

RHODE ISLAND WOODLAND PARTNERSHIP

Position Statement

The Importance of Rhode Island's Forests in Mitigating and Adapting to Climate Change

February 2015

Our Proposal

The Rhode Island Woodland Partnership (RIWP) is a collaboration among foresters, landowners, conservationists, and professionals who represent public agencies, small businesses, and non-profit organizations. Partnership members believe that maintaining the health of Rhode Island's forestland is a critical aspect of climate change mitigation and adaptation. We propose that the State support the Resilient Rhode Island Act of 2014 by:

- Empowering the Department of Environmental Management's (RIDEM) Division of Forest Environment with the resources needed to accomplish its mission in light of climate change by:
 - Mobilizing staff resources to outline specific, actionable steps to restore and promote healthy, resilient forests that can help Rhode Island respond to the challenges presented by the changing climate.
 - Increasing staff capacity to better steward State Management Areas to maximize climate change mitigation and adaptation impact.
 - Identifying an accepted carbon sequestration model to apply to specific demonstration areas/ownerships, public and private - large and small - to quantify the benefits and encourage private landowners to take part in conservation efforts.
- Advancing the role of forests and forest stewardship to foster a culture of conservation in Rhode Island's climate future, both on private and public lands through:
 - Supporting innovative planning approaches that combine conservation of forestland and economic development, outlined in the RIDEM publications "Community Guidance to Maintain Working Farms and Forests" and "Strategies to Maintain Farms and Forests".
 - Collaborating with cities and towns on comprehensive planning to include climate change planning in forest stewardship.
 - Increasing support to private forest owners, who own 75% of the forested area in Rhode Island, by restoring forestry extension to the URI Cooperative Extension program (with a new focus on climate change mitigation and adaptation), and increasing funding for small-scale forestry projects on private land.
 - Encouraging the greater use of our unique locally grown wood to lessen our dependence on fossil fuels, make our forests more productive, and create local jobs through the sustainable management of our forests.
 - Launching a state climate communications campaign to emphasize the role of forests in protecting clean drinking water and Narragansett Bay; and to promote the role of urban

forests in lowering energy costs by strategically planting trees, as well as protecting the health of RI's human communities (mitigating respiratory illnesses, heat island effect, etc.).

Background

The Resilient Rhode Island Act of 2014 seeks to make Rhode Island's economy and communities resilient in the face of climate change. Predicted effects include:

- Rising sea levels that threaten coastal properties
- River flooding due to increasing severity and frequency of storms
- Heat waves and air pollution, which will be particularly severe in urban areas
- Damage to critical infrastructure for basic needs such as water, energy, and transportation

The Resilient Rhode Island Act mandates both adaptation and mitigation efforts, and stipulates that greenhouse gas emissions should be reduced to 45% below 1990 levels by 2035.

Rhode Island's forests play a critical role in mitigating the effects of the changing climate on the state's natural environment and communities. Most importantly, healthy forest ecosystems store carbon that could otherwise add to the "heat-trapping blanket" effect caused by high carbon levels in the atmosphere. Trees in urban areas help protect human health by moderating temperatures, especially during summer heat waves, and reducing air pollution that contributes to respiratory problems. Forested buffers keep streams and rivers cool and prevent nutrient and sediment runoff from harming water quality. Forests also serve as wildlife habitat, provide recreation and scenic beauty, and support a local wood products economy. Responsible management can ensure that Rhode Island's forests sustain these values while helping ease the transition to a warming climate with changing weather patterns.

Forests currently cover over half of Rhode Island's land area and the state has a long history of forest stewardship. In 2010 the Division of Forests Environment (DFE), Department of Environmental Management updated its goals related to forest management. A number of the goals have an impact on the capacity of our forests to mitigate the effects of climate change.

The Resilient Rhode Island Act of 2014 provides an opportunity for Rhode Islanders to take a close look at what we are doing in the forestry sector, what is needed, and how to work together to achieve a climate-smart future for generations to come.

References

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- Department of Environmental Management, Division of Forest Environment. Rhode Island Forest Resources Assessment and Strategies: "A Path to Tomorrow's Forests." June 2010.
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- Payne, Ken. The Treatment of Woodlands, Forests, and Trees in Rhode Island's General Laws: The Evolution of a Comprehensive Statutory Structure and a Call for a Fresh Expression of Existing Responsibilities in Response to Climate Change Issues. White paper, October 10, 2014.
- New England Forestry Foundation. New England Forests: A Path to Sustainability.
- Society of American Foresters. Forest Management and Climate Change: A Position Statement of the Society of American Foresters. December 8, 2008.

THE RHODE ISLAND WOODLAND PARTNERSHIP

Mission

An emerging coalition established in 2013, the Rhode Island Woodland Partnership works to increase the impact of forest conservation efforts in Rhode Island through coordination and information sharing among partners.

Members

Richard Blodgett, *Certified Forester, Society of American Foresters*
Paul Dolan, *Area Director, RI Resource Conservation and Development Council*
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