

# R E S T O R E:



**TESTIMONY REGARDING H 7914, THE “NATURAL FOREST PROTECTION ACT”  
BEFORE THE HOUSE ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE  
OF THE STATE OF RHODE ISLAND GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
By Michael Kellett, Executive Director, RESTORE: The North Woods  
March 31, 2026**

I am Michael Kellett, Executive Director of RESTORE: The North Woods, a nonprofit organization with members in Rhode Island and across New England. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

**I writing on behalf of our organization in support of H 7914, the “Natural Forest Protection Act.”** This legislation would protect Rhode Island’s most significant mature and old forests, based on the best current science and with the full involvement of the public.

For millennia, Rhode Island and most of the rest of New England were covered by biologically diverse old forests that provided critical habitat for a wide range of native wildlife species, stabilized the climate, maintained rich soils, and were reservoirs of clean air and water.

Since the 1600s, almost all the original forests of Rhode Island have been lost to timber production, clearing for agriculture, and urban development — and with them many of the vital benefits they once provided. A 2023 scientific analysis, *Wildlands in New England*, concluded that only about 3.3 percent of the region is now preserved as wildlands that “allow natural processes to prevail with...minimal human interference.” The study found that **Rhode Island is the only New England state with no state-owned forests that have this level of protection.**

Although a 1993 Rhode Island law called for creation of a system of natural area preserves, none have been designated by the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management. Intensive forest management has been allowed in many areas that are potentially qualified for preserve designation, which can fragment wildlife habitats, spread invasive species, degrade air and water quality, and displace public recreation.

H 7914, the Natural Forest Protection Act, provides a clear and practical framework for long-term forest recovery and protection. Specifically, the bill would:

- **Designate 46 areas of state land as Natural Area Preserves** with protected wildlands status, which will protect mature and old forests and allow them to naturally recover to support the full range of native habitats.

- **Reinstate the Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program**, which was eliminated in 2007, with a strengthened mandate to protect the state's natural landscapes, native species, and forest ecosystems.
- **Ensure public review and participation** in planning and implementing proposed forest management on state land, and in the selection, designation, and stewardship of Natural Area Preserves.
- **Permit carefully prescribed amounts and types of forest management on some state lands**, safeguarding native species and old trees and serving as a buffer that complements Natural Area Preserves.

**We urge the passage of H 7914, the Natural Forest Protection Act.** This important bill takes a balanced approach to provide a system of permanently protected natural forest ecosystems that spans Rhode Island. This far-sighted legislation would preserve critical wildlife habitats, moderate our climate, provide vital ecosystem services such as clean air and water, and offer recreation to benefit the health and well-being of this and future generations.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,  
Michael Kellett



Executive Director  
RESTORE: The North Woods

*Submitted via email to: [HouseEnvironmentandNaturalResources@rilegislature.gov](mailto:HouseEnvironmentandNaturalResources@rilegislature.gov)*