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RE: Agriculture & Ecosystems Subcommittee

By way of introduction, I am a licensed forester in Vermont and New Hampshire with 32 years of experience working in the forests of Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine and New York. My work has included working with a wide range of landowner types ranging from small non-industrial woodland owners to large timber investment organizations. This diverse work history has allowed me to develop a unique perspective on forest management, particularly as it pertains to private woodland owners. As a result, I was asked to sit on the Private Lands Advisory Committee which is appointed by the Commissioner of FPR to help advise the department on private land issues.

I write to express my thoughts on the revision process and give feedback on my thoughts related to the subcommittee's work after sitting in on the 11/13 listening session. Following are my thoughts:

- 1) **Non-transparent process** - The revision process is not being conducted in a sufficiently transparent manner. It has not been well publicized, so the general public is unaware that it is going on. Based on my experience there are very few publicly available materials accessible for public review. At the listening session we were referred to the Climate Council's website which only includes basic agendas and video recordings of meetings with no minutes and generally no supporting materials. This forces anyone trying to follow the process to attend each meeting or view the recording. Because of this, the process places an outsized influence on the opinions of professional activist organizations and diminishes the ability for working Vermonters to have their voices included in the final product.
- 2) **Subcommittee Lack of Forestry Expertise** – In reviewing the members of the subcommittee I was dismayed to discover that there is not a single member with any meaningful forestry expertise. Despite this glaring lack of expertise, based on what I heard at the listening session, the subcommittee clearly intends to make significant recommendations related to forestry issues and policy. I do not understand how the subcommittee can justify making any recommendations related to forestry concerns without the resources to understand and appreciate the full impacts of any recommendations. Forests are incredibly complex ecological systems whose management must take into consideration impacts on climate change, biodiversity, forest health and the rural economy. To frame the discussion and make policy recommendations simply on one of these factors without considering the implications on the others could be disastrous. Working to develop policies to maximize all three of these issues is what should be the goal, and the current makeup of this subcommittee does not have the expertise to do this.
- 3) **Vermont's forests are doing well** – While Vermont's forests face challenges, they are generally doing well. Largely due to the Use Value Assessment program, they are the best

managed forests in the northeast with growth far out pacing harvests. A few issues I feel the Council should consider when developing other policy recommendations include:

- a. Use Value Assessment program:** This program has had the most significant positive influence on limiting land conversion and promoting forest management the state has developed thus far. Since the original action plan was developed, the program has been made adjusted to allow for and encourage the development of old forest characteristics as well as for the enrollment of forever wild easements in the program. These changes have not had been in place long enough to be able to evaluate their impact. No further adjustments in the program should be considered until the effects of the most recent changes can be evaluated.
- b. Continued support of the Forest Products sector:** A strong forest products economy allows rural Vermonters to continue to own and manage their lands. Without viable markets for forest products, the subdivision and sale of properties accelerates, increasing fragmentation and the impacts this has on natural processes. Low value products comprise upwards of 75% of any timber harvest, making robust markets for these products particularly important. Given the lack of markets for low value products in the region, it is vitally important to preserve every option we currently have if every day Vermont's are going to continue to be able to own forestland.
- c. Use of Local Wood Products:** The promotion of locally sourced wood products should continue to be a priority outlined in the action plan moving forward.
- d. Leakage:** The understanding that society's need for forest products is not going down and is likely to increase as we move away from concrete, plastics and steel. As such, there needs to be an acknowledgment that when timber management is restricted in any one area it simply shifts pressure to harvest more somewhere else. Most importantly, any such shift includes any real or perceived negative impacts. I believe that we as a society have a moral imperative to minimize the externalization of impacts associated with processes required to fulfil our collective needs. Additionally, our forests in Vermont are currently some of the best managed and healthiest in the region and the world, so keeping management work locally not only minimizes externalization, but helps ensure that the work being completed to produce these required products is being done so under the best conditions possible.
- e. Invasive Species:** Non-native invasive species pose a significant threat to the long-term health and productivity of our forests. Generally, the cause of infestations is not property specific, but rather a result of landscape level cultural activities outside of the control of the individual owner. The support of programs to educate private landowners on this issue and provide assistance in managing these species should be considered.
- f. Rural Economy:** The rural economy in Vermont is dependent on the forest products sector to survive. It provides good paying jobs withing parts of the state which have few other opportunities. Local and regional markets keep this money local, magnifying the economic impact of these jobs. Policies that have the potential to

reduce harvesting opportunities need to consider the impacts on rural parts of the state.

- g. Support for Rural Landowners:** Recommendations to develop and expand PES programs should continue to be supported.
- h. Improved Forest Management:** Recommendation to develop programs to incentivize forest landowners to implement Improved Forest Management activities on there property should continue to be supported.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Seth C. Clifford'.

Seth C. Clifford

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