Island with only 1% of the state's forests being over 100 years old. Yet, these Old Growth Forests have a

higher degree of native biodiversity, very little to any invasives, are more resistant to wildfires, improve water and soil quality, have less ticks, and store more carbon than any other forest.

This bill would also protect our public state forests from deforestation and natural habitat destruction through the provisions prohibiting clearcutting and other destructive logging practices on state-owned land, as well as requiring environmental review before public state logging operations.

This is not a zero-cut forest bill but instead is one which would provide some balance, something which appears to not be the case with the current activities which have been and continue to occur.

Lastly, the bill would bring back the Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program after 19 years to identify, monitor, and protect native biodiversity including rare and endangered species in Rhode Island. Notably, in Massachusetts, the Department of Conservation and Recreation is the primary responsible entity for protecting forests there.

The re-establishment of the Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program would allow for native biodiversity to become a priority for the state.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide you with my comments.

Sincerely,

David A. Brunetti
Burrillville, RI