



April 20, 2022

Senator Chris Bray  
Chairman, Natural Resources and Energy Committee

**Re: House Bill 697; Value Appraisal Program**

**Position: Oppose**

Dear Chairman Bray and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF), I respectfully encourage you to oppose House Bill 697 (H. 697) which would substantially change the Agricultural and *Managed* [emphasis added] Forest Land Use Value Program by allowing landowners to refrain from managing their forest land while still qualifying for enrollment in the Managed Forest Land Use Value Program. By discouraging the sustainable management of Vermont's forest resources, the legislation would negatively impact forest health, wildlife habitat, and outdoor recreational opportunities for Vermont's sportsmen and women.

CSF's mission is to work with Congress, governors, and state legislators to protect and advance hunting, angling, and recreational shooting. CSF has a strong track record in Vermont, working with the Vermont Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus and conservation partners to protect and advance Vermont's sporting heritage by supporting pro-sportsmen legislation and state fish and wildlife management objectives.

This legislation contravenes the statutory purpose of the Vermont Use Value Appraisal Program which is "to preserve the *working landscape* [emphasis added] and the rural character of Vermont."<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the intent of the Vermont Use Value Appraisal Program, H. 697 would disincentivize landowners from sustainably managing their forest lands. The bill would neither "encourage and assist the maintenance of Vermont's productive...forestland" nor "encourage and assist in the conservation and preservation for future productive use."<sup>2</sup> Additionally, while the bill language cites the state's forest economy as a supporting premise, the effect of the bill would in

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<sup>1</sup> 32 V.S.A. § 3750.

<sup>2</sup> 32 V.S.A. § 3751.

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fact be detrimental to the forest economy that “contributes more than 13,000 jobs and 2.1 billion to Vermont’s economy” because forest management activities would decline as a direct result of the state adopting a land use tax policy that discourages sustainable forest management.

We are particularly concerned about the impacts that the bill would have on Vermont’s wildlife. While we recognize that older forests have value for some wildlife species, incentivizing landowners to not sustainably manage their forest lands would further reduce the acreage of young forests and other early successional habitats across the state. It is well-documented that early successional habitats are in short supply in Vermont despite the critical role of these habitats for supporting a range of wildlife species. Vermont’s 2015 Wildlife Action Plan identified 44 Species of Greatest Conservation Need that benefit from early successional habitats.<sup>3</sup> The eight species of amphibians and reptiles<sup>4</sup>, the 20 species of birds<sup>5</sup>, and the 16 species of mammals<sup>6</sup>, many of which are state and/or federally listed endangered species, rely on early successional habitats during important stages of their life cycles. Older forests do not provide the habitat diversity to support these species, and we therefore encourage you to consider the effects that this legislation would have on the wildlife species that benefit from disturbance and the habitat created through science-based sustainable forest management practices.

We are further concerned about the effects that this legislation would have on carbon sequestration and forest health. While the carbon storage capabilities of older forests are important, it is also important to consider the fact that young forests generally sequester carbon at higher rates than older forests. Additionally, forests that are sustainably managed are more resilient than homogeneous, older forests to changing threats from climate change – insects, disease, storms, drought, fire, and nonnative species, among others.

H. 697 would also have a negative impact on outdoor recreational opportunities for sportsmen and women. Habitat diversity supports a variety of wildlife, and we would submit that the effect of this legislation disincentivizing landowners from managing their forest lands would result in less habitat diversity across the landscape. Young forests and other early successional habitats are important for game species, including ruffed grouse, American woodcock, white-tailed deer, wild

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<sup>3</sup> Vermont Wildlife Action Plan 2015. Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department. Available at: <https://vtfishandwildlife.com/sites/fishandwildlife/files/documents/About%20Us/Budget%20and%20Planning/WAP2015/2015-VT-Wildlife-Action-Plan.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Fowler’s toad, boreal chorus frog, wood turtle, North American racer, Eastern ratsnake, DeKay’s brownsnake, smooth greensnake, and timber rattlesnake.

<sup>5</sup> Northern goshawk, spruce grouse, ruffed grouse, lesser yellowlegs, American woodcock, black-billed cuckoo, common nighthawk, whip-poor-will, gray jay, Bicknell’s thrush, brown thrasher, blue-winged warbler, golden-winged warbler, chestnut-sided warbler, prairie warbler, bay-breasted warbler, Canada warbler, Eastern towhee, field sparrow, and rusty blackbird.

<sup>6</sup> Masked shrew, smoky shrew, pygmy shrew, Northern long-eared bat, silver-haired bat, tri-colored bat, Eastern red bat, hoary bat, New England cottontail, snowshoe hare, rock vole, gray fox, long-tailed weasel, Canada lynx, bobcat, and moose

turkey, and black bear, which are cherished by Vermont's 254,000 sportsmen and women. Quality habitat is the basis for healthy wildlife populations, and these species need more habitat diversity than older forests provide.

Hunter experience is positively correlated to wildlife populations, and we therefore encourage you to consider the negative impacts that this legislation would have on Vermont's sporting traditions which support more than 6,810 jobs in the state and generate more than \$50 million in state and local taxes. Vermont's sportsmen and women also spend more than \$443 million and contribute more than \$14 million annually for conservation funding through hunting and fishing licenses and excises taxes on sporting-related goods, the "user pays – public benefits" American System of Conservation Funding. Vermont's constitutional right to hunt, as cited in the bill, will be of little value if early successional dependent wildlife populations continue to decline.

In closing, we respectfully urge you to oppose H. 697, which would undermine the intent of the Vermont Use Value Appraisal Program, negatively impact Vermont's forest economy, reduce wildlife habitat diversity, reduce forest resiliency, and negatively impact Vermont's outdoor sporting heritage. Thank you for considering our comments, and please let us know if you have questions or would like additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph D. Mullin". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Joseph Mullin  
Northeastern States Manager | Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation  
110 North Carolina Ave., SE | Washington, DC 20003  
[Jmullin@congressionalsportsmen.org](mailto:Jmullin@congressionalsportsmen.org) | 202-253-6883