

Testimony in Support of H 7914 – The Natural Forest Protection Act

Submitted to the House Environment and Natural Resources Committee

From:

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Chairperson and members of the Committee,

I am writing in support of the Natural Forest Protection Act. H 7914

H 7914 establishes clear protection for the most sensitive and irreplaceable forest ecosystems on state land. These natural forests support declining native species, store significant amounts of carbon, and provide the cool, damp microclimates that naturally reduce wildfire risk. At a time when biodiversity loss and climate instability are accelerating, Rhode Island cannot afford to continue managing all state forests as open-access logging areas.

Rhode Island is the **only New England state** without legally protected wildland forests, despite the ecological, recreational, and climate benefits these natural forests provide.

- Even-age logging and large-scale clearing on state lands are rapidly reducing undisturbed forest cover, accelerating invasive species, fragmenting habitat, and degrading the ecological integrity of public forests.
- Mature and old-growth forests are **irreplaceable ecosystems** that store more carbon, support more biodiversity, and naturally reduce wildfire risk through cooler, wetter forest floors, and closed canopies.
- Rhode Island has lacked a functioning **Natural Heritage Program** since 2007, leaving the state without a scientific system to identify rare species, old-growth stands, or sensitive forest communities.
- As a result, construction and road projects on state forestland have proceeded **without environmental review**, risking irreversible damage to rare habitats and native species.
- H 7914 restores science-based stewardship by requiring the identification of rare forest ecosystems and the designation of **Natural Area Preserves** where forests can mature naturally.
- These preserves would **still allow hunting, fishing, and recreation**, while preventing extractive logging and unnecessary disturbance in the most ecologically valuable areas.
- Protecting natural forests is a matter of public benefit, fiscal responsibility, and intergenerational stewardship. Mature forests provide safer, more accessible recreation with open understories and fewer tick-prone thickets.
- Passing H 7914 brings Rhode Island into alignment with every other New England state and ensures that future generations inherit the ecological richness and natural heritage we enjoy today.